Bridge the Gap: Get into Computers!

by Tonnae Hennigan

IN THIS COMPUTER age, it seems odd to suggest that there are people who do not think in terms of memory, text, hard-drive and disks. Yet, millions of Canadians are not yet computer literate and choose to remain so, fighting to stick with their pen, or at most, an electric typewriter and calculator. They resist the "push of progress" and firmly grasp a way that worked well for them.

One 54 year-old woman had an impressive list of reasons to avoid learning about computers. "I resist them. I find they lack communication with people. I like to look at people when I'm relating to them. I wouldn't be inclined to learn how to use computers. It doesn't draw me... They are hard on the eyes, too!"

I confess to having experienced some pretty strong emotions myself before I took the plunge and enrolled in some courses at a local training company. My feelings were basically fear and lack of confidence, resulting in defensiveness. I denied the need to acquaint myself with this big bad electronic world, and had every excuse not to do so.... "I can type 100 wpm, and can use most dedicated word processors, why do I need to learn how to use personal computers?...It's beyond me. I can't do it."

Top: Gladys Nolan enjoying her word processor under the tutelage of Leia Beland, 13. *Below:* Bob Harvey in his home office.

To me, at the time, computers were in another world populated by brainy people. In point of fact, that's just about the way it is (minus the brainy bit). To quote Daken Ariel, who owns and operates a computer training business on the West Coast, "This is a computer-driven world."

If it hadn't been for the prompting of a computer-oriented husband, I may not have taken the step until it had become a do-or-die situation. As it turned out, I found my classes extremely interesting and enjoyable. I discovered, to my delight, that everyone else in the class was just as ignorant as I was, and my instructor had a great sense of humour and didn't talk down to us or get impatient.

Say you are happily ensconced in your job, and you haven't (by some miracle) been required to "get with it". Perhaps you don't work in an office, and the computer work in the company is handled by clerical staff. Or maybe you've recently or not-so-recently retired, and just see no reason to make the effort. Here are a few possible reasons, for your consideration.

The possibilities

Here are a few things a computer can do for you:

▲ word processing: typing, editing and storing documents

▲ playing games: old standbys like Solitaire or Scrabble, and others that are very challenging and tax the mind, like Civilization, Cim City, Myst or Syndicate

Photos top by: B. Nolan
Photo below by: Alison Gardner

"Honey.. come quick.' I found the 'stop printing' command.."

Learning to use computers

Most people need some instruction, and the ideal is one-on-one, or a relatively small class. Check the want-ads, community colleges, night schools, senior citizens groups, and computer technology companies.

What do you need?

For about $1,500 you can go all out and buy a new "486" computer and colour monitor, and if you want to plug into the Net, for another $150 you can purchase a modem. About $300 will get you a new bubble jet printer. Add about $300 for a CD-ROM reader, and you probably have a lot more than you really need.

If you're content with a DOS operating system (versus a Windows system), you can purchase a 1982 model computer that is still perfectly good and suitable for basic software for only $200, according to Cub Lea, author of *The Ultimate Shopper*. Though it's wise to take a knowledgeable friend with you when going shopping in used computer lots, usually sellers are just keen to upgrade their systems, getting more power or more features, and there is nothing wrong with their old system. However, if you know nothing about computers you'd be foolish (or brave) to buy one on your own, even brand new from a dealer. Take along a computer-literate friend who understands your needs and budget.

The lingo

Here are some of the terms a greenhorn needs to know. We're leaving out a kadzillion technical terms you don't need to know.

IBM PC. IBM was the first to come out with a small computer everyone could use at home (rather than the huge, stand-alone computers like those occupying full floors of the CIA). These are "Personal Computers" or PCs.

IBM Compatible. Means a computer that is the equivalent of an IBM, but made by another company, at a fraction of the cost.

Hardware. This is the actual, physical stuff (wires, microchips, screws, and plastic casings) that make up the computer itself, the monitor, keyboard, modem, and CD-ROM reader.

Hard Drive. The storage capacity of the system – like filing drawers in your office.

Software. Refers to all the programs that make the computer do a million different things. Visit a software store, and you will get the picture.

RAM. Stands for Random Access Memory. The computer uses this for rapid communication between you (on the keyboard) and the software.

CD-ROM. Like a music CD. ROM means Read Only Memory – you cannot save on it. Stores a massive amount of data. Used for educational and entertainment software.

CD-ROM Reader. The attachment you need to use CD-ROMs.

Monitor. The TV-like box with a screen on which your typed stuff appears.

Keyboard. It's got all the keys of a typewriter and more, but it doesn't take muscle power to work it.

Printer. The component that prints what you create.

Modem. The gizmo that connects your computer to the phone lines and allows it to "talk" with the world.

▲ education: you can browse through a multitude of fascinating reference material, e.g., the Encyclopedia Britannica

▲ electronic communications using the Internet or an organized fee-based system such as Compuserve to find out anything and everything and to communicate with people all over the world, from your home

▲ accounting on user-friendly programs like Quicken, which let you keep track of every cent you spend, get monthly print-outs and do bank reconciliations easily

▲ publish your own newsletter using simple desktop publishing packages often included in the price of a computer

▲ prepare spreadsheets for charitable organizations.

