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"Taking Commodore Computing Into The Twenty First Century And Beyond ..."

Sept./Oct. 2012



-by Lenard R. Roach

Sitting in the office chair work one cool October evening, I was pecking away at my iPhone when suddenly I realized how much we have been "forced", as it were, away from our beloved Commodore computer in order to stay ahead or competitive with the current market. Let's take me, for example: here I am, writing an article for the Interface, and I am doing it on an iPhone which is in no way related to the Commodore at all, except for the fact that they are both machines. When I finish this article, I will send it to my email (another non-Commodore item), download it to a 3.5 inch floppy in MS-DOS mode (do you see a Commodore yet?), then finally use Big Blue Reader to transpose the work into Commodore GeoWrite 2.1 (there it is!)

Do you see what is happening? Machines there were created in the past are now used to do those tasks of the lowest order, or worse, cannibalized for parts or valuable metals that can be sold the local

scrap yard. Here in Kansas City, there is a large cell phone service provider that has a once a year collection throughout the communities wherein, for free, a person can dispose of their old computers, software, and peripherals. People come in droves on the designated day bringing station wagons, pick up trucks, and trailers full of old computer equipment to be recycled. This event lasts all day and when it is over, people have to be turned away because they are still coming in. I have never gone to an event because I don't have the time, but one can only wonder what goes into those dumpsters at the complex.

Thinking about all this makes me appreciate the men and women of 21st century Commodore who are making strong strides in our beloved machine to get it more compatible with today's standards. I know that in the past I have beriled the Commodore universe for not being cost effective in their efforts to become more compatible with today's machines, but now I see that such efforts cannot be cheap, unless one does not mind shoddy workmanship, and Commodore users are not ones to settle for same; memory has to be upgraded, software has to be made compatible, and processor speeds must be enhanced, just to name a few things that need to be affected. To those who are more hard nosed than me in Commodore, these things are those like them, are worth more to them than mere money. The very life of Commodore is at stake, and many will be damned if they will allow a few technological advances

in the computer world stop them from making the Commodore the best on the market.

One of the things I was proud of when it came to the publication of Run/Stop-Restore was the fact that it was done completely on a Commodore computer and printed on a Commodore based dot matrix printer. I was hoping to make it the big selling point of the book, and not on just mere content alone. But, like and idiot, I knew little about marketing and sales and was hoping that the Commodore community would help from the clubs, so naturally the book was a flop. Seriously, 12 copies in 10 years? Yeah, flop. Now, with a better grip on sales that I have learned from various jobs I have worked, I believe I can do better, and make a bigger impact.

But when it came to Run/Stop-Restore: 10th Anniversary Edition, I had to abandon the Commodore format and use the competition's Word program and the Internet to make my book. I also had to come up with \$3,000 cash to make it all possible. Do you know that the publishers of Run/Stop-Restore: 10th Anniversary Edition are still pestering me to join this program or buy that package even when they know the book is a failure just to mustard more money out of me? How rude!

Oh, but the stepping away from Commodore doesn't stop there, oh no! With my 3rd book, Skits for 2nd Hand Puppets Volume 1: The 10 Commandments, I had to convert my Commodore files into Word files, then from Word to .PDF format. With subsequent books after that,

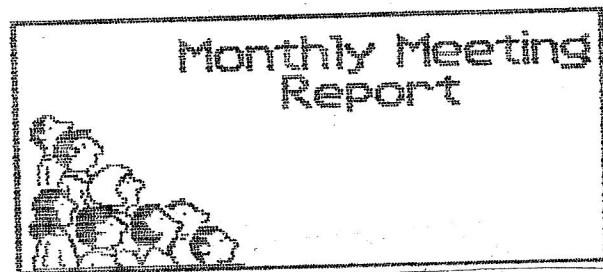
they all were done on the iPod Touch and converted to Word, then converted to .PDF and not once did a Commodore touch the process. This is what I have been brought down to. May the Commodore clubs of the world take pity on me!

So, some in the Commodore community has asked us users, "What can we develop for you?" My request is a piece of either hardware or software that will take a Commodore work processing document and convert it into a usable .PDF file that will

interface comfortably with Adobe Acrobat, preferably a GeoWrite document. I'm sure this facility exists, but I have yet to find it. I know I can use Wrong Is Write and convert the document into a Word document, but then it loses its Commodore flavor. I am looking for a direct-to-.PDF converter that will retain the fonts used by Geowrite and make the print more Commodore. My friend and web master, Tim (who some of you met at the last CommVEx), converted the original Run/Stop-Restore into .PDF using a scanner and some PC software, and it turned out good. I am looking for something that won't require so much PC activity. If something like this does exist for Commodore, then free free to write me in care of this newsletter.

