

CONSULTANT: Hank Maiden
AGE: 84
RESIDENCE: Carrboro, NC
INTERVIEW DATE: July 14, 2016, approx. 9:30 am
LOCATION: Orange County Senior Center, Chapel Hill, NC

Hank Maiden was my first oral history interview in the Millennium Memory Project. I spoke to him in the lunch area at the Orange County Senior Center. We began with a standard audio introduction (e.g., name, age, residence).

I would have never guessed you were 84, by the way.

I am accused of wanting to look young, but I like to be clean-shaven. [laughs]
[note: Hank has a white beard]

Let's just start with, tell me what you remember about New Year's Eve, 1999. Now, that's the New Year's where it changed from 1999 into 2000.

Y2K. The changing meant that Microsoft had screwed up, and they weren't ready to have my computer or my laptop work properly. So that was the great tension among people. I wasn't too concerned because I thought probably Apple would be on top of it. [Hank smiles]

That's interesting. So Y2K was the first thing that jumped out. You said that you weren't too worried about it. What were your reactions the day after?

Amazement and gratitude.

Why do you say that?

There are so many airplanes that depend on accurate information for people to fly. There are so many police departments that depend on accurate information to keep people off the streets that shouldn't be there. There's so many ways in which the military cross the world depends on if somebody screws up there could be a major disaster.

You sound like you have some background in technology. What did you do for a living?

Marketing.

Sort of applies to everything. Do you remember personally what you were doing on New Years?

Um, I was in Fernley, Nevada. Employed by Amazon at a fulfillment, um, center. And I think I was probably working.

That's because of Y2K?

I think I probably had the evening shift. I don't remember the day of the week. Could you tell me the day of the week? [Laugh] I don't remember myself.

So you were with Amazon in 1999? That had to be an interesting experience.

I was there for about six months. Temporary hire. And I enjoyed the work so very much. We were a lively group of people. I was the oldest man working at the time. Appreciated it because, of inclination, and because of the nature of the work assigned to me by my boss. I walked 10 to 15 miles a night. I was in charge of the fulfillment aspect wherein boxes that Amazon ships in, have to be constructed on site. And that means that at that time, Amazon was on the cheap. They were still in very new. All the equipment was very old and it broke down at least once a week. Ball bearings all over the floor. And so there's a lot of improvisation, and growing up in a family in Iowa that were farmers, there are a lot of backyard geniuses. And Amazon at the fulfillment center, specialized in backyard geniuses. They were mostly young people, exploring the internet. And moving twice as fast in their minds as mine could have worked. But I liked talking with them, if they talked to me.

You said you had to walk 10 to 15 miles, what were you doing exactly?

Probably, boxes came from Idaho and if they were late in shipment because of snow or because of failure to order in time, or order sufficient quantity to keep up with the demand chain that Amazon just feeds on, we had to you know, look around and see who in this half-million square foot arena, there's several places where these flat box, unconstructed boxes would be stored. And there was territorial imperatives. Meaning that some divisions wanted to make sure that they had enough. And through the scarcity mentality, ensure that. That's why I was walking around. I'd sniff out where are those boxes? Where are they in quantity? And if I had permission, if it was really really, as it was on the night of Xmas, a really really hard time, I'd simply look the other way as I sneaked as many as I could over to where I needed to have them. And we had a record number of shipments that went out. Our ability to construct boxes swiftly, and I also distributed them. I look around to see whose shipping more, and I hand on a truck, hand truck, hand-deliver the constructed boxes to places where they were needed.

So you were only at Amazon a short time, but it sounds like you witnessed rapid change.

It was interesting. And severe. I worked initially just regular shift. They paid well for that time, that era. Would be in today's equivalent, \$15 an hour, \$16 an hour. If I worked overtime, that was great, and if I got to double time, that was terrific. And sometimes I was working close to 80 hours a week.

Do you remember some of your coworkers' thoughts or attitudes about Y2K as it was approaching?

I would characterize it as, without it sounding accusatory, the "is-nes" of corporate business. And I would say that most of them around me were like, other...I worked for United Steel, I worked for concrete companies making stuff from the, actually from the stone being broken up. I'm aware that people without a lot of reading experience and only television experience are limited in how they feel or how they express things. And they just basically ignore, you know, whether things are going to happen or not going to happen. There were individuals that took advantage of things. One guy was shipping drugs on truck shipments to various parts, and he was caught.

