



Posthumous memoir offers advice, anecdotes

Mass High Tech: The Journal of New England Technology - March 2, 2007

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If you were involved in the high tech industry during the years when Adolf F. "Sonny" Monosson was involved -- primarily in the 1970s and 1980s -- odds are good you'll have some recollection of his name and of his signature bow tie. And even if you never encountered Sonny in person (or vicariously through a newsletter, photograph or magazine article), you've now got a second chance, thanks to the posthumous publication of his new book.

Although provided with a dry title, "Turning Problems into Profit -- and Other Life Lessons," this book is a rollicking memoir from a man who was, by all accounts, an original. However, to suggest that "Turning Problems into Profit" is not also a business book would be a disservice.

Indeed, Monosson (who died in 2003 at 77) was an MIT-trained engineer and a Harvard Business School graduate who launched a dozen businesses spanning several industries. The book speaks to the values that underlie a life and to the idea that business is more art than science.

His public arrival in the computer industry by way of a sandwich board came long after he got his start in business working for his father's company, a Boston men's clothing manufacturer. But Monosson, with a restless intellect and plenty of ambition, found himself drawn to other endeavors, leaving the clothing industry to start Berkeley Finance Co., a provider of commercial credit. That was when Monosson was about 30 years old, in the mid-1950s.

In the 1960s and 1970s, he really got the serial-entrepreneur bug. He and a partner launched a successful IT research and consulting business in 1968, which provided an excuse to learn more about the still-young industry and led him to build a series of businesses for leasing and time-sharing computers. But it was through an accident of fate that led to his name becoming synonymous with used computers.

Frustrated with unsuccessful efforts to resell the PDP-10 (acquired through a credit deal gone bad), Monosson's partner suggested facetiously that he wear an advertising signboard at the 1969 Spring Joint Computer Convention in Atlantic City. Accompanied by his wife, who handed out fliers, Monosson did just that -- causing mayhem and attracting crowds and the interest of local police. After some "negotiation" (a Monosson specialty), he avoided arrest and was allowed to continue.

His reputation as a showman was sealed and, in an industry full of self-important grandees, his image as the genial, bow-tied discounteer was born.

The book also contains tales of Sonny as gumshoe, helping to bust up a misappropriated computer-parts business; Sonny ferreting out government waste; Sonny colluding with Boston University to remake Kenmore Square; Sonny (as a teenager) helping to smuggle guns to the infant state of Israel, and others.

Perhaps the only negative is the sometimes variable quality of the writing. Monosson himself confessed to being a failure at English in school (though his later success as a writer would seem to refute this judgment). What's more, the book was completed with the assistance of writer Florella Orowan, but not until after Monosson's death. So there are a fair number of instances of facts and dates that don't align quite right, as well as misused or missing words. Still, such issues are to be expected in an independently published book. And they scarcely reduce the book's value or readability.

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