COMPUTER CORNER No. 9, March 1994 (Untitled)

Article 9 in this series deals with information. Information is power, so we have all heard, and the more I work with computers, the more I believe it! Information will let you build a new computer, upgrade an old one, revive a hard drive that has died, manage memory, and cause your machine to run the way YOU want it to. Where does this information come from? Simple. Books. However, you can waste a lot of money on computer books unless you know which ones to choose. That's the purpose of this article - to help you get the most for your information dollar.

Lets divide the world of computer information and computer books into two areas, software and hardware. Software is the programming part of the field, dealing with operating systems (like DOS 5 or DOS 6) and application programs (like your word processing program, or the utility you use to set the time in your machine when it boots up). Hardware, of course, deals with the stuff you add or remove with a screwdriver, or soldering iron. OK, what should you have on your bookshelf?

EVERY ham has (or should have) a late model edition of the ARRL Handbook on their shelf. There is just nothing that can compare with this magnificent volume, now in its 70th edition. By the same token, in the software area, there is nothing that can compare with the PC Magazine DOS 6 Techniques and Utilities (1993), written by master author Jeff Prosise. It will cost you about $40, but it is well worth the money and it comes with a batch of useful utility programs (on floppy disk, included with the book). EVERY ham that uses computers should have this book on hand. If you use DOS 5 instead of DOS 6, then the previous edition (DOS 5 Techniques and Utilities) by the same author is your target. There are a couple of other DOS books out by other authors, and they may be useful, but they do not measure up to the Prosise "bible". The 1993 edition is over 1,000 pages long.

Hardware is a little different, in that I have two different books to recommend to you. The first is sort of the "bible" in the field if you ever delve into the innards of your machine. Scott Mueller's, Upgrading and Repairing PCs, 2nd edition (1992, Que Corporation, $36), is clearly the best in the field. It is a bit heavy on true IBM machines and a bit light on IBM compatibles, but that does not detract from its total usefulness. Weighing in at nearly 1300 pages, it contains sections on software and hardware troubleshooting, as well as a terrific Reference Information section. Need to find out the number of cylinders, heads, sectors and so forth for a Fujitsu M2611T drive? You can find it on p. 1076. Mr. Mueller is working on the 3rd edition right now, and if you care to wait until it shows up at your bookseller, you can look for his reference to the paper that AA9W and I wrote on the effects of airport X-rays on data stored on floppy disks.

The other hardware "bible" is Mark Minasi's, The Complete PC Upgrade and Maintenance Guide, 2nd edition (1993, Sybex, Inc., $30). This is a real "how to" manual with practical tips and techniques you will find nowhere else. For example, random paging turns up these topics: "How do you find the bad board? Memory chip markings. Upgrading the power supply. Configuring Western Digital XT-type controllers. Troubleshooting dot matrix and laser printers. Reading memory error messages. Troubleshooting steps. General PC disassembly advice." Sound interesting? I just finished attending a two-day seminar on Advanced Upgrading and Repairing of PCs run by Mr. Minasi's company, and I can assure you that he and his folks know their stuff. A lot of their tips are in the book; it is a jewel.

There you have it. I never said information was cheap, and these 3 tomes will set you back over $100. However, I can assure you that these 3 books will cover a large proportion of the software and hardware information you will need to manage and repair your new XT through 286/386/486 machine. In closing, let me remark that prices continue to drop in the used market. XTs with a full 640k of memory are selling in the $50 range. I purchased a 386SX motherboard with 2 megabytes of memory in a mini-tower case with 230 watt power supply for $125 in August 1993. Used 40-megabyte hard drives are running in the $25 range, $50 for IDE types. The bargains are out there ... go find 'em!