VARI*LITE, 1984. Vari*Lite (VL) manufactures computer controlled lighting. In 1984, they bought a System 38 and wanted a customized closed loop Material Requirements Planning system created. VL was not a large firm at the time, and working with one staff programmer, we developed a set of applications we named JIP for Jobcost, Inventory, and Purchasing. The CFO, Richard Rader, credited the information in it with helping the company avoid an early demise by avoiding an excess of raw material inventory. They used the application for ten years.

Most interesting business challenge: getting consensus. Building something that worked at VL was not easy. The business was founded renting sound systems for the touring entertainment industry. Most of the managers were former touring sound mixers, and there was not a large pool of managers with business experience to gather requirements from. The requirements changed regularly. Meetings were held to storyboard the details of entering a capital asset, for example, and managers who would never use the program offered their insight. It made the final product better, because they had a passing knowledge of what information was in the system and what work was required to manipulate it. We also held big picture meetings and progress review meetings so that people understood where we were and where we were going. Priorities were set by consensus between the CFO and me.

Most interesting technical challenges: create a bill of material and routing with an indefinite number of levels. We dealt with it as parent/child binary pairs, and only created the exploded bill of material at run time, by having the user specify a starting point, and then following all of the components until there were no more.

Buzzwords: System/38, RPGIII, MRP, IBM PC, DOS, Lotus 123, Word Perfect