The New York Times/Rick Friedman

Personal computer users: Jonathan Rotenberg, president of the Boston Computer Society, at the society's office. The organization is about to celebrate its 10th birthday.

Boston Computers: A Users' Decade

Special to The New York Times

BOSTON, Jan. 10 — Jonathan Rotenberg, president of the Boston Computer Society, tells a story about the day he met Steven Jobs, co-founder of Apple Computer. They were riding in a cab in Boston when Mr. Jobs abruptly warned that the computer society would not survive another few years.

Mr. Rotenberg asked why.

"Jobs said," Mr. Rotenberg recalled, "'We're making computers as easy to use as clothes dryers. And have you ever heard of a Maytag users group?'"

"Well, that was 1981," Mr. Rotenberg adds. "Steve Jobs was soon out of a job, but the B.C.S. is doing just fine."

Mr. Jobs is now head of another computer concern. As for the Boston Computer Society, it is about to celebrate its 10th birthday.

The organization, whose first meeting in February 1977 attracted only two other people, is now the largest group of personal computer users in the world, with 22,100 members in all, from every state and 40 countries.

Getting to Know Your Computer

"The main thing they're famous for is education," said Bill Machrone, editor of PC Magazine. "They've done a superb job of telling people what they can do with their computers."

Leslie Squires, a member who was heading toward a career in curriculum with helping him learn the skills necessary to open a database consulting firm, which he now heads in Wellesley, Mass.

"At the B.C.S. I offered rather than took classes," he said. "What I did, which speaks to the spirit of volunteerism at the B.C.S., was put myself in a position where I'd have to learn to stay ahead of people at clinics. I volunteered my way to an education in computers, and I'm not alone."

Mr. Squires eventually headed one of the society's special-interest groups, for entrepreneurs and consultants, which became a recruiting grounds for several businesses. "For about a year this guy from Data General's training department would attend every monthly meeting and stand at the end and announce he was looking for technical writers or whatever," said Mr. Squires, who joined in 1982. "Over the year he took 8 or 10 people, and he was just one of several recruiters who did that."

One was Michael Sand, a society member who is developing a national museum for the Boy Scouts of America with the help of a project manager recruited through an ad in the B.C.S. magazine. Mr. Sand also credits the society with helping to create a network of computers and printers for his office. "It's saved us the dead ends and blind alleys of learning time," he said.

At the center of the society's operations is its headquarters in the heart of Boston's Government Center, housing its library and pool of about 20 personal computers. Both hardware and software are available for members, who pay nominal yearly fees, as is its collection of books and magazines. Moreover, the society offers members more than 3,000 free computer programs in the public domain, which it says makes it the largest distributor in the nation.

There is also a bimonthly magazine and monthly newsletter, user hot lines, electronic bulletin boards, museum discounts and numerous workshops, including clinics in word-processing and computer-use for beginners. Many are run by the 47 special interest groups it has spawned, whose members meet to learn about anything from devices for the disabled to the products of individual manufacturers and how grade-school students can use computers. Cosmopolitan magazine even declared the society's entrepreneur group a great place to meet men.

Feast for Manufacturers

The society's members are also prized by manufacturers, for whom they represent eager buyers.

"Apple spent $60,000 to introduce its original Mac here," Mr. Rotenberg said. "It was pure Hollywood, a multimedia spectacle. They flew in an L.A. production crew, which spent two days wiring the hall, erecting screens and

Delaware Town Plans Raffle

ELSMERE, Del., Jan. 10 (AP) — The Town Council will try to solve its budget problems with a raffle in which half the pot goes to the winner and half to Elsmere's general fund. Robert McWilliams, the town manager, said he expected the first drawing to generate $200 to $400. The town, whose budget for 1987 is $925,000, just lost $125,000 through the elimination of the Federal revenue sharing program.

setting up the sound system. The whole thing was elaborately choreographed, with Steven Jobs walking onto the stage, carrying a black bag that he placed on a pedestal. The audience was very hushed. He pulled the Mac from the bag, stood back, and the Mac said, 'Hello.' The audience went nuts."

The society was founded by Mr. Rotenberg in 1977, when he was "a 13-year-old ninth-grader with braces."

"The trouble was that there were no users' groups, and all the publications were terribly technical," he said. A Boston University radio talk show host, who shared his curiosity about computers, suggested he start his own users' group.

"The first meeting was in the library of the Commonwealth School," Mr. Rotenberg recalls. "Only two others were there, one of them by accident. He just wanted to use the library."

Growth of Computer Industry

From there the society's rise paralleled the growth of the personal computer industry, he said, and by providing a wide variety of services, the group attracted a wide range of people.

"Many other user groups are narrowly focused and small," said Katie Paine, a former executive in San Francisco for Hewlett-Packard. "That's why the Bay Area has nothing like it. There are many more groups, but all splintered."

The society plans to mark its 10th anniversary with two general meetings, in January and February, and a party in May.

As for the future, the society's agenda calls for the creation this summer of an exhibition at the Boston Computer Museum. If funds can be raised, Mr. Rotenberg said he would like that to lead to a traveling exhibition.

He added: "We're also planning to focus on development of more services for members overseas and on more affiliates overseas, and we're about to launch a business-oriented users group, which could become the largest subgroup in the B.C.S."

Nevertheless, people in the industry say the society has shortcomings, and point particularly to its lack of consumer advocacy. "We're still in the serious discussion phase about how far and in what direction we want to go with advocacy," Mr. Rotenberg said.