CHARLES MANDEL
CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

BOULDER CREEK, CALIF. – Ataris, Apples, Commodores, KayPros, and a couple of Cray supercomputers fill a 90-year-old barn nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains of northern California. Aside from a few resident pigs in stalls downstairs, it's jammed with once state-of-the-art systems, rendered obsolete except for their historical computing value.

The prototypes, homemade systems and just plain outdated technology housed at the DigiBarn Computer Museum in Boulder Creek, Calif., rivals collections anywhere.

Owner and curator Bruce Damer started the project to capture the personal stories and track technological evolution through the large collection of vintage computer systems, manuals, interviews, and "other fossil relics of the 'Cambrian explosion' of personal computing in 1975."

Raised in Kamloops, B.C., and a former student at the University of Victoria, Damer calls the museum "a memory palace for the nerd-inclined." The software engineer says he wants to piece together the history of what he believes is the most important invention of the 20th century.

"In 50 years, all of the people who were there will be gone and there has to be something left behind for people to understand how it all happened," Damer says. "That's what this project is all about."

Dag Spicer, senior curator at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, Calif., calls the DigiBarn one of the top private collections in the United States.

"There are a lot of interesting prototypes," says Spicer, who adds the DigiBarn's focus on Apple computers in particular is one of the collection's strong points.

While the DigiBarn's physical location attracts only a couple hundred people annually, the museum flourishes in cyberspace, drawing millions of visitors to www.digibarn.com.

As a student in Kamloops in 1981, Damer recalls seeing in a magazine an early computer Xerox developed called the Alto.

"It was the kind of machine everybody looked at and said: 'Oh my goodness, this is the future.'"

As it turned out, Damer's future would be tied to personal computing. He went to graduate school in Los Angeles and then worked as a software engineer for a small company that was subsequently invited to create "a Xerox look-and-feel work station that would run on a standard PC."

Creating the windows, icons and applications from scratch, Damer became interested in the history of computing. As he delved into Xerox's background, he discovered they'd done a poor job of preserving their own history. The company had tossed most of its own hardware, so Damer began collecting it from people he knew in the Silicon Valley.

"Garages would open up and there would be all this wonderful stuff somebody in their late 60s was ordered by his wife to dump. 'Get rid of this stuff. We're moving to a condo.' Instead of it going to a landfill, I took it in."

Damer bought his ranch with the barn in 1998, officially christening it the DigiBarn in 2001. Besides computer systems, the DigiBarn contains everything from T-shirts to business plans to some of Apple's earliest proprietary documentation.

Damer also has concentrated on Apple prototypes because of his friendship with some of the company's earliest founders and employees through their shared love of "home-brewed," homemade computer systems.

While Digibarn consumes Damer's time – he says the sheer volume of email has taken over his life – he still works for a living. Damer is considered the world's leading expert on avatars, the representation of people in two-dimensional and three-dimensional worlds.

As for the future of personal computing, Damer predicts more technology will show up on our bodies.

He's already designed garments to hold iPods, cellphones and PDAs.

"It's all going to be about light-weight, thin, flat interfaces that you carry around, that fold and roll up."