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VERY ROUGH AND INCOMPLETE DRAFT TO SEE IF THERE IS ANY REALISTIC INTEREST – IF SO, IT CAN BE FLESHED OUT MORE COMPLETELY – IF NOT, THEN NOT AS MUCH TIME IS WASTED.

CAN USE IN MY STS BOOKS / ARTICLES ALSO AS A SPECIFIC PERSONAL EXAMPLE INVOLVING A SIGNIFICANT DEVICE AND MANY PEOPLE

## **NOSTALGIA – THE OLD KAYPRO COMPUTERS**

**[OR “ANOTHER TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE!”]**

By Frank Gadek

### **Introduction**

So how did this all start?

In the middle 1980's, I became aware of the Kaypro somehow and, like many, was looking for a personal [portable?] computer.

I had been introduced to computing thru a National Science Foundation [NSF] grant program in the middle 1970's. Of course, they were mainframes and punched cards then and teletypes with paper tapes. There was a portable unit that was interesting with respect to accessing the mainframe by phone [acoustic coupler – you put the phone receiver into it and dialed the proper number].

**These aspects should bring back some very old [good / bad?] memories for those who were involved with computing way back then!**

A Kaypro store opened by a man and wife team in nearby Souderton, PA [South of Quakertown, PA] and we purchased one, at the initiative of my wife! Cost for hardware and software was about \$2000 [probably about \$4000 to \$6000 today] – a substantial investment at the time!

One drive failure was eventually fixed by the male owner of the store. But other than that, it worked fine. Software was ok, but the database Perfect Filer was a real challenge – partly because we were new at this and the documentation was not very good [my wife is a technical writer – just whisper “Perfect Filer” in her ear and she still cringes!].

Kaypro was smart enough to include an integrated software package with their systems – word processor, spreadsheet and database manager – all in the

Frank Gadek

“Perfect” software system making use of many similar commands and able to work together in some ways. The term “Perfect” was certainly appropriate and inappropriate in many ways.

The other big factor was that it was **very portable and very rugged**. It was all metal on the outside and weighed almost **50 pounds!**. Size was about 2’ x 1.5’ x 0.5’ – very large by today’s standards.

SOME SPECIFICATIONS:

64K RAM

2 – 5.25” DISK DRIVES - DISK CAPACITY ONLY 520 KB???

ONE FOR SOFTWARE

ONE TO SAVE FILES TO

9” CRT SCREEN

ACOUSTIC MODEM

OKIDATA PRINTER – DOT MATRIX

We quickly saw how we could very productively use it and after about a year I pushed for a second one [one for my wife and one for myself – marriages can work out better that way in the long run]. Also, when you become so dependent on something, a backup is very important.

With respect to the people who owned the local Kaypro store, the man worked for I believe a pharmaceutical company [Merck?] and his wife ran the store. He repaired Kaypros on site. Shortly, after she became pregnant, the store closed and, of course, the computer industry was rapidly changing. **We were then “on our own!”**

## **Brief Kaypro History**

It is very well documented on the web, especially on [www.vintage-computer.com](http://www.vintage-computer.com), among many other sources.

Basically and **very briefly**, the company was making electronic test instruments and saw from the success of the first [?] Osborne portable computer that they could get into the business.

They were quickly [maybe too quickly] **“very” successful with a great product**. Many stories and rumors abound that they may have been making about 10,000 per month [year?] and expanded so fast that much had to be stored in tents.

Frank Gadek

Besides being very well designed and very rugged, their **CRT screen** [only about 9" diagonally] was very clear and sharp – with **green** letters on a black background. Probably directly from their electronic test instrument screens. This was exceptional for that time period and was a very good selling point

Also, when you opened up the top of the case, you could actually have relatively a lot of room to work on the system, compared to portables today [in essence, really not much room, if any, but not necessarily for today's desktops].

The Kaypro company was **very creative and aggressive** [but nicely so!], especially in such an early period of computing in general.

They started a very informative magazine, **KUGRAM** and had people touring the country to find out more about what the users were doing and what their real market was. A representative spent some time in our local PA area and even may have spoken at a LVCG meeting at that time. I believe I was instrumental in setting that program, since I was so involved with Kaypros at that time.

Other Kaypro models soon followed, including one with the **first hard drive** [10 megabytes – 10 MB – Wow!? – but big for that time] in a portable personal computer – the **Kaypro 10**.

They had a program where you could get a hard drive Kaypro 10 for a users group for free for starting and maintaining such a group. Of course, some may have taken advantage of this program to just get the computer.

I believe Kaypro also had a website to assist their customers, but it certainly was not anywhere near what we have today in websites. But it was a source of information and was very progressive at the time.

Others outside the Kaypro company followed with information and services to maintain, repair and modify Kaypros. The journal Microcornucopia published how you could even yourself modify Kaypros to make them do more + much important background information.

After the demise of the Kaypro organization, ERAC in California was a great source of many parts, even including various versions of the motherboard.

JDR and even Radio Shack had items that could be used in the Kaypro. Many Kaypro items were very generic and used in many other electronic aspects.

It is nice to see today that there is still so much interest [cult like?] in the Kaypros. However, it is more of an interest by collectors and those interested in the nostalgic aspects, since modern systems offer so much more in so many ways.

But the Kaypro was a great and fun system **that is what it is!**

Frank Gadek

Sad to say, that running a successful business for the long term with a great product and doing many of the right things, does not make certain survival. So Kaypro, like so many Science, Technology and Society [STS - one of my special interests and research projects] events, could not maintain profitability and it finally declared bankruptcy I believe in the early 1990's.

Many factors were involved, but especially the fast pace of dramatic technical progress in many areas of the computer field. That can be a whole other area to explore and document. But this article focuses mainly on the Kaypro and its nostalgic aspects.

