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Computer pioneer Ken Olsen dies at 84

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 GateHouse News Service

Posted Feb 08, 2011 @ 09:05 AM

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Maynard — Kenneth Olsen, whose Digital Equipment Corp. broke new ground in the early years of the computer age and provided a giant economic boost to MetroWest, has died.

A statement from Gordon College, where Olsen served as a trustee, said Olsen died Sunday, Feb. 6. A longtime resident of Lincoln, he was 84.

At its height in the late 1980s, Maynard-based Digital Equipment was one of the world's leading computer manufacturers and largest employers in Massachusetts.

Digital Equipment, founded by Olsen in 1957 and widely known as DEC, led the way through the early era of the minicomputer. The company, which at one time employed as many as 100,000 people, had offices across MetroWest.

After significant success through the 1960s, '70s and '80s, the company lost pace with the industry and eventually became part of Compaq and Hewlett-Packard.

Under Olsen's guidance, Digital grew from three employees working out of an old textile mill in Maynard to a world leader in what were then called minicomputers.

"Olsen and the company he co-founded were key in the transition of corporate computing from mainframe computers to smaller, more affordable and accessible minicomputers," said Sharon Machlis, an editor at IDG's Computerworld and former business editor at the Middlesex News, which is now MetroWest Daily News.

"In today's era of PCs, laptops, netbooks and smartphones, moving from massive mainframes to bookcase-sized machines may not seem like much of a leap. But, in fact, it was a critical first step on the path that eventually led us to where we are today. It's hard not to see the irony in the fact that the PC/desktop industry did to DEC what DEC and other minicomputer makers did to the mainframe companies."

Olsen influenced no less than the most successful man in American business: Bill Gates.

"An inventor, scientist, and entrepreneur, Ken Olsen is one of the true pioneers of the computing industry," said Gates, founder and chairman of Microsoft, in a letter to Gordon College, home to the Ken Olsen Science Center. "He was also a major influence in my life and his influence is still important at Microsoft through all the engineers who trained at Digital and have come here to make great software products."

In an industry known for flamboyant characters, Olsen had a reputation as brilliant but colorless.

In a 1987 interview with the Middlesex News, Olsen said he believed in substance over style. He compared his laid-back style to the story about two explorers fighting to reach the South Pole.

Norwegian Roald Amundsen was sullen, not giving to talking about himself. "He always worried about the details," Olsen said.

England's Robert Scott endlessly chatted about his plans. "He was show. Flair. Parties. Announcements. Bragging," Olsen said.

Amundsen arrived at the pole first and returned. A month later, Scott arrived at the South Pole but never made it back.

There was a high-tech moral to the story.

"No one is productive, no one is creative without extreme discipline," he said. "If you don't have a goal, it's hard to create."

Before founding Digital, Olsen, a native of Stratford, Conn., was on the staff of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's digital computer laboratory for seven years.

A World War II Navy veteran, Olsen received bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering from MIT.

"He truly created the entrepreneurial spirit," said Susanne Morreale-Lieber, president and CEO of the Marlborough Regional Chamber of Commerce. "He was a great man."

She said the company's impact on Marlborough and the region was profound.

"When I started at the chamber in 1987, DEC had approximately 23 facilities in Marlborough. They had storefronts, office buildings and their own buildings. I think 50 percent of the people who worked in Marlborough worked for Digital."

Morreale-Lieber also described Olsen as down-to-earth, approachable and imaginative.

"He thought outside the box. He was a man before his time," she said. "He had a vision and he followed it."

Olsen talked about that vision in a 1984 interview with the Middlesex News.

"When we started, the thing that was missing in the industry was the idea of interactive computing, the idea that computers should be fast, small, inexpensive," Olsen said. "We set about to show the world how it could be done. ...Making a computer that someone could sit down with, and interact with, was truly strange."

That strange idea took shape in Digital Equipment's first product - a computer that cost \$125,000 and had 4K of memory.

"It was a small machine. But at that time, computers cost several million dollars. And here you had a real computer for only \$125,000," Olsen said.

As Digital grew, Olsen said his belief in delegating responsibility broadly across the company only intensified. "When the company reached \$14 million in sales, I realized I couldn't run it myself. ...Anybody who thinks he's smart enough to do it all deludes himself."

According to an obituary prepared by Gordon College, Olsen worked on a team that developed air-defense technology and core memory, the precursor to today's RAM.

In 1986, the obituary says, Fortune Magazine named him one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the history of American business.

Olsen, a devout Christian, joined the board of Gordon College in Wenham in 1961.

"Science is more than a study of molecules and calculations. It is the love of knowledge and the continued search for the truth," Olsen once wrote. "The study of the sciences promotes humility, leaving us with a clear sense that we will never understand all there is to know. At the same time, science provides a defense for truth, authenticates Christianity and stems from the nature of God."

He married Aulikki Valve in Finland on Dec. 12, 1950. She died in 2009.

His nephew Bruce Olsen of Bedford, N.H., said Olsen died Sunday at a hospice in Indiana. He had been hospitalized earlier, he said.

He is survived by a son, Jim of Concord; a daughter, Ava Memmen of Zionsville, Ind.; a brother, Stan of Terre Verde, Fla., and Gilford, N.H.; and five grandchildren. His son Glenn died several years ago.

A public memorial service will be held at Gordon College on May 14.

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