

DEPARTMENT: EVENTS AND SIGHTINGS

Obituary for James Pelkey

James Lee Pelkey was a unique combination of entrepreneur, investor, and historian at a pivotal time in the evolution of early networking technologies. A business executive who led both hardware and software startups and later managed funds investing in early networking startups, Pelkey turned a passion for discovering emerging markets for new technologies into a lifelong pursuit of documenting the early history of computer communications. He died on February 16 on his home island of Maui, Hawaii at the age of 77.

Many may know Jim from the oral history collection at CHM that bears his name. These interviews are a remarkable resource, both because they document the perspectives of many leading Internet pioneers—J. C. R. Licklider, Vinton Cerf, Robert Kahn, Paul Baran, Louis Pouzin, Robert Metcalfe, Jon Postel, and others—and because Pelkey conducted these interviews in the late 1980s, before the social and commercial significance of their work was well-understood.

Born in Saranac Lake, New York in 1946, Jim graduated from Saranac Lake High School in 1964. He attended Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, graduating with a BS in mechanical engineering in 1968. The following year he attended Harvard Business School, receiving his MBA in 1970.

After moving to San Francisco, Jim worked as a financial director for Sunset Designs, eventually helping the company launch operations in Canada, England, and France. He served as president of Digital Sound and later Sorcim before joining Montgomery Securities in 1984 to oversee its venture capital operations, becoming a general partner in 1985. From 1990 to 1992, he served as chairman of the Santa Fe Institute. He later held board positions with Prediction Company and Blue Sky Research.



It was during his time at Montgomery Securities that he conducted the series of 85 interviews of engineers, academics, government regulators, and startup founders in the growing fields of data communications and computer networking. These interviews formed the basis of a decades-long project to document the birth of new industries critical to the evolution of the Internet.

Initially published online in 2009, Jim's website, HistoryofComputerCommunications.info, is an extraordinary resource: it has links to the interview transcripts, as well as Jim's own personal story and his analysis—in the shape of hundreds of hypertext pages—of the formative years of computer communications. The site includes some valuable and underutilized primary sources, such as market research about the companies that made modems, routers, and other devices that facilitated computer communication.

Jim's work was published by ACM Press in 2022, co-authored by Andrew L. Russell and Loring G. Robbins, under the title *Circuits, Packets, and Protocols: Entrepreneurs and Computer Communications, 1968–1988*.

It was Jim's sincere wish that scholars in computing, computer history, business, and related fields would grapple with his work and the underlying source material, perhaps draw different conclusions, and

uses the work to inform teaching and knowledge about entrepreneurship, market dynamics, and technological change in the late 20th century and beyond
Publications by James Pelkey:

1. *Circuits, Packets, and Protocols: Entrepreneurs and Computer Communications, 1968–1988* (ACM Press, 2022), <https://circuitspacketsandprotocols.com/>.
2. "The business of internetworking: Standards, start-ups, and network effects" *Business History Review* 96.1, Spring 2022, pp 109–144.

3. "The do-or-die moments that determined the fate of the Internet," *IEEE Spectrum*, May, 2023, <https://spectrum.ieee.org/computer-networking>.

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