

Xerox Star gives final show

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PALO ALTO DAILY NEWS STAFF

It was the Silicon Valley Equivalent of Henry Ford showing up at a 1998 auto show to demonstrate the Model T. Yesterday, hundreds turned out in Palo Alto to see the legendary Xerox Star in action.

The Star — a beige box which weighs 170 lbs and is about the size of a large microwave oven turned on its side — isn't just any 17-year-old computer.

Years before the Macintosh and a decade before Microsoft Windows, the Star had a mouse so users could point and click on icons to give the computer commands.

Developed at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center — known throughout the world as Xerox PARC — its alumni gathered yesterday for what was billed as the final live demonstration of the Star.

Hundreds of invited guests filled a Xerox auditorium at the event, which was co-sponsored by Bay Area Computer History Perspectives and the Computer Museum History Center.

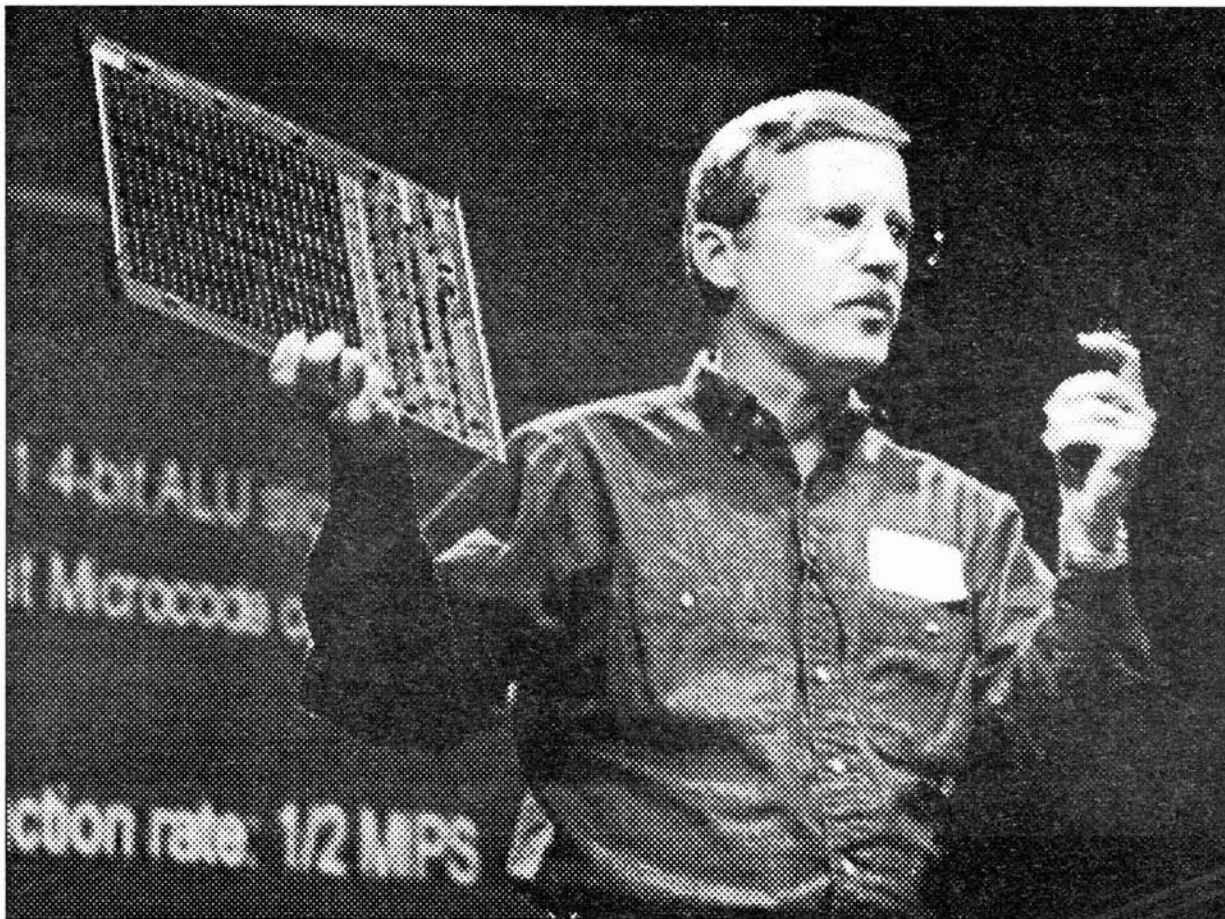
The Star's builders don't know how much longer the computer's hardware will work, so any demonstration could be the last, said David Smith, one of the machine's principal designers.

Sticky mouse

Xerox even had two Stars set up yesterday in case one crashed during the demonstration, but the backup wasn't needed. The only problem Smith encountered was a sometimes-sticky mouse.

"It's hard to give a talk on Star because more and more people say, 'What's the big deal,'" Smith said.

As he began the demonstration it was easy to see why it might be seen as ho-hum. On the screen were icons such as file folders, sheets of paper



FINAL DEMONSTRATION — Robert Garner, co-designer of the legendary Xerox Star, holds up one of the computer's memory boards at last night's reunion. Daily News photo by Susan Bradley.

and a trash can — just like computers today.

"This was a breakthrough product," Smith said of the Star, which hit the market in 1981 sold for \$16,000.

Holy grail

More than 100 million computers worldwide today can trace their point-and-click operating environment — or graphical user interface as it's known — to the Xerox Star and its predecessor, the Xerox Alto, Smith said.

"We were trying to make the first product professionals would use," said David Liddle, the CEO of Interval Research who spent 10 years at Xerox during the Star's formative years.

The team at Xerox PARC in the 1970s was charged with developing a computer for office professionals that adapted to them rather than mak-

ing them learn commands to talk to a computer, Liddle said.

"We very deliberately called it a desktop and the icons were chosen to be familiar to office users — papers, folders and a trash can," Smith said.

Applauded wildly

The outcome was the Star, which an auditorium full of software developers and other computer industry types applauded wildly yesterday when it performed the simplest of tasks.

When Smith made a bar graph showing the height and weight of two people and then changed the graph's color from gray to black, hundreds clapped in excitement.

"The Star's interface is still simpler than systems we see today. That's the most pleasant thing for me. It doesn't seem like an antiquated system," Smith said.