

News from Nan

COMPUTER HISTORY

MY HIGH-TECH ADVENTURE: CHAPTER 10, PILLAR DATA SYSTEMS

OCTOBER 11, 2018 | DICK

Dick wrote this post, which was part of a book, My high-tech adventure, to record his memories of working in the computer industry, starting in about 1960. It was first published in 2012.

It turned out my retirement from IBM was only a temporary intermission from high-tech pursuits. Anna and I moved to El Dorado Hills and began to look for things to supplement our leisure-time activities. What follows is a description of the time I spent working at Pillar Data Systems in San Jose.

Return to the Bay Area

We returned to living in the Bay Area in the Fall of 2003. Anna had a job working for Mercury Interactive as a Technical Writer, and I began looking for a job in the storage software field. After some time spent interviewing, I got a job working at Pillar Data Systems as a senior software engineer in San Jose. I worked at Pillar from July 2004 to October 2005. I was strictly a coder with no leadership responsibilities.

Pillar Data Systems

In 2004, Pillar Data Systems was a startup working on its first product, the Axiom storage array. The Axiom was built, for the most part, from commodity hardware parts combined with custom software to make it into either a network attached storage server or a storage area network server.

Even though it was billed as a startup, Pillar had only one large investor, Lawrence Investments, which belonged to Larry Ellison, the founder and CEO of Oracle. Lawrence Investments put more than \$150 million dollars into Pillar before it released its first product in July of 2005. Pillar had many people working for it who had previously been at IBM SSD. This included their CEO Mike Workman, their 2nd in command Nance Holleran, and their hardware architect, Mike Brewer. Pillar had two locations, San Jose and Longmont, Colorado. When I joined there were about 300 people at both sites.



Pillar Data Systems, San Jose

What I did at Pillar

My job was to develop the multi-pathing software solution for the Pillar Axiom hardware attached to either a Windows or an AIX server. The software was written in the C programming language. This work was similar to what I had done at the end of my IBM career in San Jose. I viewed it as a challenge, because not too many software engineers could do this work on both server platforms. I was able to create the first versions of the software that Pillar shipped for these platforms. I was the third person who worked on the Windows version, and I wrote the AIX version by myself. What made the work especially challenging in the beginning was the fact that the Axiom hardware and software was very unstable. It would crash even when the Axiom was just standing idle doing nothing! Recovering from the crashes sometimes took hours of elapsed time. We spent a lot of time waiting for Axiom cold starts to take place.

The following picture shows some Pillar hardware in the lab I worked in. The boxes in the middle were called slammers, pilots, and bricks. IBM would call them control units and disk arrays.



Pillar Axiom Hardware

Here is a picture of my Pillar office cube.

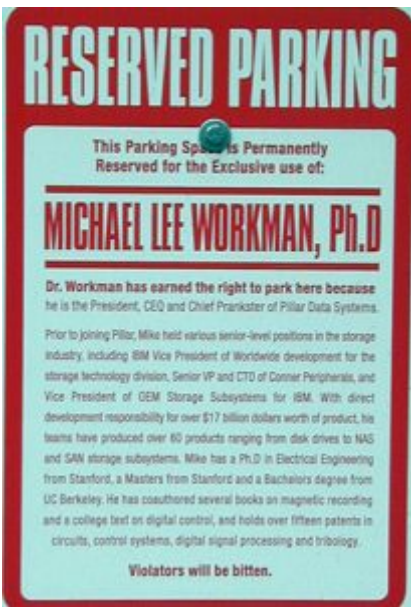


Pillar people

This picture shows the car of one of our execs in the Pillar parking lot. Notice the license plate and the sign on the pavement.



This was the parking place sign of the Pillar CEO, Mike Workman.



I left Pillar because I had seen the shipping of their first products and my code in July 2005 and because I wanted to do other things, like travel and work with my wife, Anna, on other projects.

Pillar epilogue

In June of 2011, Larry Ellison’s Oracle bought Larry Ellison’s Pillar, and the independent Pillar ceased to exist. As of this writing (March 2012), Oracle is not doing well in its efforts to sell hardware.

- ◀ 2018 ◀ AXIOM STORAGE ARRAY ◀ LARRY ELLISON ◀ MIKE BREWER ◀ MIKE WORKMAN ◀ MYHITECH
- ◀ NANCE HOLLERAN ◀ ORACLE ◀ PILLAR DATA SYSTEMS