

Hey, You In That Bunker, YOU CAN COME OUT NOW!

After a year of computer-bug fears and a month of terrorism warnings, everything turned out to be Y2OK

By JOEL STEIN

IT WAS THE PERFECT FABLE FOR OUR TIME: HAL recast as a billion tiny bugs, his omnipotent malevolence replaced by our own innocent oversight. Technology had become so all-encompassing and incomprehensible, the fable began, that we had unwittingly lost control of it. So the smallest thing, our human habit of hiply referring to years by the last two digits, was going to topple this electronic pack of cards, sending planes crashing to the ground, nukes leaping from their silos, electricity to a standstill and all of humanity back to a time much earlier than the 1900 our computers would believe it was. It was a cleansing fantasy, a dream of ridding ourselves of the increasingly unavoidable yoke of overcivilization and going back to a society simple enough for us to understand.

So at 4:30 a.m. on Dec. 31, in Lisbon, Ohio, fable believers Bruce and Diane Eckhart awoke and immersed themselves in technology for what they believed was the last time, turning on their two televisions, dialing up the Internet and clicking on their shortwave radio to monitor the first Y2K rollover in Kiribati. Since 1997 the Eckharts have been stockpiling food, conducting surprise drills, practicing firearm skills, converting savings into gold coins and studying rudimentary dentistry and field medicine. "So far, it's just a minor power outage in New Zealand," Diane reports, before uttering a sentence few have ever delivered. "But we've heard nothing about Guam; it's kind of disturbing."

As the day wears on, and news reports show that not even China is having problems, their daughter Danielle, 12, is the first to lose interest. "Whatever happens, happens," she says, after

Where the Y2K Bug Came From

1890 Herman Hollerith develops an electrically driven census system that reads punch cards. Six years later, he founds the company that eventually becomes IBM.

1957 Grace Murray Hopper creates Flow-matic, the first computer language written in plain English. Two years later, it forms the basis of COBOL—a compromise *lingua franca* for business computers. To save precious room on the cards, years are abbreviated to two digits (e.g., 1957 is represented as 57).

1960 Anticipating problems later on, Robert Bemer and 47 other computer scientists begin lobbying for the four-digit year.

1964 IBM introduces the spectacularly successful System/360 mainframe, which retains the two-digit year.

1967 The White House orders the National Bureau of Standards to settle the date debate. Pressured by the Pentagon, the bureau keeps the two-digit year.

1979 Bemer makes the first widely published prediction of the Y2K crisis, in the journal *Interface Age*. The reaction is underwhelming.

1993 Curious nuke watchers at NORAD turn their computer clocks forward to Jan. 1, 2000—and the ICBM alert system crashes.

1995 IBM finally acknowledges the Y2K bug—and announces plans to help its customers make "timely year 2000 transitions."

1998 Y2K merchandise (mugs, clocks and caps) goes on sale. The White House appoints John Koskinen as its Y2K czar. Most government agencies get a failing grade in Y2K readiness.

1999 MARCH 31 Koskinen's preliminary deadline for all computer-system fixes.

2000 JANUARY 1 The moment of truth.

singing along to a Sheryl Crow tape. "We won't have to go grocery shopping for a while." And while Bruce, 45, is still talking about being wary of strangers from neighboring Youngstown coming to loot his stash, his wife Diane, 42, is already contemplating their massive store of canned food. "I'm going to save on groceries," she says, deter-

mined to eat their 12 cans of Spam, disaster or not. “I can’t decide if I’m going to buy a Jacuzzi or a new computer with the money.”

In Tennessee, Karen Anderson woke up on New Year’s Day less ready than the Eckharts to dig in to her canned food. The self-designated Martha Stewart of Y2K now fears a leap year computer bug on Feb. 29, among other potential disasters. “We don’t know what’s going to happen with the economy. If the markets crash or my husband loses his job, we’re ready,” she says. In Ontario, Bruce Beach, who began constructing a bunker of 42 buried school buses 18 years ago, watched astounded as city after city passed into modernity with nary a scratch.

Almost as interested in world rollovers as the bunkered down were the U.S. and Russian military officers at Peterson Air Force Base, the now permanent Center for Year 2000 Strategic Stability. Officers from both sides of the cold peace, who were there to make sure no nukes accidentally went off, labored to keep busy, channel surfing among CNN and other news shows and showing one another Russian Internet fare. The only old-school touch was the hot-line phones, black for Moscow, white for the U.S. When the clocks changed in Moscow and no bugs were reported, the Russian team applauded and U.S. Major General Thomas Goslin Jr. congratulated Russian group leader Colonel Sergey Kaplin. He may have deserved even more congratulations. Russia spent \$4 million on Y2K military preparations while the U.S. spent nearly \$4 billion. In fact, Americans spent an estimated \$100 billion to be ready on all fronts, from telecommu-

nications to sewage treatment. It is still unclear whether that was money partly wasted or money that saved us from a meltdown.

The FAA confidently sent its chief, Jane Garvey, flying from Washington to Dallas during the key hour of midnight Greenwich Mean Time. The only surprising thing about the flight was that the FAA chief had to fly coach. Joining her were 36 passengers, including one brave TIME reporter, Washington Senator Slade Gorton and Janet Rhodes, 63, whose life’s goal was to fly during midnight of the millennium. Rhodes booked the trip months in advance, had her flight canceled twice owing to lack of passengers and eventually got a ticket on the flight Garvey was taking, figuring American couldn’t cancel that one. “This is the most fun I’ve ever had on a flight,” she chirped. “I just love being part of history.”

Fear itself was virtually nonexistent on Friday, with almost no one making a last-minute ATM run, leaving the \$50 billion of extra cash the Federal Reserve had printed for the occasion to be turned into mulch later this month.

So as Apocalypse Not struck around the globe—and all terrorists were either caught, in bed watching television, or releasing a planeload of hostages—people everywhere celebrated. Many cultures celebrated despite the fact that most follow completely different calendars, and despite the fact that far too many people were pointing out that the millennium doesn’t really start until next year and that our system is all messed up anyway, because Jesus was born 2,004 years ago. They celebrated because the most famous odometer

manifold has ever created was displaying three zeroes in a row. It’s exciting enough when it happens to your own car; when it happens to the world, it makes you downright giddy. ■

Questions

1. What is the origin of the Y2K problem? What steps did citizens, businesses and the federal government take to address this problem? How much did these efforts cost?
2. When did the “moment of truth” arrive for Y2K watchers? What happened?

