

Jane Roessner

November 2021

Dennis Memories

I met Dennis in 1967 when I started going out with John, right at the end of our senior year of high school. I was 17, just about to go off to Wellesley, and Dennis had finished Harvard and Harvard grad school; he must've been around 25 or 26. He was back living at home (his parents' house, at 161 Kent Place Blvd. in Summit) and working at Bell Labs. I knew of Dennis Ritchie; he was what was known then as "a brain" – a guy (the brains were all almost all guys) who was seriously smart in science and math. He looked the part: He always wore black jeans (never blue jeans) and black lace-up shoes, with a plaid shirt. Thick black glasses. Dark hair parted on the side, a bit greasy and one suspected not washed all that often. He kept nocturnal hours: worked down in the basement, where the big computer was, with the WATS line to the Labs, late into the night. He came up from the basement and went up to the third floor very late (or maybe very early). No one ever went up to Dennis's place on the third floor; it was an attic, with sloping walls, rabbit warren feel. Word was that Dennis never bothered cashing his paychecks; he just kept them under his mattress. Every few years, he'd go down to the VW place and come home with a brand-new car.

Dennis was totally fun to talk to. We all spent a lot of time hanging out in the Ritchies' living room. I'd ask Dennis what he was working on at the Labs, and he would love to explain it, in as much detail as I wanted (and I liked a lot of detail!). Those were the days when he and Ken were developing Unix. And later, when he was working on C and writing the C book with Brian. He was totally into his work, and had a great core team of people at the Labs. He'd invite us down to the basement to play the very earliest computer games: Space Wars, Hunt the Wumpus. He and Ken were working on the chess game program, and it was doing really well against serious players. It must've been such an exciting time there; the best and brightest went to Bell Labs, and the Labs set them free to play – and be insanely productive. When Lynn and I went to Japan with Dennis for the Japan Prize, his speech was all about the importance of Labs-style basic research (as opposed to developing products). He really was in the perfect place at the perfect time, and he loved talking about it, having us come out to visit the Labs, etc.

At the same time, he was intensely private. You didn't ask him personal questions. He didn't have friends over. His social life, it seemed, was with the team at the Labs – not so much socializing outside of work. That was all out of bounds, and so we just steered clear of it (except for Nanee, who teased Dennis about girls, his beard, etc.). To me, Dennis's intense privacy had a Boo Radley quality about it: I didn't want to pry into it; I respected it; it's who he was. Who knows: maybe he had some relationships over the years, with women and/or men; or maybe he didn't; or maybe he had some erotic life over the computer (certainly, he would've known how to find it); or maybe not. But nothing he ever shared with us or others.

But at home, he was around for hanging out a lot of the time. In the Poconos, his big thing was making ice cream – peach was my favorite. That happened every summer. While we'd be swimming and sailing and hanging out at the lake, Dennis would often be sitting in his beach chair reading – right nearby, but not in the fray.

At Christmas at our house in Newton, Dennis was always there – and he was my number one chef in making Christmas dinner. He and I would make it happen in the kitchen; I would take care of all the logistics and he would do the cooking. Always. Really fun. And he'd bring the wine: Jadot. I remember the Christmas when Rachel four months old: Dennis lying on the rug in the front hall, Rachel sucking on his nose! Hilarious. He was always up for zany fun.

The summer Jean got really sick, and died, Dennis was absolutely attentive – again, in a Boo Radley sort of way, he was always there doing what needed to be done. And at Jean's small memorial service in the Ritchies' backyard, it was Dennis who spoke first and gave a lovely summary of her life.

Thinking back on it, it must've been challenging for Dennis to have such a major career triumph so early on – he must've done all the basic work on Unix and C by his early 30s. Sure, there was lots to do to build on that, but nothing as meteoric as that work. I know he was very good as the head of the computing department – I think he actually cared a lot about mentoring younger people, supervising, etc., even though that's somewhat surprising. But still, that's very early to peak in a career. And later on, after Ken left, and the Labs got taken over by Lucent (and others; I forget), and the best and brightest were going to Google and Apple and Silicon Valley, the Labs must've felt like a shadow of what it had once been. I don't have a precise sense of when drinking became a problem for Dennis. Certainly, it wasn't a problem back in the glory days of Unix and C. But later on, he'd always arrive in the Poconos with a bottle of Jim Beam (I think it was) and he'd take it directly to his room – always a bad sign. He'd be pretty out of it at night. And of course, later when he was in his house I think that all got very bad. Very sad to think of. What a dear person; I feel so lucky to have known him.

Jane was Dennis' sister in law, she also grew up in Summit and began dating John in 1967.

From: jane roessner

Date: November 14, 2019 at 1:53:14 PM EST

To: john ritchie, bill ritchie

Subject: Fwd: Lynn Recording

Hey, Ritchie Boys -- I'm forwarding this in response to John's email today asking about recollections of Dennis. It reminded me that when I listened to the interview Lynn did [above], I felt like my experience of Dennis was very different in some ways... mainly, [going back to the late 60s and early 70s] I loved asking him about what he was working on, and he was always very ready to explain it -- not standoffish in the least. A lot of hanging around in the green [wallpaper, upholstery, AND shag carpet] living room, which always had a few of Mr. Keister's puzzles around to play with while we talked. We'd also go down to the basement and play Hunt the Wumpus. And some game that involved "going into hyperspace." [So cool that he had a WATS line coming right into the house.] He was really fun, and funny -- and knew all about cool cultural stuff, like the Whole Earth Catalogue. He was also into goofy stuff -- the Nixon head candle, some ooze thing [?], whatever. Antic sense of humor. Laughed a lot, at offbeat stuff. Which was the whole Ritchie family vibe. [Dressing up in the bandana dresses for the family jug band.] Get me on a roll and it all starts coming back. J

----- Forwarded message -----

From: jane roessner

Date: Sun, Sep 30, 2018 at 7:15 PM

Subject: Re: Lynn Recording

To: john ritchie

Back in Cambridge, and just listened to the whole thing. Great to hear Lynn's voice, and so great that he was able to get her story. Hard to believe the interview was so recent -- June 29. She has such an important perspective on Dennis (grilling him for stories about "hoods"!).

Listening to this also reminded me that especially in the late 70s and early 80s I had lots of long conversations with Dennis [most of them, in the living room of 161] about the work he was doing. I asked him lots of questions about what he was working on, and he was very willing to answer them. [In fact, it seemed like he loved being asked.]

He told me that at the core of his work [this was early stuff, in the 70s] was "word processing." Back then, that was terra incognita. He explained it to me, and I remember having a hard time understanding why "word processing" was such a big deal -- to me, it sounded like it was about making life easier for secretaries! I also remember him telling me that, very early on, they decided to give away UNIX to universities [license it] -- they figured that was the best way to test it & get it into the hands of the people they wanted to use it.

Then I remember he took us out to the Labs to print my letters applying for teaching jobs after grad school. It was miraculous that you could print 20 letters -- and change the salutation for each one. This

must've been in 1976, the year I finished grad school. Remember that huge room full of mainframes?
And lots of fans to keep them cool?