

Computer File

Richard O'Reilly

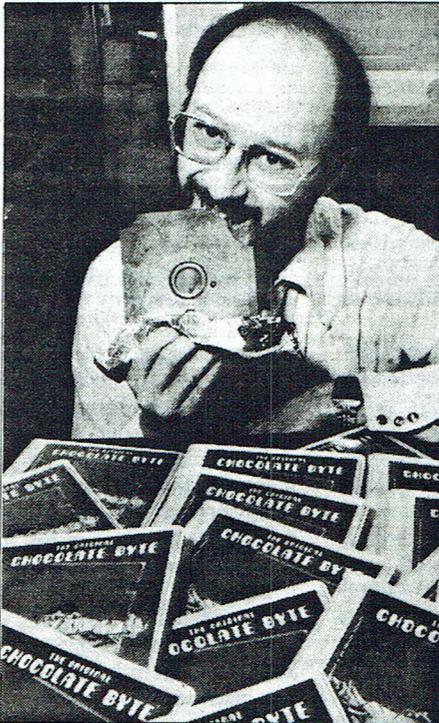
Candy and Compilers Go Together

Why, you might ask, has a modestly successful software company suddenly gone into the candy business? And what does that have to do with a programming language called C?

The answers are to be found in a cluttered 11th-floor suite in a bank building in Sherman Oaks, where a company called Software Toolworks is packaging not only program diskettes but chocolate as well.

The milk chocolate bar is a replica of a 5¼-inch diskette, with one corner bitten off (complete with molded-in teeth marks). Packaged in a plastic container that can be reused as a diskette holder, the \$9.95 Chocolate Byte is a takeoff on the company's \$29.95 Chocolate Bytes computer cookbook program, which features more than 100 recipes from the pages of a chocoholic's publication called Chocolate News.

Both are examples of the eclectic nature of a little company that has succeeded over the last four years in giving its customers a lot of value for their money



KEN LUBAS / Los Angeles Times

Walt Bilofsky of Software Toolworks displays a bunch of his byte-able Chocolate Bytes.

Richard O'Reilly designs microcomputer applications for *The Times*.

while returning a comfortable profit for its owners.

You may never have heard of Software Toolworks because it has never sought venture capital, it hasn't had to file under Chapter 11 or find a merger partner, and it hasn't spent much on advertising.

By his own description, Walt Bilofsky, Software Toolworks' low-key, balding and bespectacled 38-year-old president, is a programmer, not a risk taker.

Back in 1980, he was a programmer at Rand Corp. in Santa Monica and the owner of a Heathkit H-89 microcomputer that he had soldered together himself.

He wrote a few programs for the H-89, among them an enhanced version of something called a C language compiler. A compiler takes program instructions written in computer jargon and converts them into the numerical code understood by computers.

C is a programming language with several features that are making it increasingly popular among professional programmers. It produces programs that are portable, meaning that only a small amount of the code has to be rewritten to produce separate versions. It also is highly compatible with UNIX, a sophisticated operating system that is becoming more popular as microcomputers become more powerful.

What was unique about Bilofsky's C-80 compiler was that it was compact enough to run on the eight-bit computers available four years ago and that it sold for an inexpensive \$39.95.

Didn't Want the Money

What Bilofsky did was rework a C compiler called Small C that had been written by programmer Ron Cain and placed in the public domain.

Bilofsky said that when he finished his enhancement, he talked to Cain and they agreed that Bilofsky had put in as much work on the enhancements to create C-80 as Cain had on the original Small C.

"I told him I thought it was worth about \$80 and said I'd split the profits with him. But Cain said he didn't want the money because he had accomplished what he wanted to do, which was to get C out there so that programmers could work with it.

"So I said, 'Fine, then I'll sell it for \$40.' "

The program has been enriched since then and now sells for \$49.95, but it is still one of the biggest bargains on the market and is Software Toolworks' best seller. It works only on eight-bit computers using the CP/M operating system, but a version for 16-bit IBM and compatible computers using PC-DOS and MS-DOS is under development.

Few readers of this column have any use for a C compiler, but the story behind it illustrates Bilofsky's philosophy on software prices, which carries over into products of a much more general interest.

"I don't price things at what I think I could get for

them," he said. "I sell them for what I would like to be able to buy them."

It is a philosophy that has kept Bilofsky's products off the shelves of most computer dealers. They would rather devote the space to more expensive software offering a larger profit margin, he said. So Software Toolworks remains largely a mail-order business. (The address is 15233 Ventura Blvd., Suite 1118, Sherman Oaks 91403; phone, 818-986-4885.)

The most expensive offering in Software Toolworks' 40-program lineup is a lovely little spreadsheet called MyCalc that goes for \$59.95.

It is easy to learn and use and has the features of spreadsheets selling for \$200 to \$300, including sorting and the ability to link separate spreadsheet files so that updating a value in one updates a related value in another. It is available for most kinds of computers running CP/M, PC-DOS and MS-DOS.

Sold Cookbook Programs

There are a number of games, including a faithful rendition of the original Adventure game, offering players a trek into the Colossal Cave for \$19.95. Software Toolworks also has an accurate version of Eliza, the original artificial language program developed at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, available for \$24.95. It includes the original Doctor script, with which your computer becomes your psychoanalyst.

Unlike the software of many publishers these days, none of Bilofsky's programs are hobbled by copy protection to prevent customers from making as many backup copies as they wish, nor does he try to tie up his buyers with mumbo-jumbo licensing agreements that seek to limit how the programs can be used. That open policy is something Bilofsky is proud of. It pays off in the end, he said, even yielding a small stream of \$5 to

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\$7 voluntary checks from folks who have copied programs.

So how did he get into the candy business?

It was like this. Software Toolworks sold three computer cookbook programs: Computer Chef, \$29.95; What's for Dinner?, \$19.95; and The Best of Wok Talk, \$29.95.

Recently, it added a fourth, Chocolate Bytes. They all contain a sorting program that allows you to look up a recipe by ingredient, name or key word and display it on the screen or print it out. You can add your own recipes to the list as well.

I don't think computer disks are going to replace printed cookbooks anytime soon, but they are another way to use your computer. These computer cookbooks work well enough, once you get used to a couple of idiosyncrasies.

Bilofsky commissioned a painting to illustrate the package cover for Chocolate Bytes and—what do you know?—the artist portrayed a disk made of chocolate.

The public relations consultant Bilofsky had hired took one look at that and said it had to be made in real chocolate. The rest is history.

Suddenly, department stores and discount chains were interested in selling a Software Toolworks product (the markup on the chocolate bar is apparently worth their while). Soon, Bilofsky and crew were even carting a portable computer to the kitchen ware section of a classy department store to demonstrate their computer cookbooks.

If the bar becomes this year's fad, so much the better. But Bilofsky isn't expecting it to vault Software Toolworks into the big leagues. Instead, he has some ideas for a few new programs and looks forward to serving his small but loyal clientele, many of whom still have their Heathkits.

The Computer File welcomes readers' comments but regrets that the authors cannot respond individually to letters. Write to Richard O'Reilly, Computer File, Los Angeles Times, Times Mirror Square, Los Angeles 90053.