

Geek Chic: Old Computers As Collectibles

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The year was 1986 and Bud Ballos was an eighth-grader, a proud owner of a brand-new computer with what was to him "a weird thing" called a mouse.

Remember the Apple II? It was a fixture -- in the library, next to the card-catalogue filing cabinet -- in many a middle school beginning in the 1980s.

"This was the start of the new computer, and at the time, I didn't really know what it was," Ballos says of his very first desktop, its screen no bigger than 7 inches by 5 inches, its color off-white, the kind of plastic that starts to yellow after a while. In the early years, not too many families actually had a computer at home. "I thought it was cool. My friends thought it was cool. We'd look at it and go, 'Wow, all right.' "

Ballos is 33 now and goes by Thomas rather than Bud. He's a novice collector and a random one at that: coins from the United States and Canada, belt plates from the Civil War, Native American spearheads and arrowheads, some of them 1,300 to 3,000 years old. They're all kept in the garage of his Ashburn home, where the showpiece -- "I did my homework on it; I played Donkey Kong on it; I brought it with me to college," he explains -- is his Apple IIc.

You'd think Ballos would have trashed or recycled his childhood Apple, but these days people are holding on to their first (and second, and third) desktops and laptops. Some keep them for nostalgia's sake, others for the kitsch value. Whatever the motivation, the urge to hang on has turned yesteryear's outmoded computers into today's historic artifacts -- giving them a growing value in the ever-so-hungry collectibles market.

Ten years ago, the mantra was that old computers were worthless -- smushed, forgotten, unbought in roadside yard sales. Today, the chances of scoring undiscovered gems at Sunday flea markets, or thrift shops on Nowhere Boulevard, or computer recycling centers on Faraway Street, are still pretty good, but even casual collectors spend a great deal of time shopping and researching online.

Tony Romando, editor in chief of Sync, the men's magazine for the gadget-obsessed, says there's a one-word reason why people collect old hard- and software: cool.

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