There are countless software packages, but follow the old motto when you begin: KISS (keep it simple, stupid!). Harold Berner, president of Software Alley in Vancouver, says he sees some 70 and 80-year-old people who want to develop some software, write their own program. He says, "Nobody has a specific purpose with a computer. It is such an infinite area...There are no limits." (By the way, writing your own software requires a fairly advanced system.)

Increase your value to society

By becoming computer literate, you make yourself more marketable, even if you don't need money. Say you are interested in working as a volunteer. All organizations today use computers. If you have a working understanding of them and of popular software, you will be more valuable. While it's true they still need people to sit at reception desks, talk to patients, walk dogs, or whatever, if you can augment your list of skills with computer knowledge, you will be that much more valuable to the organizations you seek to assist.

Bridge the gap

I hate to say it, but indeed there is a generation gap – caused by many things, certainly. Knowing today's young people are literally brought up on computers, if more mature people aren't educated to at least the basics, we can't talk to them intelligently about their jobs, education, and aspirations.

Making the effort to gain that knowledge will help to bridge that gap.

Though nothing, admittedly, can induce one raised on Bing Crosby and Old Blue Eyes to actually enjoy The Grateful Dead or Twisted Sisters, the simple act of reaching out beyond our comfortable world to learn something new sharpens our minds and shoots our poky old car forward to catch up with the fast pace of life. Garett Hennigan, a comptroller for a charitable organization, made this observation: "Because technology has become so interwoven into the fabric of society, learning to be comfortable with computers bridges the gap to the present generation."

Converts

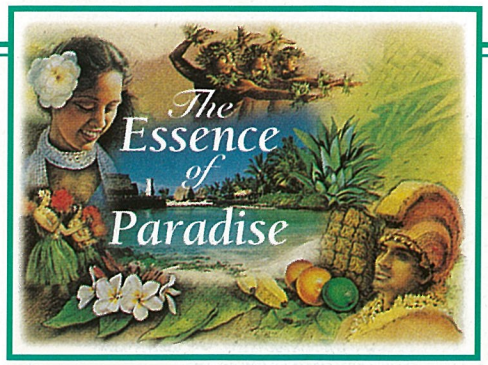
Successful people who've been quite happy with their non-tech state, are converting to "computerism" all the time, and reaping unexpected rewards. Bob Harvey had no computer knowledge whatsoever when he retired as deputy minister of highways for the province of British Columbia. He taught himself mid-way through writing his successful book on the history of B.C. road building, *The Coast Connection*.

"I enjoyed using the computer for editing my book, for corrections, and everything else [some desktop publishing]. It makes a tremendous difference," he says. His daughter in Australia is after him to use e-mail to "talk" to her, but Harvey resists: "I am a bit worried about making mistakes and getting a roomful of paper." Turning the printer off solves that worry.

A most inspiring story is that of Gladys Nolan, who's been writing for 40 years. She recently invested in a dedicated word processor (a basic form of computer) and revels in mastering its moods with the aid of Leia, her 13-year-old buddy/instructor.

"I'm thrilled to death with it, but it's a love-hate relationship. I'll be 87 this month, so it's quite a thing for me. Like many of life's problems, we have to learn to crawl before we can walk. I'm crawling as fast as I can."

Tonnae K. Hennigan is a writer and editorial assistant. Her husband is now lobbying for a CD-ROM reader so he can pretend he's Captain Picard.▲



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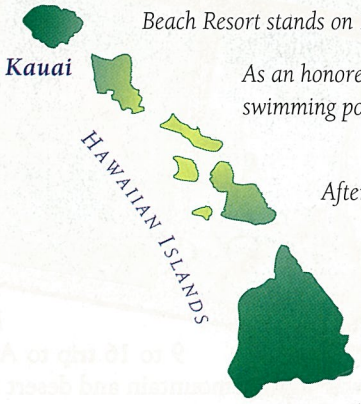