### “On Our Own”

As noted above, we Kaypro owners were quickly “on our own” with respect to managing issues with the Kaypros – both software and hardware.

When one of our Kaypros was not working correctly, I took it to a local electronic repair place that specialized in fixing personal portable computers. They were fairly familiar with them and had several continually in their shop for repairs. We developed a very friendly relationship. Kaypros were very reliable computers, but like all mechanical things, they do break down periodically over time and heavy use.

However, what I found one time was that **a single staple** had been used to jumper a 5.25” disk drive, instead of the ordinary type of jumper – plastic head with 2 exposed pins. This alerted me to some possible very important and serious future “issues” developing with such computer repair places.

So being fairly good at repairing things [my Dad taught me well!], I decided to investigate how do you diagnose and repair computers, besides properly maintaining them.

Since so many of us Kaypro users were “on our own now,” many sources of information started to become readily available from a variety of sources.

After all, the Kaypro system was very good, we were familiar with using it and we had already invested a lot of funds, time and other resources in it. So why change now? Some competitors were out there and of course Apple was active, but they were a whole different “breed” of computers.

So by “banding together,” many of us Kaypro users were able to keep our systems running by sharing our experiences and sources of information, parts, new commercial products that could be used on the Kaypros, etc.

Frank Gadek

The journal **MicroCornucopia** was certainly a big factor in all of this. They held it all together with a fantastic amount of very practical technical details and items to improve Kaypros and to keep them running well. This journal could be a whole other topic for an article.

Naturally, the **Lehigh Valley Computer Group** [LVCG] was also a very important factor in our local area for Kaypro owners and users. It had been in existence for several years before the middle 1980's of the start of the Kaypro era. The Radio Shack TRS personal computer systems were a big factor initially to bring people together in LVCG about their computer issues and interests.

At one meeting I was at ,at the very beginning of the Kaypro era when we were all looking for help wherever we could get it, some Kaypro questions were asked in the beginning Random Access portion of the program [nice to see that this is still part of the LVCG program!]. Many in the group started to look around at all these Kaypro people asking questions about a new computer system that they did not know about. After all, most in the LVCG were certainly very knowledgeable about computing and especially local computing. Why did they not know of Kaypros? What were they, what could they do, were they just a passing fad, etc.?

Finally, I think it was good old **Joe Secundo**, in his inimitable, very unique manner [there was only "**one Joe Secundo**" for those of you old timers who knew him! – what a guy!!!], asked well just how many people in the audience are into Kaypros? Well, if my memory is correct [it was over 20 years ago – it may be in one of the old LVCG newsletters] at least 1/4 and possibly 1/3 of the audience raised their hands!!!

In those days, again if my memory is correct, the LVCG got about 50 to 100 people attending a meeting The class room at Lehigh Valley Tech on West Tilghman Street was almost always half or more full from my recollections.

There were not as many sources of computer information in those days, like there are today. Such meetings were thus a big factor for many in their progress in computing. Thus, if you had computer issues, you showed up at the meetings. There was a newsletter to help pass information, but only the very beginning of the idea of a suitable web site, I believe.

Well the **Kaypro Sig** was soon formed and was very active for many years. People came to the Kaypro Sig meetings to swap information, software, hardware, etc. in order to keep their systems running and to make better use of their Kaypros. Naturally, as the computer revolution progressed, the Kaypro Sig gradually declined and was not necessary any longer, since many Kaypro computer users had finally moved on to more modern systems, myself included.

Frank Gadek

I even gave a presentation on how you could make the **Kaypro “talk”** by attaching a simple electronic device to it that you could easily make yourself. The building details were from Microcornucopia I believe. You spoke into a microphone attached to the device and your voice was captured by the Kaypro and played back from the Kaypro thru a speaker. I still have the device! It was an incredible thing to do back then, but of course, so common today.

I even contributed several very short published journal articles to MicroCornucopia and KUGRAM from my experience fixing Kaypros.

## **EVENTUAL / INEVITABLE CONVERSION TO WINDOWS / DOS**

It was at the strong urging of my wife – again she was a big factor in my computer development – she knew what had to be done, but she is not a technical person. She got a Gateway and when I saw what she could do, I just had to finally make the break with my “beloved” Kaypros around 1994 – 10 years after getting our first Kaypro.

I gradually started to convert over to the Gateway and the Windows / DOS operating system from my Kaypro work. One of the very nice features of the Kaypro Perfect Writer word processor was that the text was essentially in “text format” so it could be used by other word processors like Word. A software package, by Kaypro possibly, was the **Uniform Software** system that made the conversion of Perfect Writer files on a C/PM disk to a disk readable by a Windows / DOS system. However, formatting was not converted, so you lost that. However, formatting was not as complex as it is today. Mostly, you got just the “bare basics” in Perfect Writer, so not much was lost.

The database, Perfect Filer and the spreadsheet, Perfect Calc, were not so easily converted, if they could be converted at all. However, you could get a line by line listing of the spreadsheet items, so that was at least something.

So the conversion from C/PM to Windows / DOS could be a significant issue for some users and uses, but not really a big issue for text documents with a word processor.

## **SUMMARY**

So this is how it all began for us!

If you would like more details, please consult my over 100 page **2008 Trenton Computer Festival** paper which is on this website as a download.

Frank Gadek

You can check the Lehigh Valley Computer Group website [[www.lvcg.org](http://www.lvcg.org)] for their January 2008 Newsletter issue that is posted for the nice 2 page article their Editor Carole did on my Kaypro disposal activities.

If there is substantial interest in this topic, I can expand on it.

But this can give you some of the initial “flavor” of what it was like at the beginning of the portable, personal computer [PPC] era in the early 1980’s.