

Cassidy: Steve Wozniak test-drives ancient Apple 1 computers

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SAN JOSE -- It was a little like having Stradivari over to your house to make sure your violin is in tune, or having Rembrandt stop by to touch up that painting on your wall, but there was Steve Wozniak on Tuesday standing over a table of five rare Apple 1 computers at History San Jose, regaling a small crowd with war stories.

Yes, five Apple 1s, as in the computer that recently sold at auction for \$671,400; the computer of which there are believed to be about 50 in the world.

Mostly, I just wanted to avoid bumping the table at History San Jose's Collection Center near Kelley Park.

"In terms of personal computing," Woz said, taking in the rare display of five Apple 1s. "I think this is the most historic day ever."

He had a point. The Apple 1, which granted, isn't much to look at, is one of the founding artifacts of Silicon Valley. Technically, the computer was just a green motherboard. Hobbyists supplied their own monitors, keyboards and power supplies. Still, a strong argument can be made that the computer -- which Woz designed in the mid-1970s -- launched the personal computer revolution.

"It really showed the path to the world, of a useful, affordable computer," said Woz, who with [Steve Jobs](#) and a few others assembled the machines in the Jobs family garage.

For a techie, the Apple 1 holds the sort of reverential appeal of a rare stamp for a philatelist, or a mis-minted penny for a coin collector. The story is repeated of how the computer sold starting in 1976 for \$666 and how from there the Apple empire was launched. The Apple 1 is a tangible point in a lineage that has led to the smartphone (a computer in our pocket) and the tablet and which will no doubt continue on far beyond our 2013 imaginations.

Tuesday was a day to revel in all that. Word had spread that History San Jose was going to attempt to boot up its machine. Wendell Sander, a brilliant engineer known as the father of the Apple III, agreed to bring his. Allen Baum, a high school friend of Woz and a former Apple employee, brought his, too. Apple 1 owner Andy Jong, a Berkeley computer store owner with early Apple ties, thought, why not? And Woz himself grabbed his on the way out the door, too.

But there was a serious and somewhat more nerve-racking purpose to the informal gathering that resulted from a question a museum volunteer had posed about the institution's machine: Does this thing work?

"I'll tell you, it's taken me a lot just to get the museum to agree to let me turn this thing on," volunteer Ralph Simpson told me before the gathering to start up the Apple 1. "They don't like to turn on electronics, especially this prized possession, which they know is worth a lot of money."

Yes, no one wants to be the guy who fried the museum's Apple 1. The truth is the museum's version hadn't run for at least 30 years. But Simpson, a retired IBM mainframe engineer, knew what he was doing. He tested parts and circuits. For technical support, he called in ringers Sander, Baum and Daniel Kottke, a former Apple employee and a friend of Woz and Jobs who helped them assemble Apple 1s back in the day.

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And so by late morning, the five machines were assembled, as were two dozen museum employees and volunteers and old Apple friends and family members. Simpson asked Woz if he'd be OK with doing the honors.

"I'm OK with it," he said. "Just show me what to push."

Not surprisingly, he figured it out and in a beat or two the display connected to the Apple 1 came to life. Volunteers inserted a program tape to the cassette drive and primitive digital images of the Apple icon and of Woz and Jobs and of the Apple II appeared. Meantime, Sander's computer ran a Star Trek game while Baum's featured the game of Life.



Steve Wozniak, center, co-founder of Apple, and Wendell Sander, right, one of Apple's early employees, signed their signature on some of remaining Apple 1 computers on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group) (Dai Sugano)

"We have five Apple 1s, and at least three of them are working," Woz beamed. Once Simpson was finished exhaling he said that he doubted anyone would see such a collection of operating Apple 1s in one room anytime soon.

"Probably never," Woz added.

