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Cap'n Crunch programs his way from jail to success

By Pete Carey

SAN JOSE, Calif.—The year was 1979, and telephone prankster John Draper, alias Cap'n Crunch, had been caught again.

In rumpled clothes and tousled hair and with a slightly fanatical air, Draper stood before Judge Robert Peckham here in U.S. District Court and listened.

"You're no stranger to this court," the judge told Draper. "Is this not simple? You have to pay for your telephone calls."

Draper had been in the habit of making calls with strange devices that helped him avoid telephone company billing equipment. The strangest of all was a whistle from a Cap'n Crunch cereal box, which, he learned in the 1960s, would trigger telephone switching equipment when he blew it near the receiver.

ON MARCH 9, 1979, Judge Peckham found Draper guilty of violating the terms of his parole on a 1976 conviction of cheating the phone company. He gave him a year of nights in county jail, reduced to four months by time he'd already served at a federal penitentiary for a 1978 conviction.

Draper had been arrested so many times that he complained the FBI was practically persecuting him.

His first arrest was in 1972 for fraud by wire; the second in 1976, when he served four months in Lompoc federal penitentiary; the third in Pennsylvania in 1978, followed by his appearance before Judge Peckham for probation violation.

"You're bright," Peckham said. "I hope you can find something constructive to do with your talents."

Peckham says he lost track of Draper after that. "Whatever happened to him?" he asked recently.

Draper is a wealthy executive now, president of his own computer-programming com-

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Cap'n Crunch plugs into computers — and success

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pany. He parks his Mercedes in front of the Cafe Ren coffee shop in Berkeley, where he writes his programs in longhand at a table in the back. He has all the hardware that a technology junkie could dream of owning.

HE SOMETIMES haunts the beaches of Hawaii, Acapulco, Trinidad and the Galapagos Islands—anywhere that's sunny, peaceful and far from "mundane telephone calls."

As president of Cap'n Software Inc., Draper receives royalties for the EasyWriter word-processing program he wrote during nights in jail. The program runs on Apple and IBM personal computers.

This week, EasyWriter became a multilingual word-processing program. The program has been translated into French, Spanish, German, Italian and Japanese by IBM, according to Bill Baker, president of Information Unlimited Software Inc., of Sausalito, which markets EasyWriter.

"I've been fairly successful," Draper said. "We pay our bills, always on time. We have enough money to buy our equipment."

"We have our cars," added a partner, Michelle McCloskey. The cars are 1982 and 1983 Mercedes diesel sedans.

In computer-industry jargon, Draper is an "independent" programmer—one of a dying breed of freelancers who work on their own or in small groups.

THE INDEPENDENTS are the guys with stringy hair and strange work habits who labor as much for love as for money—shadowy figures in the lab late at night, surrounded by half-eaten junk food, eyes glued to a computer terminal.

Not all of them are like that, but Draper seems made to fit the stereotype.

"John has a lot of talent and a lot of strangeness to go with it," according to McCloskey. "He's more of an artist than a businessman. Some people write poetry in coffee shops. He writes his code."

The metamorphosis of Cap'n Crunch into Cap'n Software was strange and agonizing. "I helped make it happen," said Larry Weiss, a friend of Draper's who helped him develop EasyWriter. "It almost drove me crazy."

DRAPER'S SAGA began in the late 1960s, when he discovered how to telephone home from England, where he was stationed as a U.S. Air Force radio technician, using nothing more than a toy whistle from a Cap'n Crunch cereal box.

Draper discovered that by blowing the whistle into the telephone after dialing any long-distance number, he could trick the telephone equipment into thinking he'd hung up.

Only he hadn't. Instead, he had an open line invisible to the telephone company's billing system. From that point, he could call anywhere, for free.

From 1971 on, he experimented with electronic-tone generators, "blue boxes," and even computers to make free calls and scan the telephone system for interesting numbers. As Cap'n Crunch, he became a sort of cult hero to other phone freaks, assuming the name when having a "handle" became popular with citizen's band radio operators.

