SIGDOC Reminiscences

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It's sad.

I went to go click on some SIGDOC files still on my hard drive to aid me in composing this review, and they wouldn't open. I had no software that would recognize these files and open them again. That's both a sign of how long it's been since I was President as well as the ephemeral nature of so much in the computer industry—and it's that fleeting nature of facts and importance that caused me to leave as I have.

Mind you, I still write about the ideas behind applied writing—my book, *From Millwrights to Shipwrights to the Twenty-first Century*, contained chapters on the first computer user manual written in 1949 as well as on the creation of IBM's first computer manual in 1954. But I was driven to find truths about writing and the writing process that transcend the latest Web browser characteristics or the syntax of HTML. Thus my most recent book, *Exploding Steamboats: The Technology, Politics and Rhetoric Behind the Steamboat Bill of 1838*; considers the investigations regarding steamboats blowing up and the reports which tried to change US policy towards their safety and design; and the inability of contemporary audiences to use effectively the reports. They passed the wrong law, and the explosions and deaths continued. So it goes…

When I began as President after Diana, SIGDOC was still pretty much THE only game in town if you wanted to discuss the communication aspects of computers, but already other SIGs such as SIGLINL and SIGUCS were beginning to carve off some of the most interesting elements of our originally unified approach to computer documentation. My book, *Writing Better Computer User Documentation, Version 2.0* also had this unified approach. STC was still focused on automobiles and radios, and computers had just a small part of their yearly conference. IEEE was, as their named implied, also focusing on the content of our interest, but they seemed to have lots of material on oral communication and such expensive annual meetings that no one would go.

By the time I stopped being President in 1993, the sense of computer documentation as a unified whole had ended. When one has such competent folks as Bill Horton writing entire books just on icons, you know that the days of single book coverage…or single SIG coverage were gone forever. Moreover, when the 20,000 member STC decides that it will focus on computers and writing, then the tiny 1200 member SIGDOC gets lost in the welter of talks, papers, presentations, and conventions. So it goes…

I am proud of the creation of the **Diana Award** as a match to the Rigo Award both because it commemorates a great lady as well as because it recognizes that writing for computers is a corporate commitment and involves teams of writers, editors, testers, etc. I was proud that we could attract such interesting speakers to our conferences as **Edward Tufte** and **Ted Nelson** who invented hypertext.

Where Tufte was professional and planned and set the conference program committee at ease, Nelson was a terrorist! I remember sitting on the dais next to him in Ottawa and holding a "conversation" with him. But every so often he would reach to a post-it in his pocket, write something down and slam it onto a blank page in a three-ring binder. Lo and behold, he was writing his keynote talk for which SIGDOC had paid dearly while eating dinner and talking with me—he had no idea what he was going to say!

I was pleased that during my SIGDOC experience I got to meet folks I never would have met—some I consider true geniuses. Jeffrey Sickler, a.k.a. Geoffrey James would call me up from out of the blue and want to discuss myth and magic during the reign of Elizabeth R. or the *Tao of Programming* or his documentation library platform, CAP, that once was such a promising idea at Honeywell. I had met Bill Horton many years prior when I had worked for his department as an intern during my graduate studies at the University of Michigan, but it was such a delight at SIGDOC to see him range over concepts from photography to Indian food to icons. Joseph Chapline was THE oldygoldy original computer documentation writer, manager, and consultant teacher who I found retired by a lake in New Hampshire. I was most pleased that he could garner some recognition and receive a RIGO award. He gave me a book that contained the original copy of the first user manual for the BINAC computer, and he awed me with the pipe organ he had build that cause him to take apart the upper two floor of his house so the pipes could free. When not writing or rebuilding church organs, he was translating Italian choral music into English.

So, congratulations SIGDOC on your anniversary! May you have many more.