

/dev/random

History, or Maybe Not

ROBERT G. FERRELL



Robert G. Ferrell is a fourth-generation Texan, literary techno-geek, and finalist for the 2011 Robert Benchley Society Humor Writing

Award. rgferrell@gmail.com

I have decided this time to touch on history, specifically, that of USENIX. As such I've delved deeply into the musty dusty archives of my own frontal lobes, which are easier to get into than the, um, backal ones (why isn't this a word?) because most of the synapses in my midbrain have been co-opted by snatches of '70s rock songs, Monty Python quotes, and obscure factoids I got from Snapple Peach Tea lids. That makes accessing anything further aft problematic.

I have a peculiar, albeit quite minor, connection with USENIX history. It would be more accurate to say, rather, that I have a distinctive non-connection to it, to wit: I served, or failed to serve, as the historian for SAGE. The story behind this confusing sea of negation begins with a notification to SAGE members via *Sys Admin* magazine in late 1997 or early 1998.

The notice was a solicitation of candidates for the newly created office of historian for SAGE, the somewhat puzzling acronym for USENIX's Systems Administrator's Guild(e). I had served as historian for a couple different chapters of a nonprofit, so I figured I'd give it a shot. Apparently I and another gentleman were the only ones to apply, so the powers that be decided we could share the title of SAGE Historian. We contacted one another and decided on the approach we would take to this most engaging assignment, which mostly consisted of each doing their own thing without any further communication.

While there are many luxuries a burgeoning co-historian can eschew and still function at an acceptable level, there is one commodity without which they are, to employ the vulgar vernacular, screwed: history itself. Alas, that was the one thing we (I) could not seem to generate no matter how hard we (I) tried.

It isn't as though there was no history to be had; the very fact that USENIX leadership saw fit to appoint a brace of historians for SAGE strongly suggests otherwise. No, the problem we (I) experienced centered chiefly on our (my) profound inability to coax meaningful bits of that history from members who lived it. I wrote letters, made phone calls, cajoled, wheedled, and flattered my way to...not much history. I got a plethora of promises; my inbox was filled with good intentions and best wishes—but not a lot of anything useful.

So I chose another approach that had served me well in past assignments: I decided to write my own wholly fictional history and then send it out, hoping the readers would take umbrage at my fabrications and correct them. It didn't work. Some of them even told me they remembered this or that incident and thought I recounted it rather well. It dawned on me after a few weeks of this that SAGE history might be easier simply to invent than investigate. I wondered how often this principle had occurred to previous chroniclers of the human condition. It would explain a lot.

/dev/random: History, or Maybe Not

The historian position and I drifted apart after a few months; my “history” was never published or otherwise promulgated, until now. I have excavated and below present for your edification and amusement selected excerpts from my larger *History of UNIX and USENIX, as Told by Some Guy Sitting Next to Me on the Subway*. It is, as I’ve indicated, completely and unashamedly fictitious, with no regard whatever to truth, the historical record, or even basic physical laws.

UNIX began as an improved system for generating man pages. The old method, using a *manual* typewriter, a ball-peen hammer, and five-to-seven wads of well-chewed bubblegum, was tedious and slow, prompting Dennis Ritchie and Ken Thompson to develop a better mechanism in their spare time. They began by rewriting the premises for *Have Gun–Will Travel*, *Mission: Impossible*, and *Hogan’s Heroes* in Sanskrit, then converting that to PL/I using semaphore flags borrowed from local Boy Scouts.

Once the more serious lacerations had been stitched and the cracked windowpanes replaced, they punched the resulting characters into cards and put them on the mainframe in batch mode for the night. The next morning they discovered that they’d created an entirely new operating system which they decided, after staring for too long at the computer lab aquarium, to call “Xinu” because it sounded like they imagined a blue neon guppy would sneezing. They wrote the name on the only surface they could find, the aquarium wall. That night the cleaning lady wiped it off, but not before copying it down from the other side of the tank in case it was important—and thus was UNIX born. (She had left school to enter the janitorial field before they learned the lowercase letters.)

People began to employ this new operating system because the others available at the time were too easy to understand, and after a few years those early adopters banded together to form a users’ group and bowling team. Searching for a name, they first wanted the cleverly named *UNIX Users’ Group* but that did not fit on the sweat bands very well. They then tried *Users of UNIX*, but the guy who was charged with etching this name into the beer mugs only had enough etch for six (capital) letters, so he shortened it to USENIX.

USENIX attracted only 40 people or so at first, many of whom thought they were attending the Undergarment Sales Executives’ Northern Indiana eXposition, but gradually membership expanded to include people who knew the difference between a dumb terminal and a bus terminal; after this the organization really got rolling.

At some point the steadily expanding membership decided to start sponsoring technical conferences. The natural first step in this process was to appoint a committee to come up with cool acronyms based on irrelevant adjectives, cutesy names, and obscure mythological creatures. After that crucial benchmark had been cleared it was simply a matter of choosing topics, arranging speakers and venues, and, well, all the other stuff that goes into giving technical folks an excuse to duck out of the keynote and explore the drinking establishments in a distant city.

I suppose this isn’t really much of a history, but I only have a limited space here and, as I noted above, my call for real data wasn’t so much answered as aggressively ignored. Sure, there’s Wikipedia, but where’s the fun in that? At least I admit from the outset that I’m shoveling manure at you.