What about the whole notion that – the Y2K Bug, and for various other reasons – they thought the world was going to end? Do you remember people feeling that way or talking about it?

No, no. It wasn't as if it was end times. If it went to that level, people, and I can't say anything explicit...I didn't expect end times, I just expected a lot of trouble. Nuisance mostly. And there was a bit of that.

Do you remember some of the examples of that?

Well, people blaming it on their computers went down.

Even if it wasn't because of the computers –

-- I have no idea.

So you were living in Fernley, Nevada, at the time?

Yes, I had been living in Oakland. I was recovering from cancer, prostate cancer. And it was my first job. I completed 32 units of special education in an MA program at San Francisco State.

HM discusses his brief teaching career and disgust with the violence and ineptitude in the low-income, special education school system in Richmond, CA.

So what was Fernley Nevada, like?

Dust bowl, basically. It was very, very gritty, poor, unshaped, un-designed, Gold Rush time with Amazon newly arrived.

Do you remember your first encounters with the internet, with using email and computers?

Phew. I think, I hate to get to date, because that would challenge my memory. But basically because of work I was doing, in real estate, I was computer literate to a modest degree. I went to a lot of trainings. Had the pleasure in the bay Area to be in the same room with Larry Eliason, same room with Bill Gates, you know, and talking to them, and Steve Jobs. There's just like, theater, for people who were considered living in a bubble. And at the time, I do recall, this would go back to 1997, being here in Raleigh NC with someone else that worked in marketing, and he was sure that bricks and mortar would dominate and that the e-commerce would never get off the ground.

Why is that?

I think he understood connectivity. That you have to know people and appreciate them, and I think that's even true now, on the internet, there's sort of an inner process for the people who are most successful with their businesses on the internet. But they're able to create in their images and their mind, they way people are attracted to products. And whether they're going to purchase one way or the other, whether they're going to be looking for competitive pricing.

So it's about still establishing a personal connection, even though it's online?

I sense that is the challenge. I think that the companies – not necessarily the ones most successful, because that would be like failing to appreciate that some of the developers in among the more recent successful groups in SF or LA or NY or Paris, London, they're selling Kool-Aid acid to each other. The people who feed off the bottom know where to find them, and in situations that we live in, week by week, month by month, the crashes in Hong Kong or Singapore, Sydney, Australia, eventually affect small companies, or wannabe big companies. And we're talking now that people want to be billionaires almost within six months to a year. I listen a lot to news from Asia, stock news, I don't follow it in a metric sense, but I'm trained from University of California as a sociologist, and I can, you know, I understand trends, I understand...I even understand persuasion. That's how I was modestly successful in real estate. We live in an increasingly difficult world. And I'm amazed that young people, they're called Millennials, I'm amazed that even the Generation Y fully appreciate what Bernie Sanders was saying, not because most people think like socialists, like European socialists, we're not talking about Moscow socialists, and you know,

we live side by side and we find middle ways for things. But what they do realize is that in the more recent crashes, more and more of the assets, not just money, but resources, have flowed to the top, I'd call it the 10 percent, not top one percent.

Hank mentions that they serve food at the Center, then asks if I have any more questions.

I'm just trying to paint a picture of your life that you remember from that time – 1999 going into 2000 – and contrasting it with your daily routine now.

It's a picture of aging. Basically, I was so disappointed in those years that the Generation X people had been successful – I'm talking about the oldest of them – in moving the young aging group, in their 50s, to join AARP and lobby in order to change the direction of not only SS but especially Medicare and most especially Medicaid for the poor. I was so disgusted with AARP, and I heard as I went to meetings that I did become involved at the policy level in the state of Washington where I was living. I moved there and I lived there for nearly 10 years. And Bellevue, and you know, over in the west side of Puget Sound. I'd gone to high school there, so I was felt [?] my roots, and I recognized how disappointed people were who relied on respite care. And respite care was taken away. And they relied on other kinds of benefits that had part of Medicare. And in the long run, if you go to AARP now, or if you go in this center to the staff that are concerned to construct the next five-year program, they're concerned to no longer think about people in their 70s and 80s going to nursing homes. They're imaging that they're probably going to be as lively as the Asian people who are coming from all over the world to Seymour Center.

End of formal interview. We talked briefly about Hank's two sons.

What brought you to North Carolina?

Retirement.