I know this is short article from me this issue, but I have hat in my hand and asking that I be forgiven of my shortsightedness in to what exactly the men and women of 21st century Commodore are doing.

Next issue: Christmas!



September Meeting Notes

-by Robert Bernardo

Treasurer Dick Estel was absent as was member Brad Strait, Dick was travelling throughout the West and Brad was caring for a new family member. I myself barely made it to the meeting, having to contend with my car's left front tire, which had lost air pressure overnight. With my Coleman air compressor, I pumped the tire back up, saw that it was holding air, left for the meeting, and only arrived 10 minutes late. Member Louis and son Vincent M.

were waiting for me when I arrived at Bobby Salazar's Mexican Restaurant. I apologized for my tardiness, but they didn't mind.

Piece by piece, I unloaded the Commodore hardware out of my car and into the restaurant, Louis and Vincent helping and member Roger V.P. helping also when he showed up a few minutes later. I took an air pressure reading off the leaking car tire, and it seemed to be holding air. With my mind at ease, I went back into the restaurant to get down to business.

As usual, it took a while to set up all of the equipment, but once done, we were able to sit down and order lunch. While waiting for the food to arrive, we started with old business -- talk about the Commodore Vegas Expo for next year -- and new business -- our October "picnic" lunch.

The meeting went along fairly efficiently. Though we ran out of time to try out SuperCPU games and utilities at <http://members.optusnet.com.au/spacetaxi64/index2htm> and the new C128 slideshow, VDC Mode Mania, found at <http://csdb.dk/release/?id=110966>, we did have plenty of time to look over the rare, German-built VC1020 expander for the VIC-20, a PAL C64C shipped from the Czech Republic, and a Dreaan C64C from Argentina. Everyone at the meeting was amazed at the heavy-duty metal construction of the VC1020. Louis and son Vincent had brought one of their VIC-20s to the meeting, and we tried it out with the VC1020. Well, when some game cartridges were inserted in the first or second ports of the expander, there was no response from the VIC-20; otherwise, the VIC-20 seemed to be working normally through the pass-through in expander. Another device for hardware tech Ray Carlsen to repair.

The VC1020 was almost in perfect condition, except for a missing front label. Louis said that with the help of a friend, he could duplicate the label right down to the font, color, and material used. Later, I sent him photos taken from the Internet that showed what the label appeared to

be. Now all I had to do was get the measurements of the label to him.

The PAL C64C came in a different box to what we knew was usually provided in the USA; the different languages provided on the box and the West German bottom label on the C64C were a treat to see.

The Dreaan C64C was the most unusual item. I had to explain to the members how this machine was created, how Dreaan received permission from Commodore Business Machines to make its own version of the C64. Though we did not power it up (it would have just shown a black-and-white image on our NTSC monitor, due to its PAL-N 6572 video chip), we examined the casing, a crudely molded plastic case manufactured by Dreaan, and we laughed at how unfinished its looks seemed.

Finally, with the meeting coming to a close, I showed two Commodore-related videos posted at YouTube.com. The first was "They're Taking Hobbits to Isengard (C64)". With scenes taken from the Lord of the Rings trilogy of movies, a SID-composed music background was played while the characters spoke with digitized voices. Louis and I were skeptical that the voices had been digitized and played back through SID; they were too clear to be from an 8-bit Commodore (but anything is possible!).

Then we saw the video, "Datarock-Computer Camp Love". This video was about teenage computer nerds at computer camp, and one of the computers at the camp was ... a C64. In fact, the C64 appeared a few times in the video. Though I didn't understand everything about the video, Roger was kind enough to explain some of the esoteric parts of it.

When the meeting ended, we were only a mere hour overtime, give or take half an hour. All was not well, though. The left front car tire had lost air, and I had to fill it up again. The next day after work, I went to Sears and had it replaced under warranty.

-by Dick Estel

The annual Fresno Commodore Users Group picnic started in the 1990s, and for a number of years was held at the beautiful country home of the late Sandy and Ingrid Dippolett. As active, local membership declined, the event eventually became a dinner, and then a lunch, usually at the regular monthly meeting time, but a different location, with the club providing the dinner.

This year we gathered at the Seven Bar and Grill in Clovis, highly recommended by Dick and various friends he's taken there in the past few months. Our attendance was pretty much like our typical meetings -- Brad Strait, Roger Van Felt, Robert Bernardo, Louis Mazzei, Vincent Mazzei, and Dick Estel.

