Michael Sean Mahoney's 1998 Princeton interview with Dennis

"Graduate School Experience Questions and Answers"

MSM: Then your special interest as a grad student?

Ritchie: My work was fairly theoretical. It was in recursive function theory. And in particular, hierarchies of functions in terms of computational complexity. I got involved in real computers and programming mainly by being - well, I was interested even as I came to graduate school. But, I guess it was even the first year I was a teaching fellow in the introductory programming course and I continued that for at least, I guess, at least three years. Being a teaching fellow in that course and also a couple of others, but, ah, this was at Harvard. The computer situation was fairly - reasonably backward there, it characterized [inaudible] quite well-known people. But they didn't really have a comprehensive program. Of course this was early 1963.

MSM: Your Harvard class was '63?

Ritchie: Yes.

MSM: Okay, then we overlapped by just a year then. I was Class of '60.

Ritchie: At that point there were really weren't any, any computer science probably was not even called that practically anyplace. Harvard has always been part of the sort of strange relationship with the subject. That's what's [inaudible]. At that time in particular there were individual courses that were for people who were quite well-known. So, as I said, my actual thesis work was on - was fairly theoretical but I spent a lot of time, also, doing programming.

MSM: Was your thesis work at Harvard?

Ritchie: Yes.

MSM: And in the recursive function area, who were you working with?

Ritchie: Pat Fisher. Who, when - I guess the last year or so he went to the University of British Colombia. He is now at Vanderbilt. Pat was sort of not really the Harvard advisor. I was fairly independent.

MSM: So you wandered down to Project Mac for a summer job?

Ritchie: It wasn't a summer job. I think by that time I guess I was just more interested in doing programming. I don't know how I even found my way to it, precisely. But it was a part-time job throughout the year. Basically to support myself.

MSM: How did you come to Bell Labs?

Ritchie: My father worked for Bell Labs. Hence I knew very much about the place. I knew it because also he was involved with telephony. I came to know the Multics work from MIT. I actually interviewed at several places at Bell Labs. I was out Indian Hill and Whippany as well as the research group here. And this certainly looked the most interesting.