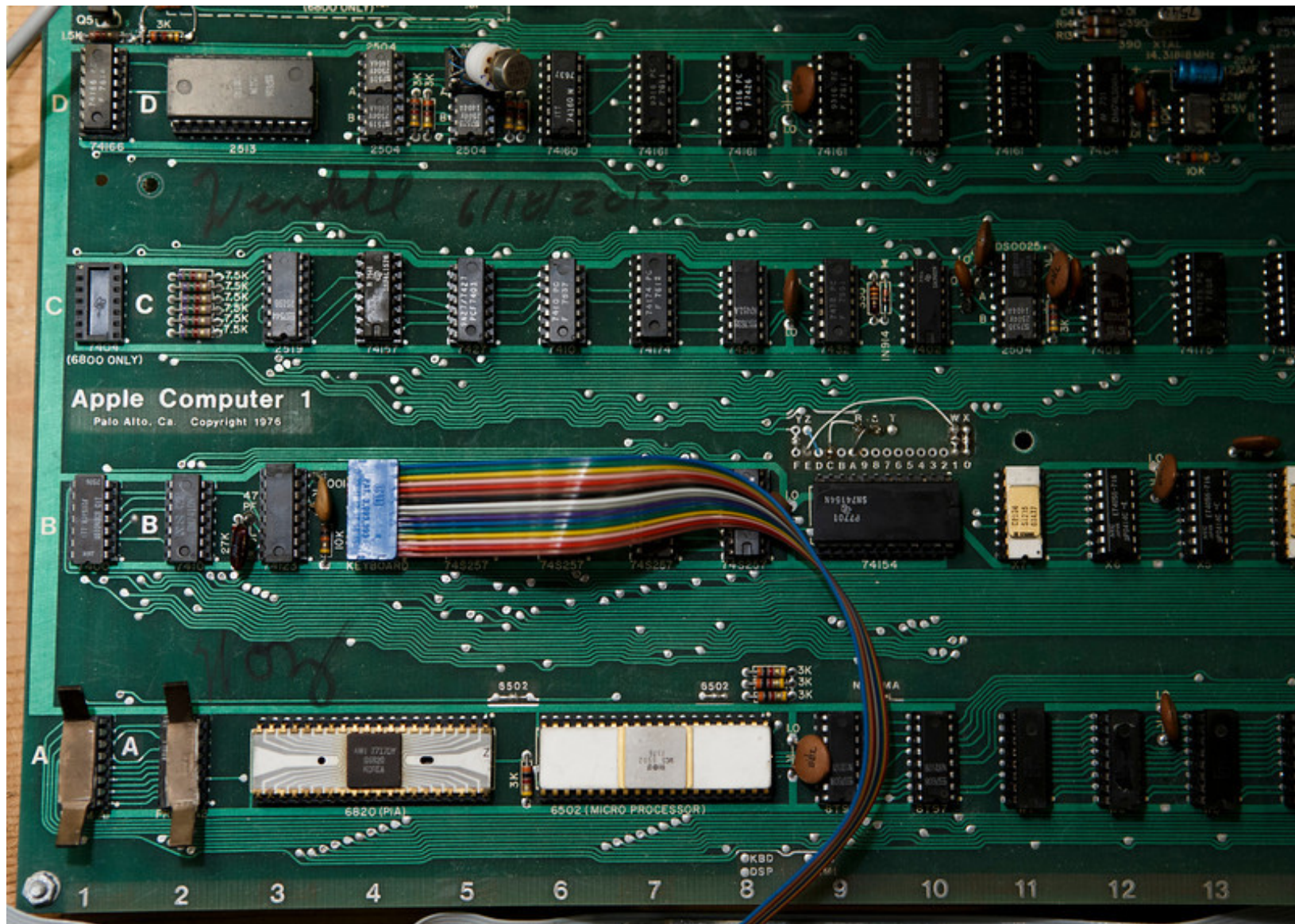
Of course the Apple co-founder was pleased that something he invented could still bring such wonder and joy to those who love computing and those who love old things. But there was much more to the day for him, he told me as the hubbub began to subside. The working motherboards were cool, all right, but what really stood out were the memories of old friends and the thrill of making something, something that worked and made a difference.

"I didn't know how much today was going to mean to me," Woz said. "It filled me with such warmth."

Funny, isn't it, how a circuit board that launched a revolution can do that?

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Pictured is an Apple 1 computer with signatures written on June 18, 2013 by Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple, and Wendell Sander, one of Apple's early employees, at History San Jose.

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Apple Monitor III shows a program run by one of remaining Apple 1 computers on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose.

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Steve Wozniak, right, co-founder of Apple, reacts as one of remaining Apple 1 gets booted up on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose. Standing with Wozniak are Ralph Simpson, left, a volunteer at History San Jose, and Wendell Sander, center, one of Apple's early employees.

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Wendell Sander, one of Apple's early employees, boots up his Apple 1 computer on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose.

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Steve Wozniak, right, co-founder of Apple, talks about Apple 1 computer as an image of the late Steve Jobs, the former Apple CEO, appears on a screen on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose. The image of Jobs by a program originally made in 2006 for the 30th anniversary of Apple was run on the Apple 1 for today's event. The computer which was made in 1976 was Apple's first computer. Pictured at center is Allen Baum.

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An image of the late Steve Jobs, the former Apple CEO, by a program originally made in 2006 for the 30th anniversary of Apple Inc. was run on the Apple 1 for today's event on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose.

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A photograph of Wendell Sander's modified Apple 1 computer with an iPhone.

