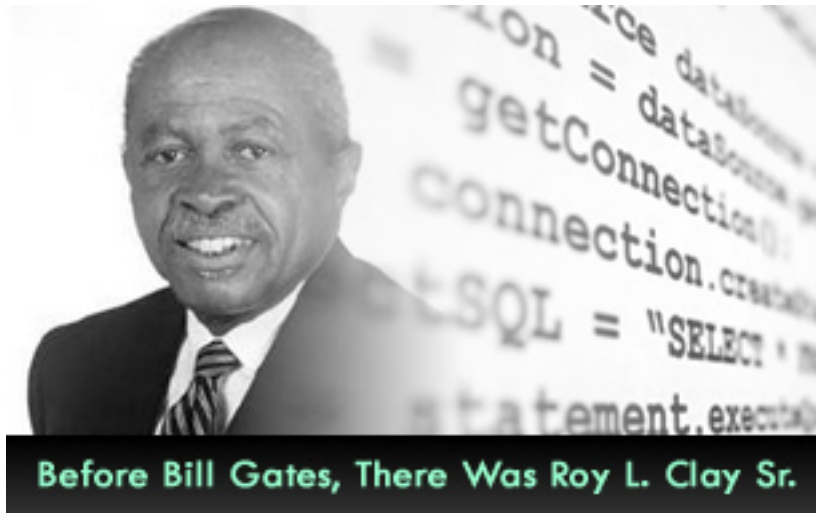


Before Bill Gates, There Was Roy L. Clay Sr.: Black Tech Pioneer Helped Build First Computers

Written by Diedra Henderson
Friday, 01 June 2012 10:15



To today's iPad generation, accustomed to lightweight portable computing power, the first computer Roy L. Clay Sr. helped build may seem like a relic. When Clay, now 82, learned how to program computer code in 1956, Bill Gates was in diapers. Universities didn't have computer science programs. And a computer stable enough to run for a full day without failing was the holy grail. David

Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard Co., brought Clay on board in 1965 to build that computer.

Packard heard about Clay from a friend who had worked on the Manhattan Project, the United States' answer to Germany's nuclear-development program during World War II. In 1958 Clay was a computer programmer at what is now Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, turning the ethereal into something tangible: He wrote software that showed how particles of radiation would spread through the atmosphere after an atomic explosion.

What Packard had in mind were computers that would work with other instrumentation that HP built. He knew nothing about software.

"He trusted that to me," Clay said.

Clay was born in Kinloch, the oldest African-American community incorporated in Missouri. He lived in a home with no indoor plumbing, a neighborhood with no streetlights, in an area with a tradition of police picking up black boys like Clay if they wandered outside of Kinloch after dark.

"Everybody cared," Clay said of his hometown. His first teacher "inspired me to do well. By the time I left that little school, I thought I could learn to do anything."

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