We hadn't seen Brad for a while; he and his wife recently welcomed a new baby, making three kids under four to keep them busy.

Roger had good news -- a new job, after months of searching. Robert recently attended the AmiWest Show, as well as the Southern California Commodore & Amiga Network (SCCAN) meeting in Northridge, California.

Louis has been buying up low price JiffyDOS chips to install in his VIC-20s, while son Vincent has been getting a lot of use out of the VIC he won at the Las Vegas expo in July.

Dick mostly keeps busy "being retired," a task that takes all his time, without producing any measurable results.

We got caught up on everyone's activities, discussed the state of Commodore, and enjoyed a great lunch that lived up to Dick's claim for it.

At the conclusion of the event, Robert handed out gift bags with a small, non-computer item to everyone, this has become a tradition each year.

Servicing The CMD RAMLink



-by Ray Carlsen, master C= repair technician

(As of November 22, 2012, Ray has asked for the data for the GAL chips mentioned below but has not yet received that data. With the data, he thinks he can burn them.)

Until I was asked by a friend +Robert Bernardo to repair his CMD RAMLink, I had no experience with those devices ... never even saw one up close. Turns out he actually had five of them, three older and two newer versions, and they all ended up on my repair bench for evaluation. He mentioned that one of them (a later version) had a problem of losing data stored on the RAM after it was on awhile. Rather than trying to dig into one right away, I thought I should first get as familiar with a working one as I could.

Starting from scratch on any electronic device, I try to get all the information I can before I even open the case. Bad information is difficult to un-learn. Fortunately, the owner had the original user manual and a utilities disk, so I found out how to properly connect the device to the computer and how to use it. A user needs both the book and the disk. I believe that are copies on the Internet. One source I found for a .pdf of the later spiral bound manual is from Daniel Mackey. As of this writing:
<ftp://2dvm.com/Commodore/Programs/Misc/Ramlink-manual.pdf>. It's a 50 Meg file and took over an hour to download on my 1.5M DSL.

My next step as a servicer, like a doctor, is to examine the "patient". Taken completely apart, I found two of the early models had poor solder connections on the

4-pin DIN PS input jack (main board). They were bad from the factory, and I had to scrape the pins a bit to get solder to properly flow around those connections. All early models should be checked for that shortcoming as it could cause intermittent operation or an outright failure.

POWER REQUIREMENT AND EXTERNAL CONNECTORS: ...

The early version RAMLink uses a 1581/1541-II power supply. It has a four pin DIN power connector and puts out two voltages: +5VDC at 1 Amp and +12VDC at 0.5A.

NOTE: A smaller version of that same PS was sold by Commodore but which probably should be used with the RAMLink because its 5V output is only 0.75A (750 mA). Those specs are printed on the PS. A coaxial or "barrel" type of connector is there for the backup battery, if used. The battery is rated at 6 volts 6.5 AH and is used to keep the RAM alive in the event of a power failure or if the RAMLink is moved to another location and the data must be maintained.

The later version RAMLink uses a single 9 volt DC "wall wart" AC to DC adaptor rated at 1 Amp. The DC input connector on that later RAMLink is therefore different: a single coaxial or "barrel" type. The plug on the PS is about 10mm long, 5mm outside diameter, and it mates with a socket center pin diameter or approximately 1.5mm. The backup battery connector on the later version RL is a mini-phone rather than a coaxial (barrel) type. The connector is essentially the same as the older mono earphone type. The polarity of that connector is tip=positive, ring=negative. I didn't need a backup battery for my tests but I understand a fully charged battery should hold the memory for 6 to 8 hours, depending on how much RAM is installed and the state of charge of the battery. It's slowly "trickle" charged by the RL and so it would take a lot of time (several days) to fully charge a low battery.

NOTE: If you didn't get an original Commodore power supply for the later version RAMLink, most important is the polarity of the PS output: the center pin is positive and the barrel is negative. Using a supply with a reversed voltage output could damage the RAMLink and/or the PS!

I should mention one other thing here. I never like using a mini-phone plug as a battery connector. The exposed ends of the plug could short out if that plug touches metal. Also, there are many manufacturing variations of that plug and its jack. The wrong combination could potentially short out the battery when the plug is inserted or removed. It's best to plug or unplug that connector when the battery itself is disconnected from its wires. A shorted battery could explode or at the very least burn its wiring.

One connector common to both versions of the RAMLink is the large circular 14-pin DIN parallel port. It's used to connect a CMD hard drive to the RL with the appropriate cable and HD DOS version in the drive.

