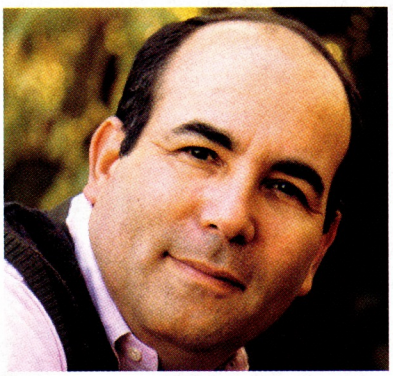
Silicon Valley baby

My long, winding path out of obliviousness and into electronics

Sometimes you can be smack-dab in the middle of history and not know it. To get from the house I grew up in to the swim club where I took lessons in the early 1960s—a distance of a little more than a mile—I would bicycle past a low-slung, nondescript building on the farthest boundary of the Stanford Industrial Park. The building is gone now, replaced by a new office building, but in those days, 4001 Miranda Avenue housed one of Silicon Valley's most important institutions: the research-and-development arm of Fairchild Semiconductor. Every summer's day, I cycled past some of the most brilliant people in the valley—such as Robert Noyce and Gordon Moore, to name two—and remained oblivious.

I was oblivious for many years to what was happening in the valley, because my passions were movies and girls and writing. My mother was a real estate agent who was constantly working with people swarming into the valley. She referred to something called Silicon Gulch, one of the first appellations for the area before the far more elegant moniker Silicon Valley caught on. She didn't talk much about the industry, other than to periodically muse about Advanced Micro Devices. I don't know whether she knew CEO Jerry Sanders or not, but I do know that several years after 1972, when AMD went public, her stockbroker recommended that she buy its stock. She never did, complaining that all her discretionary income was being sent to the birthplace of Silicon Valley, Stanford University, where I was working on my degree in English. (This was at about the same time that ELECTRONIC BUSINESS was founded.)



Executive Editor Howard Baldwin was born one month after Shockley Semiconductor Lab was incorporated.

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But the obliviousness of childhood passes into the stark clarity of adulthood, and it was basically impossible for anyone living in the valley not to be pulled into the electronics industry vortex. Thus, as we planned this 30th-anniversary issue of ELECTRONIC BUSINESS, I remembered touchstones along the way in my own career:

• The articles I wrote back in the 1980s for *Electronic Design* and *Microwaves & RF*, designed to help engineers further their careers. In an article on giving presentations, I vividly remember the advice: "Never create a presentation slide with more text that you could read on a highway billboard"—and wonder why that's still a problem today.

• The rush of RISC chip development, most of which went horribly awry (remember Intel's i860? Motorola's 88000?). I recall one analyst's lamenting that most chip designers took the *R* in RISC—*reduced*—too seriously. "They looked at all the instructions that were rarely used and eliminated them, even when they were vitally necessary," he said. "It was as if a residential architect had said, "Gee, in a 24-hour day, nobody spends that much time in the bathroom—let's not design that in.'"

• The transition from the "walled gardens" online services—America Online, Compuserve and Prodigy—to the Web. Who would have thought that Prodigy, the service most maligned for its ads, would be the one that most resembled the Web of today?

Those of you who lived through all of that are probably thinking, "It seems like yesterday." It does to me too. But ultimately what I love about this industry is not its yesterdays, although those memories surround my every step in the valley, but rather its tomorrows. The fact is that it has plowed under the missteps in its ongoing rush toward making the world smaller, faster, cheaper—and more interesting. I'm confident that the next 30 years will be as invigorating and innovative as the last. •

What seems like yesterday to you? **Send your memories of the last 30 years to feedback@eb.reedbusiness.com.**