

My first trip on the electronic turnpike



From Where I Live

Bruce Stapley

For the past half-decade or so, I have lived in fear of last Thursday.

That was the day when a knock on the door signaled the arrival of a presence so diabolical as to make me break out into a cold sweat at the mere notion of its long-pending arrival.

No, we didn't break down and get a dog, a cat or even a Vietnamese pot-bellied pig for the kids. Nor did we set up a basement apartment for my mother-in-law. The dreaded entity of which I am speaking is a brand new, state of the art, personal computer, complete with icons, task-bars, e-mail capabilities and a billion or so other functions to catapult a fossil like myself kicking and screaming into the 21st century.

To properly appreciate the extent of my electronic ineptitude it is necessary to trace my sorry technological ascent. My very first *From Where I Live* column back in March of 1986 was hammered out on a small Underwood typewriter salvaged from a pile of unsold items at a garage sale. A year or so later that old clunker gave way to an electric typewriter which, while very used, represented a quantum leap of communications technology for me. After running this device the rest of the way into the ground, I finally took advantage of yet a third friend's offer to set me up with a used, mouseless, computer just as the 1980's were coming to a close. It took a while, but I soon came to appreciate the luxury of being able to write a newspaper story, rearrange a sentence or two along the way, and then have it print itself out without having to apply whiteout the same way an aging Hollywood actress plasters on makeup.

But it soon became quite obvious that the world of technology was zooming past me. Ads for personal computers started to take on the look of foreign language films. I was no longer able to hold my own in conversations with my fellow journalists about the equipment being used to produce their work. My occasional attempts at operating even the simplest computers belonging to

friends inevitably became exercises in futility. So you can understand my trepidation upon waking up last Friday morning faced with the prospect of having to meet deadline for the *Weekender* using a machine which was to my old computer what a Porsche is to a tricycle.

Armed with the lists of aids I had scribbled down while the man setting up our new window to the world quickly briefed us on its operation, I sat down to work. Within minutes I had lost the task bar and misplaced my first story. I quickly decided to admit my unreadiness and beat a hasty retreat to the familiar confines of my old beat-up computer with its black and white screen.

Over the weekend I took a few lessons from my wife Susan, whose school-teacher exposure to computers has left her light years ahead of me on the technological turnpike. I tried again Monday morning to get my new nemesis to dance with me, with only a little more success than I had met with on Friday. At one point I somehow managed to make the start-up icon which is the key to performing any and every function become irretrievably lost. A panic phone call to the guy who sold me the thing led to his steering me back on course much like a person who

has taken over an airplane when the pilot has passed out at the controls.

Susan fully expected to come home to find I'd purchased a gun and blown the thing into electronic oblivion.

By Wednesday, however, I was on the infernal device on a full-time basis, still tentative but able to succeed in a pinch at writing, saving and electronically sending a story to my

editor.

I know things can only get better as I endure the painful process of coming to grips with this hellish technological contrivance. But along the way I'm going to continue to curse Bill Gates, Thomas Edison and everyone else whose contributions to the electronic age where computers rule have turned my life upside down over the past week.



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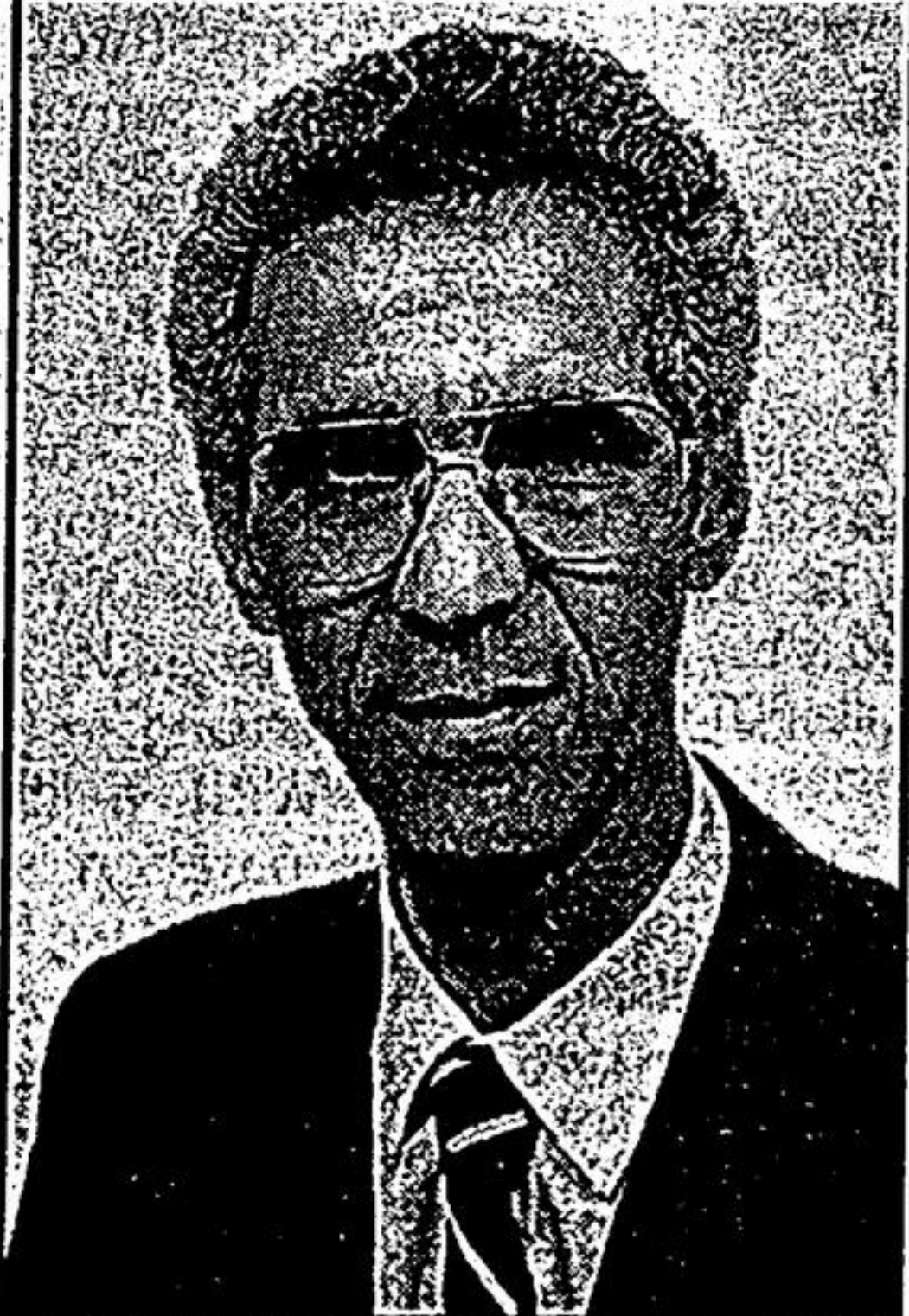
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