Trip report E.W.Dijkstra, Westboro - Boston, 14-17 Feb. 1985

This was a short trip up North at the invitation of Data General. After my Thursday morning lecture at UT, I drove home to collect Ria and then to the Airport. We left Austin at 13:05, changed planes in Dallas, and arrived in Boston at 18:53 (local time). On Sunday, we returned via the same route. We flew with American Airlines in B727's; the planes were full, the flights were smooth and on time.

Data General had rented a car for us from Avis (a Dodge "Aries" that I did not like), and had made a room reservation at "The Bostonian Hotel", quite near to the airport (at the other end of the tunnels in fact). On the airport the traffic was congested, at the other end of the tunnel (in the heart of Boston) it was confusing. (They had sent us a map on which the hotel had been marked, but at the wrong place.) We reached the hotel at 20:15 . The hotel's restaurant being full, we had dinner in a nearby café.

The next day we spent at Data General in Westboro. We left the city around 10:00, found Data General around 11:00, left close to 17:00, spent in Boston itself about an hour in a traffic jam and were back in the hotel shortly after 19:00 . (At a merge, a huge truck mercilessly pushed the car in front of us out of its lane and against the car to its right: the victim was damaged at both sides.)

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On Saturday we behaved like good tourist. First we walked to the Aquarium, which was very impressive. If you have never seen it, try to visit it the next time you are in Boston. Next we went to The Computer Museum. We found it interesting, but I doubt whether I can recommend that in general. On an old movie we saw a very young Doug Ross explaining an AI project! (Never knew that Doug had had a flirtation with AI!) I was struck by the strongly anthropomorphic terminology, used right at the start: in 1952 —in a program about the elections— Walter Cronkite (?) referred to the UNIVAC as "he". It was shocking, but it explains a lot. It was also interesting to observe the public: it did not seem to realize that, at the time, these early machines were great technological achievements, and when it saw such things as punched cards or paper tape, a condescending laughter was its primary reaction. In the afternoon we made the tour of the old city in a trolley. At the end of the day, after all the contrast between the old and the new, I think I could understand how Boston fills the American citizen with pride. We were very impressed by the result of the renovation of the Market Halls — the more so because, a stone's throw away, slums and ruins catered for the contrast.

At Data General we were given before lunch a short tour of the facility. During lunch —we were about nine people— I was most impressed by

Julie Kling, the resident linguist; I would not be amazed if she understood the limitations of thinking in terms of analogies at least as well as her technical colleagues. I thought I would start my lecture at 14:00 and it was with some disappointment that I learned that I would only start at 15:00. From 15:00 to 16:00 I showed our explanation of the Chandy-Lamport Snapshot Algorithm (a topic I had chosen because I suspected – with full justification, as it turned out – that my visual aids would be barely adequate: I addressed an audience of 200 in the cafeteria). I had hoped that the next hour would be available for a more general discussion (as announced), but suddenly the audience got restless – they wanted to leave before the rush hour? – and my host, Jerry Breecher, cut the performance short by offering me a portable personal computer. Then there was a big applause, but I don't know whether that was for my performance or for the present. Shortly thereafter, we were on our way to Boston, as before I as driver and Ria as copilot. I had learned (to my delight) that a year ago at Data General the job title of all programmers has been changed to –yes, your guess is right!– "software engineer". I said "to my delight" as this renaming is the strongest possible linguistic confirmation of what I suspected all the time, viz. that "software engineering" has failed to develop itself into an intellectual discipline of substance. The

renaming was a cosmetic change that was possible because the new name did not mean anything very different from the old one. I am really delighted.

On Sunday morning, at Logan Airport at the gate, we met Joe Weizenbaum; he told us that 80 percent of the -accepted! - MIT freshmen had just flunked their writing test. On Sunday evening, Jayadev Misra and his wife came by, who -with amazing boldness and expertise- immediately installed my 256 Kbyte computer. My first impression is that the quality of its screen is enough to guarantee its utter uselessness.

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