

He got with the program early on

Bill Pytlovany played a role in making the Internet user-friendly as an early AOL employee

By **DAN HIGGINS**, Staff writer

Click byline for more stories by writer.

First published: Monday, February 6, 2006

SCOTIA -- When Bill Pytlovany showed up for his first day at America Online 20 years ago, one of the first things the boss handed him was a screwdriver.

"I had to drive to an office supply store and buy myself a desk. Then I had to come back and put it together myself," said Pytlovany, 50, as he stood in the doorway of his spacious home in Scotia.

The Scotia native was one of the Internet giant's first employees, back when it had about 30 people. Recently, as he reflected on those early days of the Internet, he talked about what he and programmers like him have done since.

Pytlovany's challenges have included working on the code that allows DVDs to be played on home computers. He volunteers to maintain <http://www.visitscotia.com>. On the less technical side, he recently became chairman of a village park board.

"When we ask him for help, he helps us," said Mayor Michael McLaughlin. "He's that kind of guy."

Pytlovany also developed WinPatrol, a program that hunts out unnecessary programs that can slow down a machine's performance and detects spyware.

Working with computers was a second career for Pytlovany. A divorced father of two, he was in his 20s in the early 1980s when he went back to college to study physics. He took a minor in computer science and aced all of his computer classes.

He knew he was making the right decision when, while thumbing through a Sears catalog, he saw an Atari 2600 game console for sale. "I thought to myself, 'I think I may be onto something,'" he said.

After college, he went to a conference for computer programmers in Virginia and met Steve Case, AOL's founder. Case persuaded him to come down to Virginia to help build his Internet service provider.

That assignment helped turn the Internet from a "geeks only" tool to a routine part of daily life. Pytlovany managed a team of programmers whose mission was to design, he said, "something that our mothers could use."

What he came up with was the first widely used, user-friendly Internet service software. For the first time, casual computer users could peruse the Internet without knowing anything at all about computer programming or the intricacies of modems.

While Pytlovany designed software, Case made deals with computer companies: with Commodore, then Apple computers, then IBM. Computer customers would get a floppy disk with their new computers and instructions on how to use online services with names like Quantum Link or AppleLink.

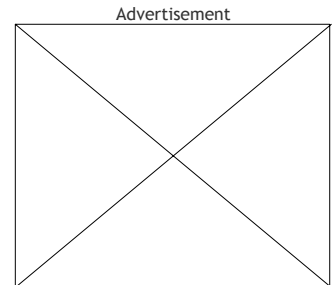
Eventually Case combined all his online brands under the name America Online.

Soon after that things really took off. Company stock that Pytlovany and his colleagues purchased for \$1 per share continued to split as the stock price grew. He declined to say how much his stock options grew to be worth, but what Pytlovany did next provides a hint. In 1992, at the age of 37, he entered "semi-retirement," bought a house in Scotia and was able to put his two children through college.

"Basically, I get to work from home on projects that I think are cool, which is really nice to be able to do," said Pytlovany.

He has stayed busy since his AOL days. He did programming work for companies like Gateway and Epson. And he donates his time and computing expertise to community groups.

Through his company, BillP Studios, he gives away copies of his WinPatrol. In 1998, he came out with a pay version that provides more



detailed information on where the unwelcome programs come from and how best to handle them. He said that as computers become more sophisticated, he must hire researchers to hunt down the source of thousands of programs that constantly bombard machines and slow down networks.

"There is so much junk out there that people don't need. This (program) prevents anything from being added to your computer without your permission," he said.

It's a long way from when he and his programming team were dreaming of how to build a tool for making the Internet useful to anyone, for a company that has become one of the most famous brands in the world.

Occasionally it dawns on him that he played a role in the recent history of the Information Age. He and his wife, Cindi, have four grandchildren, who all grew up exposed to computers and the Internet. "One of them will hear something about AOL, and they'll say, 'Hey, didn't poppa used to work there?' That's when it hits me," he said.

Dan Higgins can be reached at 454-5523 or by e-mail at dhiggins@timesunion.com.

All Times Union materials copyright 1996-2006, Capital Newspapers Division of The Hearst Corporation, Albany, N.Y.

[CONTACT US](#) | [HOW TO ADVERTISE](#) | [YOUR PRIVACY RIGHTS](#) | [FULL COPYRIGHT](#) | [CLASSROOM ENRICHMENT](#)