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Art without engineering is dreaming;
Engineering without art is calculating.

Steven K. Roberts, N4RVE



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By Steve (<https://microship.com/author/archive-admin/>) | April 26, 1987

Photo by Maggie Victor: Sailing with Norm Goldblatt on San Francisco Bay.

Texting while Driving in 1987

This posting to my Computing Across America column on GENIE came near the end of the Silicon Valley layover between the Winnebiko II trek down the Pacific Coast and the jump to Ohio to resume through the Northeast and down the coast to Florida. It includes a short item that may have been the first instance of texting while driving... chatting via binary handlebar keyboard and packet radio while pedaling through Palo Alto... talking with another early adopter of mobile technology who was on the road as well, enroute to Monterey with a laptop in the back seat! We even quipped that we were making history.

by Steven K. Roberts

Palo Alto, California

April 26, 1987

12,000 miles

A fellow in Rochester writes: “Many of us in the less temperate zones wonder when you’ll be leaving the exotic climes of the West coast to embark on the real adventure, the soul-destroying adventure that ensues when you cross over into the desert. After all, any of us can have good time in Palo Alto...”

But Simon... we *have* been roughing it! Why, just yesterday we were sprayed with cold salt water as we danced in a 34-foot sailboat across the violent, whitecapped surface of San Francisco Bay. There were moments of terror as the deck dipped into rushing froth — as the women screamed and the captain intoned “It’s under control... it’s under control” like a reassuring litany while Angel Island passed to starboard.

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Yes, we' sharp cc  vater at the bottom chilly — in
and me. Sott wrestling in the murky depths, the two of them ganging up on me, tickling me,
taking advantage of my exhaustion...
(<https://microship.com/>)
e of us in, Maggie and Laura

So you think this is an easy life, here in Palo Alto? Why, it fairly reeks of challenge, risk, and high adventure! My electronic calendar is crammed to capacity with fearless assaults on high-tech pinnacles (subtly camouflaged as speaking engagements): Hewlett-Packard. Apple (<https://microship.com/winnebiko-ii-talk-and-demo-apple-amateur-radio-club/>). Sun. Intellicorp. All-nighters of software-hacking alternate with those of machining and still others of writing... leaving me wired yet exhausted, too limp to face the daily onslaught of perky voices and curious faces. And then there are the unexpected doses of adrenaline: skimming the Pacific with Alan in a Cessna 172, only to nose skyward, squeak over a cliff, and aim for the treetops of a 2,000-foot ridge. "There's my property," he says, pointing down as the plane closes in on a cluster of redwoods at 200 feet per second...

