

January, 2000

Editor's View

How (Not) to Prepare for Y2K

A hurricane teaches some valuable lessons.

I got an unexpected practice run for January 1, 2000 in September. Not on the over-hyped 9/9/99, but a week later when Hurricane Floyd (by then a tropical storm) hit the Philadelphia area. The night before the storm was due, I dutifully performed a full, rather than incremental, backup of my primary computer and charged my notebook batteries. I wanted to be ready to keep working even if we lost power, something my home (where my office is located) tends to do even in minor storms.

My backup device is an external Jaz drive. I use WinZip to perform backup. Low-tech, but simple and effective. My plan was that, once the power went down, I'd use the 10 minutes or so granted me by my UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supply) to copy the files I'd been working on since morning onto either the Jaz or a floppy. Then I'd shut down the big machine in an orderly way and move over to the notebook. I could copy everything I needed from the Jaz to the notebook and keep at it. When I relayed all this to my husband, he asked the \$100,000 question: "But how will you power the Jaz drive?" Oops.

So, in the morning, with the storm not yet too bad, I figured I'd get to work on the desktop and copy all files onto the notebook simultaneously. Remember what they say about the best-laid plans of mice and men. I was just settling in at my desk about 7:30 A.M. when, you guessed it, power went out. I called a friend nearby and her power was still on. I packed up the notebook, the Jaz drive, and some paperwork and settled in at her house.

Naturally, by the time I'd copied all the backup files I needed onto the notebook, the power at my house was restored and I was able to go back and work on my production machine. However, throughout the rest of that stormy day, I regularly copied the files I was working on onto a floppy so that, should we lose power again, I'd be ready to move right back onto the notebook. Of course, our power never did go out again.

We were fortunate in that a two-hour power outage was all that Floyd had in mind for my family. The friend who took me in ended up spending more than three days without power. Others in our area had devastating flooding. A number lost their lives.

What the experience taught me is how to get ready for January 1, 2000. While I don't expect huge catastrophes, I'm not planning to go out. (Actually, we rarely go out on New Year's Eve. We prefer to entertain at home; we don't trust the other drivers.)

I actually don't expect much impact here in the U.S. I think most large businesses and utilities have things under control, as do smaller business that have been paying attention. (As I write this, I've just finished Y2K testing for one client's payroll system, originally written in FoxBase+, which for sound reasons we've decided not to replace.) I think the largest domestic problems will be for individuals and for small businesses

who've simply chosen not to listen to the warnings for the last few years. (If you still have FoxPro 2.x Y2K work to resolve, these FoxPro Advisor issues should help you: 6/99, 4/99, 9/98, 3/98.)

I have more concerns on the international front, especially in the third world and in places like the former Soviet republics. Overall, though, I suspect that the biggest problem on January 1, 2000, will be overloading of telephone lines as people call each other to find out whether they're experiencing Y2K problems.

We also won't see all the Y2K problems just on January 1. Some are already occurring. I read recently of one state issuing auto registrations for "horseless carriages," the designation they normally use for antique cars—this time, those with brand-new cars got it, too.

Other problems may not surface until well into the new year; February 29 is likely to cause its own set of problems. (See my August Editor's View for the reasons.) Other problems will arise as different applications run into different kinds of rollovers. Nonetheless, I still think that overall, most of them will be like the "horseless carriage" registrations—annoying, but not life-threatening or business-destroying.

My family won't be stockpiling six months of canned food and bottled water, but just in case I'm wrong, we will treat this as though a blizzard (or a hurricane) is coming. We'll make sure to have plenty of food, cash, and other essentials on hand.

On the computer front, we'll do a full (not incremental) back-up of each machine before we shut down on December 31, 1999. I'll be sure to charge my notebook batteries and put any files I want to have available onto my notebook before I get ready for my New Year's guests.

Floyd also reminded me that life is short and you don't know when real danger is coming. While television and the Internet brought the world into our family rooms, it's different when the stories of sadness and courage and the pictures of people cleaning up and trying to move on with their lives come from towns around the corner.

Thanks, Floyd, for some important lessons.