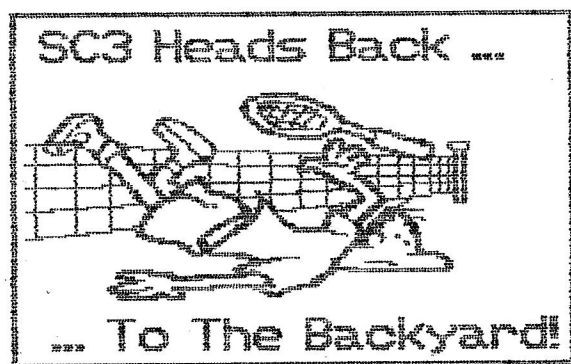
RAMLINK INTERNALS

The main (bottom) board in the two RAMLinks versions is, of course, different. They use some different IC's although both have a date stamped on that board of 1990. The plug-in RAM board situated on top of that bottom board appears to be the same (can be marked either 1990 or 1992) except for a very early one that doesn't have a real time clock. RAM boards should be interchangeable between versions of the RAMLink. If the RAM is to be upgraded, a jumper must be cut on the sub-board (see appropriate users manuals for details). In the units I examined, there were four RAM module sockets filled with DRAM strips for a total of 4 Meg in the early units and 16 Megs in the later ones. Total BYTES FREE in the early units was 16064 and 65216 in the later ones.

The one RL (later version) that was defective was found to have had a liquid spill onto the

internal boards. I disassembled that unit, scrubbed the boards with Windex and an old toothbrush, rinsed with water and dried with a hair dryer. I replaced a corroded IC socket and a burned resistor (R49, a 5.1 ohm 1/4 watt flameproof) but that RL still didn't work reliably. Swapping chips back and forth between the good and bad units, I finally found the DOS 27512 EPROM had a part of its code corrupted. As stated, that unit would initialize but couldn't reliably hold its partition and program data. I was able to "clone" a copy of the DOS from the good RL onto a fresh EPROM and replace the bad one. All the other socketed chips in those RAMLinks are GALs, programmable chips I don't presently have the hardware with which to "burn" replacements. I clearly got lucky with this one. One last thing ... I noticed that some of these RL's would not always show up with the JiffyDOS opening screen with the computer was booted. I cleaned the two toggle bypass switches on the case top by spraying control cleaner in the openings at the base of the paddles and working the switches back and forth a few times. That took care of it.

The paper stickers with the factory part numbers were glued to the chips in these RAMLinks but they were all loose and falling off, so I glued the ones I found back on. All the labels are on programmed, socketed chips only, namely the DOS EPROM and GALs.



-by Steven Hertz, SCCC

Near freezing temperatures
and the threat of rain weren't

enough to keep 130 gamers from coming "Back to the Backyard" for SC3's latest arcade party on Saturday, November 10th. After two successful but more formal events at an Alhambra gallery, the Southern California Classic Collectors decided to return home to a private backyard in Claremont, CA. Commercial venues and big events have their place, but sometimes lack that sense of "just a bunch of friends getting together" that SC3 is all about. Well, we definitely felt that sense again at this event, and we think our attendees did too. It was good to be back.

But it was COLD. Thankfully, the rain that had fallen slowly but steadily throughout Southern California for two days prior stayed away on the day of the event. Temperatures were a different story. It dipped into the 40s at times -- practically Arctic levels for those of us accustomed to SoCal's sunny weather. The chilly temps didn't seem to get people down though. They crowded into the garage arcade, huddled around Satan's Hollow machine for warmth, or otherwise kept moving by running from the arcade games to the console games to the trade tables and back again. The cold contributed to the event breaking up a little earlier than normal -- 11:30 rather than the traditional midnight -- but that was OK since we had opened two hours earlier than previous parties. This schedule work well for wintertime events, and we plan to stick to it in the future.

Since this was our first backyard party in two years and the rain interfered with our setup plans, a few things went more roughly than we hoped. The biggest snafu was the last pizza pick-up we had scheduled for 10 pm. Our designated pizza guy drove to the restaurant, only to find it was closed! by the time he got back, it was getting too late to devise an alternate pizza plan, so we kind of dropped the ball there at the end, food-wise, and we apologize. (But in our defense, who could have guessed that a pizza would close at 10 pm on a Saturday!) We also owe

a big thanks to Eric B., who helped us open the event by providing four pies from Petrillo's, one of the best pizzerias in the state. Our stomachs thank you, Eric.

