James Griesmer 1929–2011

John Fitch

The recent death of James (Jim) Griesmer marks the passing of one of the historically important foundations of computer algebra, and the loss of a gentleman.

After studying at Notre Dame and Princeton, where he earned his PhD in game theory he joined IBM for whom he worked for 35 years in a number of areas including error-correcting codes and expert systems.

Importantly for computer algebra, Jim was the initiator of the Scratchpad/1 project at IBM Thomas J. Watson Research Center. By asking for the work-in-progress from MIT, Stanford/Utah and others the team crafted a new synthesis of the ideas of 1970 into a new innovative system. The original idea was for this system to be distributed back to the contributors – the early days may not have used words like Open-Source or Free, but that was the ethos.

I first met Jim when he visited us in Cambridge (England) in 1970, apparently to see if there really was an algebra group there. Our approach differed significantly from the LISP-based Scratchpad system, and so we had no code to contribute; but we had a few happy (and sunny) days discussing computer algebra, and he introduced us to the SIGSAM, and suggested we write papers for the upcoming SYMSAC/2 conference in Los Angeles.

From left to right: Audrey Fitch, John Fitch, Jim Griesmer, Steve Bourne.

We next met at that conference, where the character of Jim was noticeable, especially in handling the difficult questions about LISP from McCarthy! His calm measured response was a master-class in diplomacy. After SYMSAC/2 we visited Jim who was on sabbatical at UCB, and he showed us the sights [see photograph of Jim, Steve Bourne, myself and my wife, taken by John Horton]

The relationship between the Scratchpad team (Jim Griesmer, Dick Jenks, Fred Blair, and later David Yun) at IBM and the Cambridge team continued with research fellowships for both Arthur Norman and James Davenport; Jim was always there as a fixed point.

One of my colleagues adds that Jim also convinced him that there was such a concept as a “good manager” at a stage (which in fact tends to persist) where his basic expectation was that “management” was the “them” and liable to be at best obstructive. Another colleague noted that Jim was a tool-builder who was genuinely interested in tool-users.

I have concentrated on my personal recollections, but there were other sides to the man. I know that he was active in charity and good works, but I must leave those aspects to others to describe. The lasting impression is that of kindness and interest – a gentleman.

James Griesmer was born in Cleveland, OH on Dec. 18, 1929. He passed away on Dec. 20, 2011 and resided in Decatur, GA.