Cheerio to UNIX, cereal giant says

by Hark Halper -- CW Staff

Minneapolis -- General Mills, Inc.'s distribution group has a true computer confession: It tried Unix, but it did not inhale.

The $7.2 billion cereal giant's open system flirtation lasted all of a few months in early 1991, after the company installed a Hewlett-Packard Co. 9000 minicomputer running HP's Unix implementation, HP/UX, at its West Chicago, Ill., plant.

It did not take long for General Mills, based here, to return to its HP MPE senses, a recovery enabled in part by what the company discovered was the ease of portability between HP/UX and the proprietary MPE/IX operating system.

"There's a lot of panacea thought today that says you have to have Unix," said Mike Meinz, principal technical consultant in General Mills' IS group. "You don't have to have Unix."

The company's Unix project was a pilot for what would have been a series of HP/UX installations running warehouse management software at nine General Mills distribution centers and eight plants around the country.

But the Unix euphoria, if it ever set in at all, never spread beyond West Chicago. Within months, General Mills had pulled the plug on the 9000 and ported the warehousing software over to the MPE/IX operating system running on a score of proprietary HP 3000 minicomputers. MPE/IX is the latest release of HP's proprietary operating system. It is compliant with the government's Posix open systems standard.

The move was logical because General Mills was already well-outfitted with HP 3000s. It had 21 of them spread among its data center in Minneapolis and its plants and was about to begin the process of migrating them from HP's older versions to new models build on HP's Precision Architecture microprocessor.

This raises the question of why General Mills turned on to Unix and the 9000 in the first place.

According to Meinz, the autonomous distributions division chose Unix because its preferred warehousing software -- an application provided by a small third-party vendor -- was available only for Unix platforms.

Good warehouse management software can provide a strategic advantage in the packaged food industry, where factors such as shelf life and inventory control affect a company's fortunes. The distribution division wanted nothing less than what it considered the best software and was willing to change platforms to get it, Meinz noted.

Managers in the distribution operations farmed out maintenance of the program to the vendor but came to the sobering realization that, given General Mills' existing HP 3000 orientation, a 3000 implementation might be more prudent -- especially because, as Meinz noted, the folks in distribution "weren't happy with the [vendor's] bills."

The distribution group turned to the IS group to see what could be done internally. IS' answer was to port the warehousing software to MPE/IX.

IN ONE-THIRD THE TIME

What followed became a testimonial to MPE's portability. Meinz said he had anticipated the porting project would take six months, but it took only two. And much of that time was spent developing enhancements to the existing program rather that actually porting to it. General Mills had purchased the source code when it bought the software.

According to Meinz, the port was a cinch because the software vendor's program is based on Oracle Corp.'s database server software. As such, it used many of the same building blocks in Oracles MPE port, like the C programming language and the SQL Forms development environment.

Meinz said the SQL Forms portion required no recompiling, and the C language portion required only a simple recompile process.