We also had slightly fewer arcade machines than normal due to the threat of more rain. Luckily, Steve A. helped out a lot in that department by bringing a cabinet containing a Blue Elf multi-SNK cartridge. Kalan H. brought Satan's Hollow and Eliminator, an awesome vector game that had never appeared at SC3 before. Rik M. provided his usual complement of early 80s handhelds and a super-rare Adventurevision. Robert Bernardo brought the Commodore love with an Amiga CD-32 and an MCC-216. Of course our expected plethora of home consoles was up and running -- 14 of them this time around. The cold didn't bother them one bit.

Games weren't the only attraction however. Director Jeff Von Ward showed his upcoming documentary film, "The Space Invaders: In Search Of Lost Time," a fascinating look into the world of arcade game collectors (something we can relate to for some reason). How good is the movie? A crowd of people sat still, in metal chairs, in 40 degree weather, to watch it. And they came back to keep watching it after the projector screen got knocked over accidentally and the film had to be restarted. More information on the film can be found on its official site.

Thanks to Jeff and everybody else who brought games and supplies. We'd also like to thank all attendees who chipped in a few bucks into the kitty jar. Your contributions pay for this event and enable us to keep SC3 running smoothly. Special thanks to Ian W. who helped immensely during setup, teardown, and even during the event. His comfy-looking Tron hoodie was also an inspiration to all of us struggling to keep warm.

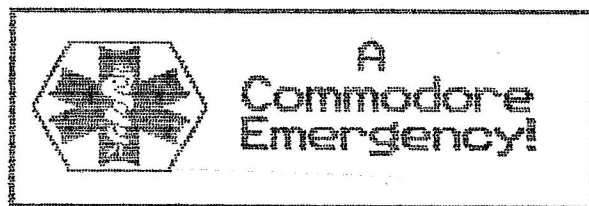
Despite the cold, the trade tables were hot. There was the usual action of classic cartridges and systems changing hands, in addition to a few choices rarities (someone had a boxed NES Donkey Kong Jr. Math for example). Some

big items could be seen too, including a Steel Battalion controller and an X-Arcade panel. GameGavel was once again on hand, raffling off goodies ranging from a boxed Tele-Pong console to an Omnibot toy robot to the board game based on Sega's Turbo coin-op. As collectors, it always thrills us to see it all back in the backyard. It felt good.

So just how eager were folks to attend this event? So much so that they kept showing up on Sunday ... well, one on them, anyway. George R., one of our good friends and regular attendees, got mixed up on the date arrived the day after the event, literally at the moment we'd just finished tearing down and packing up everything. He'd just driven some distance to be there, too. Fittingly, it was like the ending of a Joh Hughes movie from the 80s.

Stay tuned for announcements for our spring SC3 party.

<http://www.facebook.com/VAQEbHNSyAQFMsa5iORxZmq@JCpUZBboWA3xUGdN3PAQ/www.sc3videogames.com/highlights/20121110.php>



-by Dick Estel

It was a frantic, late-night email, with the subject, "Commodore Emergency!" After my own late night, non-emergency trip to the "facility", I had gone in the office and glanced at my email. Who could resist immediately checking a message like that?

It was from Lenard Roach, our editor, who wrote:

"I was up early and thought I would start converting the text for the newsletter from PC to Commodore. My copy of Big Blue Reader has gone corrupt and I need another one sent to me ASAP. All production of the newsletter has been halted until this disk is acquired."

We had had our club meeting the previous day, and I had used the last of my blank disks making copies of our library disk. However, I accepted the fact that in the morning I would set up the club equipment and copy BBR over one of those disks. I returned to bed, thinking about the task ahead. Would I be able to copy the program from my CMD hard drive?

Between falling asleep and struggling out of bed the next morning it occurred to me that maybe Lenard could download and use Little Red Reader, a BBR clone, or maybe even BBR. Then I realized that he would need BBR to convert the downloads ... a street with dead ends in both directions.

Then a vague memory stirred. Several years ago I demonstrated BBR at CommVEx. The author had abandoned Commodore and had responded rudely to requests from

users for assistance. So I had no qualms about distributing copies of the program, and I made some to hand out at the show. Did I still have some of those disks around?

I keep a text file called "Where Is" on my PC, to help me locate things that I put "somewhere", when I forget where "somewhere" is. Sure enough, the list included the envelope that contained three BBR disks plus instructions. It was not necessarily in the LAST place I would have looked without the reminder, but it was certainly not the first or second place.

So this sudden "lemon" ends up being a refreshing drink -- the disks are on the way to Lenard via our somewhat dysfunctional but still usable mail system, and an issue that was a bit short of material has another article.