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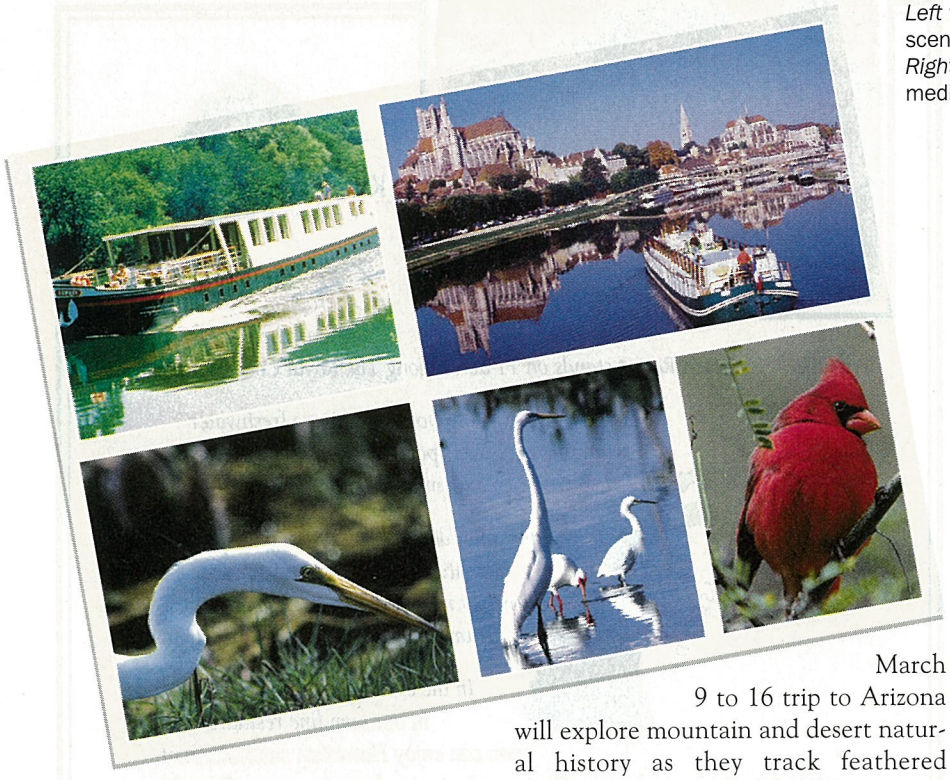

Left top: The 18-passenger *Esprit* cruising on the scenic Canal de Bourgogne near Dijon.
Right top: The 8-passenger *Liberté* cruising into the medieval port city of Auxerre on the Yonne River.

Barging Through Burgundy

French Country Waterways Ltd. has come up with a unique way to celebrate its 10th anniversary on the canals and rivers of east central France. During its April to October 1996 season, the company will offer "milestone anniversary" discounts to those celebrating their 10th, 25th and 50th wedding anniversaries, in the amount of 10%, 25% and 50% respectively. Travelling on one of its four luxury hotel barges, you will enjoy your own stateroom with private bath, delicious French cuisine, and a variety of on-shore options in the Burgundy countryside. These include tours to romantic chateaux, historic towns, and estates which produce some of the world's most famous wines. Each barge also carries bicycles.

Calling All Birdwatchers

Quest Nature Tours, a Canadian company with 26 years in nature-based travel, is offering three North American trips this spring to some of the top birdwatching areas on the continent. Leaving May 16, the six-day Spring Migration tour to Cape May, New Jersey visits this crucial resting and refuelling stop on the Atlantic seaboard. In a very different setting, participants in the March 9 to 16 trip to Arizona will explore mountain and desert natural history as they track feathered migrants from Mexico heading north. An exciting Canadian option in early May takes birdwatchers to Point Pelee National Park on Ontario's Lake Erie, described as "a bottleneck of the migration flyways" in North America. These are intimate once-a-year tours with a limit of 10 people, so book early.

Hawaii Takes Care of Winter Blues

Especially during our Canadian winter months, Outrigger Hotels Hawaii's 20% year-round discount for mature travellers is an incentive to shop for a spot to warm up the bones. This family business with 60 years in Hawaii encourages exploration of a perennially popular holiday destination with its 50 Plus program. Outrigger owns or manages 29 hotels and apartment condos on Oahu, Kauai, Maui and the big island of Hawaii, all with on- or near-beach locations and many with free breakfast included. See your travel agent for Outrigger's 16-page *Booking Guide*.

Discovering the South Pacific – in Depth

The Institute for Shipboard Education has unveiled a new two-month Semester at Sea summer session from May 22 - July 18, which will visit Tahiti, New Zealand, Australia, Fiji and Hawaii to focus on the human culture and natural environment of the South Pacific. Offering an academic curriculum and enriched field program similar to its round-the-world spring and fall voyages, the ISE permits 10% mature casual students, who may audit any university level course and join all activities on and off the ship. While there are separate sleeping areas, a private lounge, and program coordinator for mature students, a high tolerance of young adult companionship is recommended. The 737 passenger *Enchanted Seas* will make its inaugural voyage as a floating university, as the *SS Universe* is retired after more than two decades of service and 27,000 graduates. Call Club Maturity for details.

Single-Friendly Travel Directory

This directory published annually by *Connecting: news for solo travellers*, lists hundreds of travel and travel-related companies, clubs and organizations whose programs and pricing policies are sensitive to the needs of people travelling without a partner. Whether you're looking for high adventure tours, sightseeing or singles-only options, a beach resort, or education and volunteer travel programs, the 32-page directory is packed with ideas geared to all ages and interests. It comes free with a subscription to the bi-monthly newsletter, or is available on its own for $6.95 (GST and mailing included) with a cheque or money order to: *Club Maturity, 1030-1188 West Georgia Street, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6E 4A2.*▲

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