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Nat Wadsworth, Forgotten Personal Computer Innovator

By Mike Willegal



Even though it was only their second date, when Terri Lenart left Nat Wadsworth's cottage, she recalls that she was "on cloud twenty-two", as she knew she had found the right man.

It was 1973 and Nat Wadsworth was a 29 year old electrical engineer who had left his job to create a new kind of computer. Working with a few friends in his cottage in Milford, Connecticut, he was designing his new computer around the new Intel 8008 microprocessor. Several companies already had or were actively designing computers around microprocessors. Some of them were using the same Intel 8008 that Nat was using. However, those machines were all commercial computers intended to be sold to businesses, universities or the government. They all would have starting costs of several thousand dollars. Nat's computer's base price was planned to be around \$500, but what really made it different is that it was to be marketed to anyone that might have an interest in computers. He called his machine the SCALBI-8H, the H standing for hobby. His plan was to market his computer to hobbyists through advertisements in amateur radio magazines.

Terri Lenart was teaching high school English and Social History in Derby, Connecticut. Terri had degrees in Social Studies History and English from Central Connecticut State College and a masters' degree from Wesleyan University. After that Saturday night date, she called Nat several times, but it wasn't until the

following Tuesday, that Nat's mother answered the phone and told her that Nat had suffered a heart attack. He was in intensive care at the hospital and the doctors feared that he would not live. In order to get Terri visitation privileges, Nat's mother convinced the hospital staff that Terri was Nat's finance. By the time that Nat left the hospital, three weeks later, he had proposed marriage and Terri had accepted the proposal.



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While Nat was recovering from the heart attack, Bob Findley, Nat's main engineering partner, and Frank Zawacki, his best friend, continued to work on the computer. Four months after Nat's heart attack, when the first small ad appeared in the March, 1974 issue of QST magazine, the SCELBI-8H became the first microprocessor based computer designed for and marketed to a new type of hobbyist, the home computer enthusiast.

During the period when Nat was developing his computer business and Nat and Terri were getting to know one another, Nat didn't have a driver's license. He had lost it when he flunked a sobriety test after a car accident. That accident occurred as he was driving home after working for seventy-two straight hours. He had stopped for a meal and a drink or two. Nat wasn't a heavy drinker. In fact, Terri says that she never saw him drunk in all their years together. Terri thinks it must have been the state of exhaustion combined with those drinks, that caused the failed test. Whatever the reason for the lost license, Terri would gladly do the driving for both of them.

Terri says that Nat was a "renaissance man." Not only could he design computers, but he was a great dancer, she says that, "Nat had brains in his feet." He was deeply involved in the legal side of SCELBI, studying legal matters to point where his lawyer sometimes just rubber stamped his legal ideas. Not only was he developing a new computer business, he was working with a biology professor at University of Connecticut and the Connecticut Budgerigar Society researching parakeet diseases. He had around 140 parakeets in his basement. This interest in birds, accounts for part of the name of the business, SCIELBI Computer Consulting, Inc., which was an anacronym for SCientific, ELectionic and BIoology.

Though this isn't reflected by the history books or the few interviews that Nat gave before he passed away, Findley remembers that Nat was a "funny person." Terri recalls that, "You had to be very quick on the draw - literally he found double meanings in everything you said. I always said to him you could make the word, 'the', funny." Nat formally proposed marriage to Terri during the Wadsworth family Christmas celebration of 1973. In his typical funny way, Nat had wrapped the engagement ring in seven boxes.



SCELBI Computer Consulting, soon established itself as a leader in the newly emerging personal computer market. Findley recalls that for a time, "They had the market to themselves."

Sometime in the spring or summer of 1974, Zawacki's and Nat's close friendship ended. Zawacki left the company, taking SCELBI's major investors with him. This affected the company,

in that future projects had to be financed by revenues, alone.

The Mark 8 User Group Newsletter reported in the March of 1975 issue, "SCELBI continues to add to their legion of satisfied owners. Their machine may not be the cheapest or the prettiest, but it is easy to assemble, does exactly what it is supposed to, delivery is on time, and support is superb. Their programming manuals continue to earn absolutely rave reviews."

A year after the release of the first SCELBI computer, a new competitor, MITS, brought the Altair 8800 computer to market. The Altair used a newer generation processor, making the SCELBI obsolete overnight. The success of the Altair and the lack of investors forced Nat to shift his company's focus to publishing books. SCELBI had sold about 40 fully built-up computers and another 100 kits before they left the computer hardware business.

The books that SCELBI would publish would instruct the people that had purchased the new personal computers, how to use them. Findley wrote or contributed to eleven books, but

after three years, he left SCLEBI. The business survived, but Nat only paid himself occasionally, reinvesting most of the company's income back into the business. Nat and Terri lived mostly off of her teacher's salary.

Terri helped with the business during summers when school was out. For two years, she left her teaching job, and worked full time with Nat. Her background in English came in handy, but Terri wasn't particularly interested in computer technology. She was there to help Nat with his business. She contributed by doing a lot of the typing for SCLEBI's publishing business.

At one point, Nat wrote a computer grading program for Terri to use in her teaching. Not interested in technology, Terri said she wasn't going to use it. Nat responded by ripping up the program. Terri asked Nat why he ripped it up instead of selling it. Nat said he wrote it for her.

In 1982, Nat sold the SCLEBI publishing business to Hayden Publishing and started exploring pocket computer technology. In 1988, Nat had the design done for a new pocket computer that he thought would revolutionize the industry. He had parts on hand and was ready to build the first production units when his heart stopped. Terri kept him alive with CPR until the paramedics arrived. The paramedics took over, but it took three tries with a defibrillator before they could restore his heartbeat. His heart had been stopped for over 10 minutes.

Severe brain damage resulted in blindness and he never walked again. Important parts of his memory were destroyed. Nat did not know who Terri was or remember their joint past. For the next 10 years, he couldn't be left by himself and Terri depended upon a series of visiting nurse's aides to tend to Nat while she went to work. These aides varied in quality from awesome to unreliable. A number of times, when one of those unreliable nurses didn't show up in the morning, Terri would bring Nat to school and install him in the library where the staff would help Nat during the day, while Terri taught. They would call Terri from her classroom, when he needed to go the bathroom.

In 1998, Nat's heart stopped again. Visiting him in intensive care, though he was supposed to be knocked out, Terri saw Nat sit up and say, "Holy Cow!" The doctors and nurses put him back under. When Terri arrived the next morning, she knew that Nat was gone, only the machines were keeping his body alive. The doctors said that he could last minutes or days if the machines were disconnected. Terri had the machines turned off. Nat died one minute and thirty-one seconds later.



Nat passed away knowing that he had been the first to ship a personal computer. At the same time, he felt his contribution to the personal computer revolution had been overlooked by those who wrote the history books.