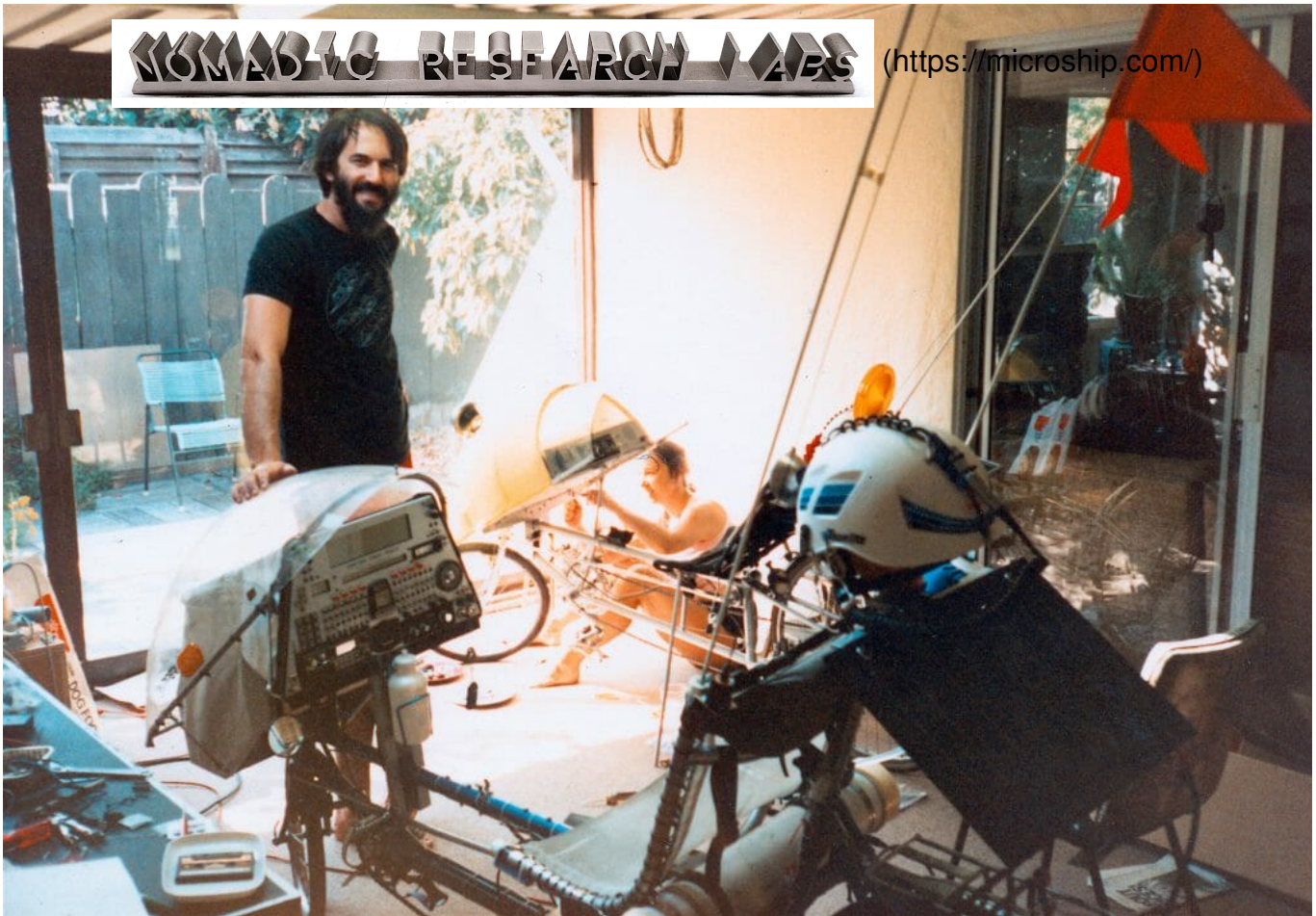
Adrenaline's addicting stuff, isn't it? But unlike most addictions, it's pure delight when the conditions are right and horrifying when they're not. Skydiving, breathless tickling marathons, climbing to Alan's tree fort in the dark, taking a blind corner at 30 in a Vacuum Velocipede — those are OK. Getting cut off by a jerk-piloted dirty white van making a left turn onto Page Mill Road — that's definitely NOT OK. That little buzz of adrenaline does little to offset the chilling awareness of extreme vulnerability, of mortality. Sometimes I get images... a mental slide show of what-ifs that urge me to flee these risky highways and move to something else, something gentle, something like a recumbent kayak or sailboat or even, while we're dreaming, something airborne.

But in the meantime, lacking the requisite megabucks, I'll be pedaling the Megacycle out of Palo Alto in about 2 weeks. The layover has served its purpose; the tires itch violently like a sneeze that won't quite happen and the urge to roll is so compelling that it seems almost hormonal.

And besides, I want to play with my new toys where they're designed to work best — out there on the road where comfort, like a gob of gelato, is rare treat instead of daily routine.

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(<https://microship.com/wp-content/uploads/1987/04/alan-selfridge-house-bike.jpg>)

Maggie and I working on our bikes in the home of Alan Selfridge in Palo Alto.

New toys, yes. There have been a number of techie delights to offset the stresses of my frantic business schedule. One of the major motives of this whole Palo Alto adventure was to get some of the bike's sexier systems working. A few highlights...

Paleo-texting while driving:

- Packet datacomm is working so well that I now view my bike as a mailbox — just like the HP computer. Every time I climb aboard, I sign on and download the messages, which are beginning to roll in from all over the country. On April 22, while I was pedaling to a brown-bag speaking gig at Intellicorp in Mountain View, I communicated digitally with Sourcevoid Dave (http://davehugheslegacy.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=422) while he was also mobile, en route with friends to Monterey, typing in ASCII on the handlebar keyboard as I rode through Palo Alto. A few minutes later, I accessed the satellite wormhole, emerged in Maryland, and left a bulletin-board message for a friend on the East Coast — risking my physical self by typing my way through noontime El Camino**