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Wendell Sander, left, one of Apple's early employees, and Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple, stand behind five Apple 1 computers for a photo op on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose.

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Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple, stands behind five Apple 1 computers for a photo op on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose.

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One of Apple 1 computers runs a program on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose.

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Steve Wozniak, right, co-founder of Apple, and Wendell Sander, left, one of Apple's early employees, talks about Apple 1 computer on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose.

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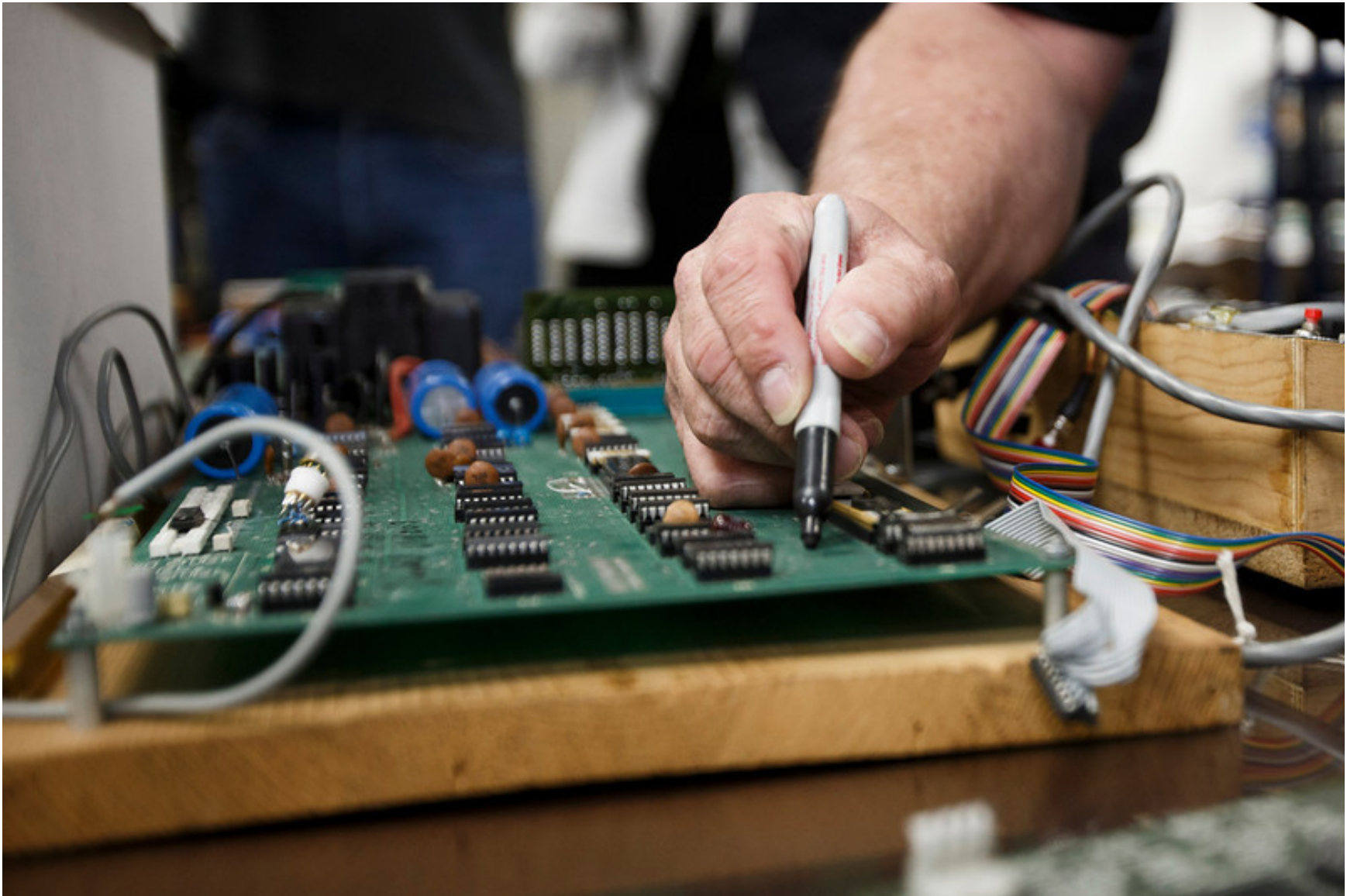
Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple, talks about Apple 1 computer on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose.

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Wendell Sander, left, one of Apple's early employees, puts his signature on one of Apple 1 computers on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose.

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Steve Wozniak, center, co-founder of Apple, and Wendell Sander, right, one of Apple's early employees, signed their signature on some of remaining Apple 1 computers on June 18, 2013 at History San Jose.