

# "The Late Great Franklin Ace"

by Michael Finley

The other day, I was rummaging around in the crawlspace of the attic, where I keep boxes and boxes of cables, wires, and outdated electronic stuff. And I suddenly felt a strange pang. I remembered my first computer, and I wondered where it was.

My first computer was a hybrid of an Apple II+ and a CP/M machine, called a Franklin Ace 1200. For a brief period in the early 1980s, Franklin was the premier maker of Apple clones, before Apple asserted its proprietary prerogatives and busted Franklin down to the pocket gizmo niche it occupies today.

I always hated when I was at a party and people would brag about their IBMs, Compaqs, and Macs -- recognizable macho PC brand names -- and I had to peep "Franklin Ace," which sounded more like a kite or a kazoo than a computer. You couldn't network with it. I wasn't even able to fit it with a modem.

Looking back, I wonder why Franklin thought having two operating systems was a good idea. You could run a program like Appleworks if you booted the native operating system up. Or you could use WordStar if you booted from a CP/M disk. But basically, you couldn't use both, because your data would never be interoperable.

It was January 1983. I was an early adapter, but not all the way to the bleeding edge, or I would have bought a Lisa, the antecedent to the Macintosh. The Lisa was stunning but she was way expensive and underpowered.

And WordStar was the lingua franca of early computing. I can still remember most of the Ctrl commands I ran on WordStar for five years: Ctrl-S for save, Ctrl-C for copy. Ctrl-X got you out of the program.

If you run Windows today, and you prefer the keyboard commands to using the mouse, you probably use a remnant of the original WordStar commands. And you probably have healthier wrists as a result -- mouse use is the worst thing for repetitive stress.

The Ace was too stupid to have an Undo key. But you could program the Alt-M combination, for instance, to type out your entire name and address. That was pretty cool.

Anyway, there I am, on my hands and knees, burrowing in the attic and grunting like a pig, and wondering where my old friend the Ace was at that exact moment.

I figured, when I moved up to an IBM XT, that I'd give the Ace to my baby daughter. I did not then know the great truth of computer hand me downs -- that kids need great new computers, not lousy old ones.

Then I donated the Franklin to the Friends School in Saint Paul. I liked thinking that this toothless old beast was enlisted to teach young Quakers how to survive in a grasping world. But realistically, I knew that an off-brand hybrid that was crippled for network use, and for whom parts were unavailable, was too much of a burden even for Friends.

I'll bet they passed it on to someone pretty fast. As a once-valuable computer tumbles down the food chain, there are fewer and fewer people who will take it. Prisons don't want 'em. Mexico doesn't want 'em. I don't think even Mexican prisons want 'em.

Still, I imagine the Ace set sail in its senior years for other lands, and it is possible it is still crunching data onto 5.25" floppies somewhere. Someone in some faraway country might be wrestling in the 1990s with the inadequacies I struggled with in the 1980s. Maybe it was in Burundi, doing correspondence at some village clinic. Or maybe it was in Bangla Desh, running Visicalc spreadsheets for a trucking company.

Who am I kidding? My Ace is junk. But I'm still curious where, and how. It was an untangleable snarl of plastic, wire and glass. No way could it be properly dismantled and recycled.

Maybe it's in some Volunteers of America shop somewhere, propping open a door, or sitting in the dark in somebody's mini-storage compartment, buried under boxes of tax receipts.

Or it's on level 738 of some terraced exurban landfill, bulldozed over a thousand times, badly crunched but still retaining its basic shape, communing in the blackness with cereal boxes, banana peels, and faded Big Wheels.

Ace, you were so feeble, even on your best days. But we had fun, didn't we. Staying up late, getting up early, attacking the clunky keyboard that was built into the CPU. And I think of all the thoughts I poured into you, that you nearly always saved.

And only the best friends do that?

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To visit Mike, go to <http://mfinley.com/>, or write him at [mfinley@mfinley.com](mailto:mfinley@mfinley.com)