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træff: the really annoying folks, nothing can stop **the networks now. If a solar-
pc NOMADIC RESEARCH LABS far are we from real-time
pocket mailboxes?**

- The machine now has pneumatic truck horns, powered by a compressed-air tank with adjustable regulator and handlebar pushbutton. I now sound, as well as look, like a Mack Bike. This exciting new potential for acoustic obnoxiousness has already paid off in traffic with that jerk in the van — the kind of guy who bases his respect for a man upon strength, number of tattoos, or loudness. Lacking the first two, I socked him with 140 db of air horns, followed by 130 db of knifing siren and a quick clang of the bell. His shouted curses, rendered feeble, dwindled to a trickle and then disappeared behind a quick, defensive finger gesture.
- The hydraulic brake project, product of Mathauser Engineering and a few late nights with machining wizard Peter Lindener at Stanford, is done. A pair of master cylinders under the seat is actuated by a transfer bar with a proportional coupling to the right hand brake lever. This system, along with the existing disc brake, might even be enough to stop my 1/5-ton biomechanical absurdity before it crushes a stray Toyota or something.
- Maggie has a whole new bike. The Infinity, faithful workhorse that it was, couldn't be adjusted far enough to let her 5'5" body turn the cranks without hyperextension. Her latest sponsor is Life Cycles, the all-recumbent bike shop here in Palo Alto, and the bike itself is a beautiful silver De Felice (<http://www.defeliceenginc.com/about.shtml>), hung with the glitter and sheen of polished aluminum components. As I write, Maggie's in the lab making drilling noises and puzzling over her all-new problems with communications gear, solar panel mounting, packing, cabling, and so on... all of which, for both of us, are about to be further complicated by a pair of lightweight Equinox trailers.
- My new security system is wonderful. Called the UNGO Box and made by Techne of Palo Alto, it senses even the most subtle movement (by watching for flux-density changes in a 40 kHz field around a puddle of mercury). Set to maximum sensitivity, the system can trigger my pocket beeper or the on-board siren when someone sneezes on one of my orange flags or stretches an uneducated finger toward a console switch. With digital remote control of a few bike functions (like speech), my response to an alert can dissuade casual tinkering with no loss of humor.
- The brain-interface unit, built on a Bell helmet substrate, is living up to its name. Linked to the bike by a 12-pin medical-grade Lemo connector and coil cord, the unit provides stereo jacks for my ears, adjustable boom microphone for my mouth, and a halogen lamp over the visor if I want to feel light-headed. And now, I'm designing a swing-down eyepiece for the new helmet optical system — since Color Microimaging Corporation is providing detailed, full-color maps on microfiche (<https://microship.com/microdocumentation-on-the-road-computer-currents/>), We have to do whatever we can to increase our brain's I/O bandwidth, you know... time to re-think that handlebar keyboard...

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And speaking of new magic in the communications world, have you heard about DASnet

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networks? well, i was obviously not the only person thinking about that — it's been done. For information on linking to ARPANET, ATT Mail, BITNET, CompuServe, EIES, EasyLink, MCI, Portal, The Source, Telex, TWICS (Japan), Unison, and UUCP, drop a line to Anna Lange (*old email redacted*).

