

THE NIGHT WE STOPPED TRAFFIC ON 5TH AVENUE1

One day, **Les Solomon, Technical Director of Popular Electronics Magazine**, came into the store and showed me a new board that could produce color graphics on the Imsai computer. It was called the T.V. Dazzler, and when Les showed me what it could do, I just had to get one for my store. The board was made by a new company called Cromemco, organized by Roger Melen and Harry Garland from Stamford University. The Dazzler was actually two boards connected together that could produce vector-generated color graphics that were very far advanced for 1976. Storing any video image in a computer takes a lot of RAM memory, and storing color images takes even more memory. Personal computers of 1976, such as the Altair or IMSAI with 8K or 16K of RAM memory, were considered to have large memories.

Most of the computers in use at that time did not have video terminals, but were connected to Teletype machines which acted both as printers and memory input devices. To produce any kind of graphic image on a CRT took such large amounts of memory, all that could be managed was block-like figures. (Remember the early video game machines?)

The TV Dazzler produced graphics that were also very crude, but they were in color. One program for the TV Dazzler generated a sensational ever-changing color display. This was called Kaleidoscope, and the color video display was exactly like looking through a rotating color kaleidoscope, except it was shown on a large color TV and the patterns constantly changed, seemingly never repeating exactly the same design.

When I received my T.V. Dazzler kit, I had it assembled and installed into an Imsai 8080 Computer. In those days, color video display monitors were something that only existed in TV stations; they cost thousands of dollars and were far out of our range. We used a regular 19-inch color TV and connected it to the computer through a little board called a PixieVerter. This was a sub-miniature TV station which added RF to the video signal from the Dazzler. You connected the output of the PixieVerter to the TV set's antenna terminals, and the image appeared on your TV. Of course, the PixieVerter was illegal to sell for this purpose, so it was sold as a kit and was supposed to be used to generate signals for a TV repairman.

When we got the Dazzler hooked up and running, we loaded the program in from a paper tape run through the tape reader on my Teletyper. Then we accessed the memory address for the TV Dazzler. All at once the TV screen displayed the moving, vivid colors of the kaleidoscope. Nobody could take their eyes off the images on the screen; it was hypnotic.

Then I got a real bright idea. My computer store was still in Polk's Hobby Department Store at 5th Avenue and 32 St in New York City. This location, two blocks from the Empire State Building, on 5th Avenue, was a very busy thoroughfare both day and night. I thought of a great way to draw attention to my store! One evening we put the TV set in the window. It was connected by a long piece of coaxial cable to the IMSAI computer in the back of the store, which had Kaleidoscope loaded into the TV Dazzler. We left the computer running when the store closed, and went home.

Imagine that you are a motorist driving down 5th Avenue in New York City at night. All of the stores are closed. It's pitch black, except for the street lamps. As you approach 32nd St., you see dazzling kaleidoscope patterns in bright colors, playing across the face of a TV tube in a store window. Even a jaded New Yorker was sure to stop and see what was making this display. Naturally, when you stopped to see what was going on here, so did everyone else. It did not take long to attract a large crowd of rubbernecks, and this stopped traffic completely, creating a big traffic jam on one of New York's busiest avenues. Soon, the police came to unscramble the traffic jam and they quickly saw what was causing the problem. Thinking that the pictures had to be coming from a TV broadcast (there were no VCR's in those days,) they called up all the local TV stations to find out who was broadcasting the images. The TV stations knew nothing about it. The police soon realized that the display had to be generated by something inside the store.

First they called the owner, and then the manager, of the store. The manager had to come downtown all

the way from the Bronx. He had to open the store, turn off the alarm, and then he disconnected the computer by pulling the power cord out of the wall. The next morning, when I came to work, he had a few choice words to say to me about the window display. If I ever pulled anything like that again, I was finished with Polk's store!

It was worth it. We got a lot of publicity, and people became curious about the little computers that could cause a big traffic jam. However, soon after that episode I moved into new quarters at 30th Street and Madison Avenue, enlarging the Computer Mart of New York from 500 square feet to 4,000 square feet.