Letters to the Editor

Author responds to April book review

To the Editor:

With regard to the latter, the review states “...most statements appear to correlate with the facts in Fire in the Valley...,” thereby assigning benchmark status to that book. Fire in the Valley was the result of some two years of dedicated research by Paul Freiberger, then West Coast editor of Popular Computing, and Michael Swaine, editor-in-chief of Dr. Dobb’s Journal. Though Fire in the Valley is very well written and captures much of the flavor and trivia of the heady days of the mid-to late-70’s, it contains several important errors about the early days at MITS. Another microcomputer author spotted the errors in the prepublication galley proofs of the book and sent them to me. By the time I notified the authors, it was too late to make corrections.

When Fire in the Valley appeared, I was writing for Computers & Electronics a package of articles to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Altair (“The Tenth Anniversary of the Altair 8800,” Jan. 1985). I titled the lead section “Setting the Record Straight” and corrected some of the errors about MITS in Fire in the Valley. Meanwhile, Paul Freiberger flew to Georgia to conduct a second interview with Ed Roberts, the designer of the Altair 8800 and my former partner. He and Michael Swaine then interviewed me by telephone for more than an hour. These and other interviews formed the basis for a special report in Popular Computing celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Altair (Paul Freiberger, “Ed Roberts: The Father of the Personal Computer,” Jan. 1985). This article corrected the errors about MITS found in Fire in the Valley.

Next, the review of my book contains two important errors. First, the review states “...[Siliconconnections includes] heavy emphasis on how much the author contributed to the modern-day PC development.” Actually, as the book clearly reveals, I was no longer a MITS partner when Ed Roberts designed the Altair. In fact, as recorded in Siliconconnections (p. 41), “[When Ed showed me the prototype Altair] I was unimpressed. ‘Unless you add a keyboard,’ I said, ‘you’ll sell a few hundred at most.’ As it turned out, I was wrong.” Siliconconnections relates how a model rocket light flasher I designed inspired the formation of MITS, that I was one of the original MITS partners, that I wrote the Altair operator’s manual, and that the Smithsonian Institution has asked me for virtually everything in my MITS files (plus a language-reading computer I had built in high school). However, nowhere in Siliconconnections do I claim to have developed or helped develop the Altair or “contributed to the modern-day PC development” as claimed in the review.

Second, the review observes that “...the author could have eliminated the many references to ‘I’—whether factual or not...” and come out with a much more readable manuscript. While I am not questioning the accuracy of the account, I do think that the book should be called The Autobiographical Sketches of Forrest M. Mims III rather than Siliconconnections by F. M. Mims III. Siliconconnections is a very readable account of Mims’s activities...”

Siliconconnections has been reviewed in some 35 technical and nontechnical magazines and newspapers, and I have been interviewed about the book on many radio and television programs. The IEEE Micro review is the only instance thus far in which a reviewer has expressed doubt, conditional or otherwise, about the veracity of my account. As for the autobiographical nature of the book, Siliconconnections, which is my 50th book, was planned as a memoir from the time it was first presented to McGraw-Hill. Though the book includes the MITS story, it is certainly not and was never intended to be a computer history book in the pattern of Fire in the Valley. For example, Siliconconnections includes chapters about my experiences with aids for the blind, laser eavesdropping, military laser research, miniature guided rockets, the Consumer Electronics Show, the silicon press, and my legal battle with Bell Labs over a disputed invention. In view of these silicon-based experiences, McGraw-Hill’s editors agreed with my selection of the book’s title. Since a memoir is by definition autobiographical, I fail to understand how the mere elimination of personal pronouns would have transformed “a very readable account” into “a much more readable manuscript.”

Finally, as both a writer and reviewer of books, I am well aware of the impact questions of accuracy can have on an author’s career. Siliconconnections has been extensively reviewed and thus far has been found to contain no factual errors whatsoever. For a review to hint without basis in fact that a book might contain factual error injures the author and is a disservice to the reader.

Forrest M. Mims III

Dave Hannum replies:
You’re right, Mr. Mims.
For the most part I have no disagreement with what Forrest Mims says in his letter to the editor in this issue. He states that Fire in the Valley is a computer history book, and it did arrive first, so there is a natural bent to compare what the historians say versus what someone writing their memoirs has to say. This will not hurt anyone and is no cause for alarm. Secondly, I am not questioning accuracy; from my own research, I can verify most of the historical facts. The book is good, solid “memoir” material. Third, I stand by my comments on the use of the personal pronoun and the name of the book; however, this is the author’s choice—no criticism of that.
And finally, I appreciate Mr. Mims’s information on the corrections to Fire in the Valley, as I do not read Popular Computing/Electronics or Computers & Electronics.

Rebutting a review with substantive facts, not trivial conjecture, is always welcome. Your choice; thanks again.

Reader Interest Survey
Indicate your interest in this department by circling the appropriate number on the Reader Interest Card.

High 183 Medium 184 Low 185