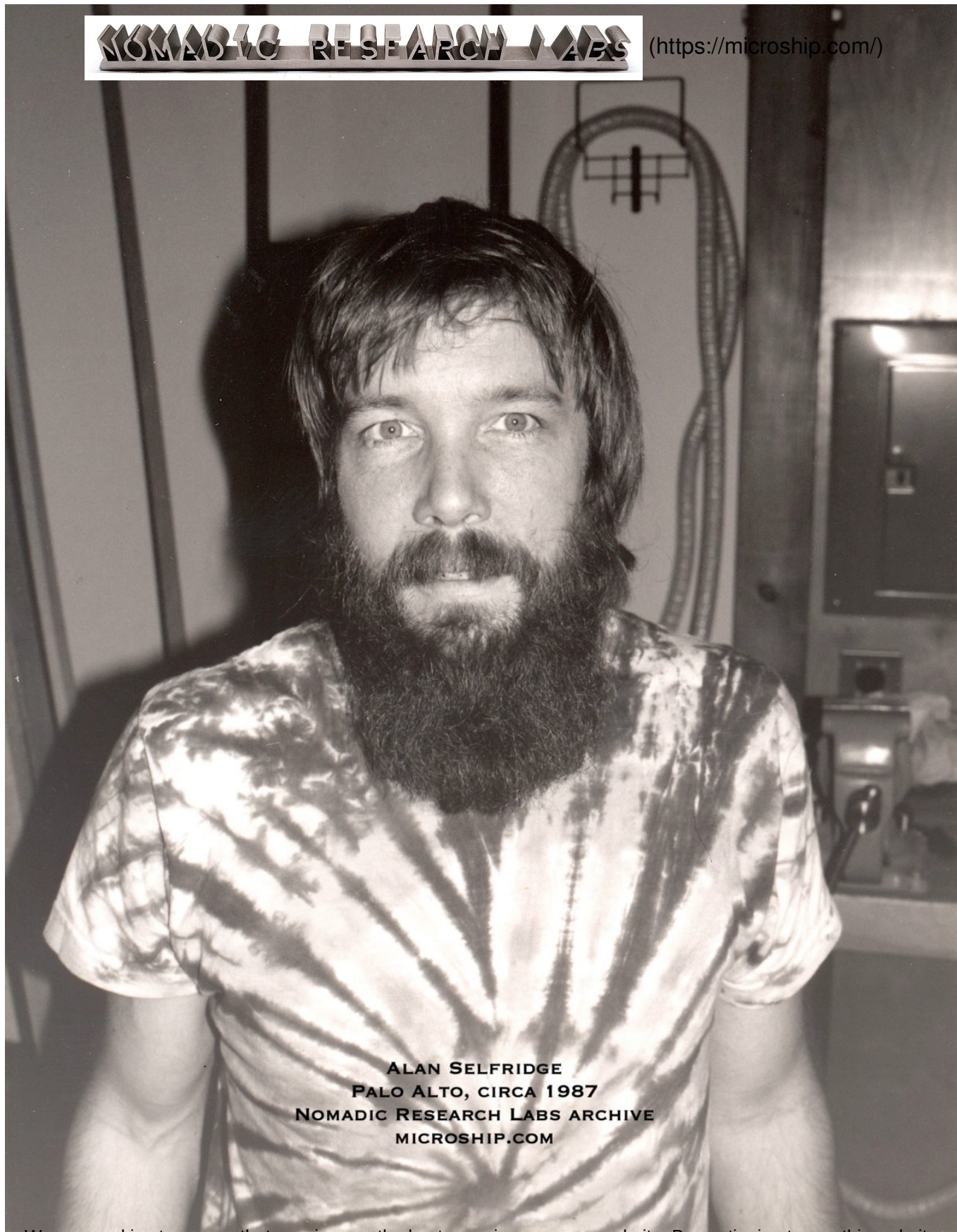
Meanwhile, all this whiz-bang technology aside, what's life like as we struggle through these last twelve rugged Palo Alto days? Well...

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**ALAN SELFRIDGE
PALO ALTO, CIRCA 1987
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The dinners range from world-class Maggie-pizza to creative productions of pumpkin seeds,