But the Cap'n Crunch whistle brought nothing but trouble from 1972 to 1979. The FBI and AT&T were rooting out phone freaks all over the country, and he was under scrutiny by the FBI. In fact, an FBI sting had led to his Pennsylvania arrest.

DONN B. PARKER, the computer-crime expert for SRI International, a Menlo Park think-tank, recalls seeking him out in 1976. Parker invited the then-impooverished Draper, whom he calls "the criminal hero of the conspirators" against the phone company, to SRI for lunch.

"He was totally incongruous in the SRI dining room," Parker wrote in his new book, "Fighting Computer Crime."

"Dressed in counterculture clothes hanging on his bony frame, his nervous, flicking eyes, partly hidden by long stringy hair, avoided direct contact with others. He had a sharp, hawklike face from which emitted machine gun-speed speech with a vocabulary limited by years of reading only Bell Telephone journals and telephone texts."

Parker said Draper ate every roll at the buffet lunch and confessed that he had starved himself for two days so he could scarf up as much free food as possible.

Later, Draper asked Parker to persuade Judge Peckham not to give him a prison sentence. "I realize I'm rather eccentric and have a big ego and a big mouth," he wrote Parker. "I'm admitting it. . . . Try to

help me. I'm a much better programmer than a jailed convict."

Draper was at a crossroads in 1979, when he appeared in Judge Peckham's courtroom, but his interest in programming was blossoming under the gentle prodding of Larry Weiss, who sensed that computing might absorb his energies and talent like a giant sponge. It did.

"I REPLACED his telephone addiction with a computer addiction," Weiss said. "It was something more productive. He just has to be occupied all the time, and a computer can do it. There's no end to the imagination it can use up."

With the coaxing of Weiss and other friends, Draper had written a computer program that enabled Apple owners to write programs in a simplified version of Fortran, a computing language popular in scientific and academic circles. He was selling it on small Tippy discs with handwritten instructions door-to-door in the Silicon Valley.

"We were selling it in these little bubble packs, like dope baggies," Draper said and giggled. "We'd go to Computerlands and ask, 'How many do you guys want to buy?' and they would buy five or 10, and that's how we got our start."

When he was sentenced for probation violation in 1979, Draper already was thinking about expanding a small word-processing program he'd written as an exercise.

"I needed a word-processor program to do the documentation for my other software," he said. "I did it as a little exercise in learning how to program in Fortran, and it took me about two months. I got started [on the expanded version] immediately on entrance into the work-furlough program."

HE WAS WORKING days at a Berkeley computer firm, which freed him to do some of his own programming during the day. At night, jail was a nice, quiet place to write code. He worked in the jail's recreation room, preparing for the next day's time on the computer.

"I had only four hours of time on the computer a day," Draper recalls. "I would work everything out as much as I could without the computer, so that when I got access to it I would be able to get as much work done as possible."

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John Draper: "A lot of talent and a lot of strangeness to go with it," says his partner.

Weiss worked with Draper on EasyWriter, which he called "my public-service duty."

Draper frequently reacted with frustration. Once, when Weiss warned him not to make any noise that would disturb the business meeting in progress in the next room, Draper vented his frustration by running "the length of the room about 10 times, jumping up in the air, making all these faces—without making a sound."

The sheriff gave Draper time off to demonstrate EasyWriter at a computer fair in Los Angeles. "Sales took off," Draper said.

The program—and subsequent revisions of it—has been a money-maker for Cap'n Software and the Sausalito firm that sells it.

DRAPER'S WARDROBE hasn't improved much with his success, though. He owns one three-piece suit, which McCloskey forced him to buy. He wears it only "when I need to look straight."

He rarely needs to, and there's a certain justice in that, according to his friend Weiss.

"Behind those slick tycoons [in Silicon Valley] there are a lot of people like him working in the background," Weiss said, "a lot of fellows in tennis shoes who spend late nights on the terminals. It's almost like an addiction for them. We don't see much of those guys, but they're behind the successes."

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