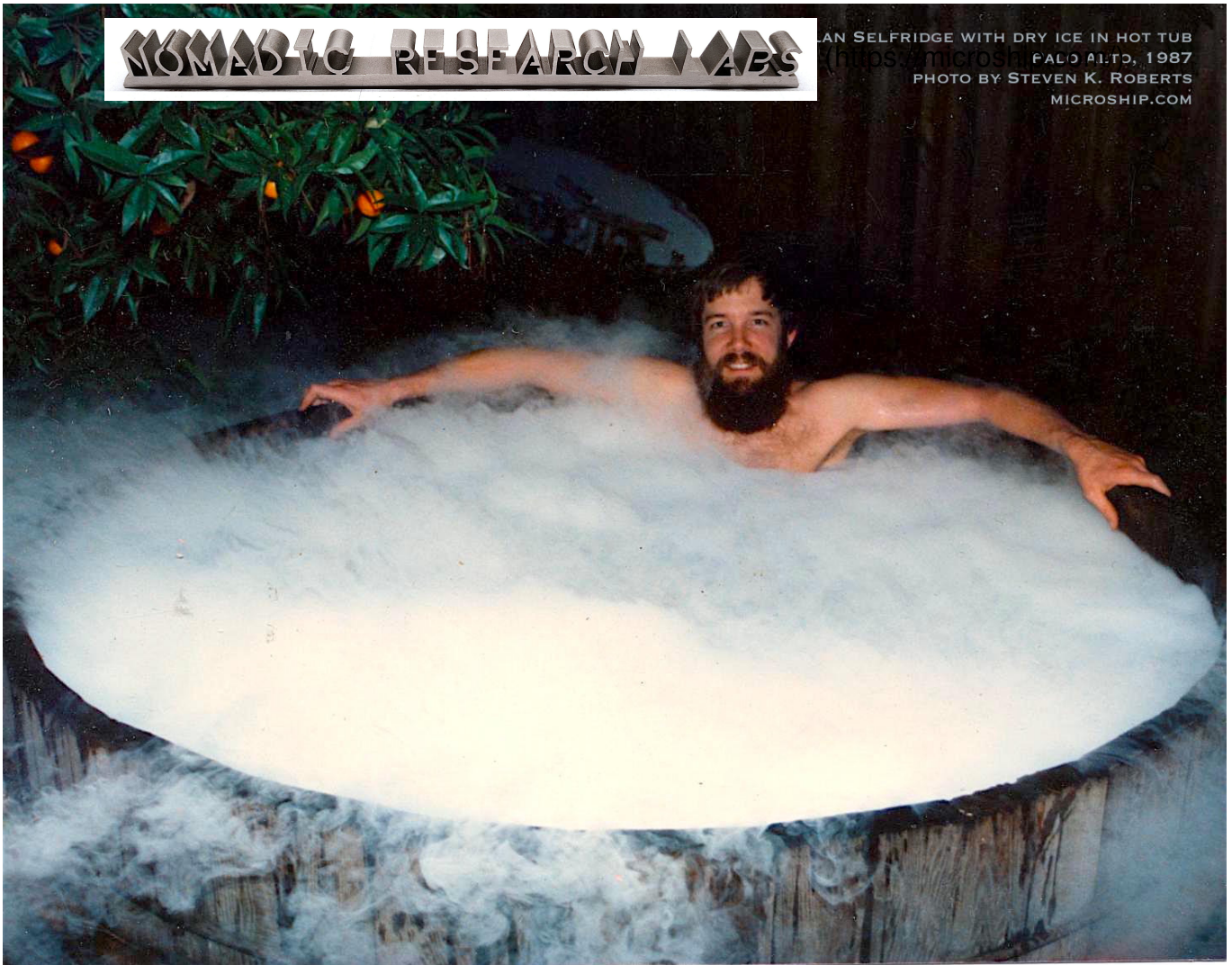
roadside vegetation and fish heads — the exiled Congolese drummer Ma Boukaka (https://microship.com/kate-194) to my right spitting eyeballs <u>on</u> the plate, Maggie to my left helping herself to more flowers. Drinks run the gamut from exotic cognacs to homemade *Kahlúa*, a tasty substance that imposes its own curfew. Strangely confused conversations in the bike room continue for two or three minutes before we suddenly realize that I'm talking about interrupt logic and Maggie's discussing aluminum fairing mounts. Daily show-n-tell jaunts throughout the peninsula are exhausting but profitable (at least in "soft dollars"). KLR5 is on the radio — the area's new station dedicated to that wonderful and yet-unnamed breed of music variously referred to as new age, Windham Hill (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windham_Hill_Records), space, alternative, and yuppie muzak. Traffic roars by on Middlefield, now and again syncopated by the thundering bass of an East Palo Alto cruise-mobile. The perennial clutter is slowly getting sorted into boxes and disk files. There are far more amazing new friends and corresponding social opportunities than I can possibly keep organized in one overloaded wetware infosystem. And as always, free moments are filled by the detailed planning and fantasizing that precedes travel.

For this, I suddenly realize, is more the beginning of trip 3 than the continuation of trip 2.

So here we go again... drawing back the bow, steadying the breath, slowing the heartbeat, relaxing, sharpening the focus until the target point turns inside-out and becomes infinite space...

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ALAN SELFRIDGE WITH DRY ICE IN HOT TUB
 https://microship.com/first-text-while-driving/
 PALO ALTO, 1987
 PHOTO BY STEVEN K. ROBERTS
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Our wonderful and brilliant host during this epoch... the late Alan Selfridge. I miss his sparkling mind. One day he brought home some dry ice for the redwood hot tub in his back yard.

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