Cambridge museum aims to preserve digital history…Boston Globe, Aug 31,2013

Northeastern University lecturer Mary Hopper thinks she's found the perfect way to recycle 30-year-old computers: Switch them on, boot them up, and use them to teach a new generation about the history of digital technology.

"You can't do innovation without an idea of what's come before," said Hopper, as she showed off archaic Apple II computers, and laptops loaded with long-obsolete versions of Microsoft Corp.'s Windows operating system. Students entering computer science "have no clue what all this stuff is," she said.

Hopper's new venture, Digital Den, aims to provide a hands-on introduction to personal computing history. It's a remarkable collection of hardware and software, ranging from late-1970s desktop computers to the latest Xbox 360 game console. For now, all the gear is wedged into a cramped storage room in a Cambridge warehouse, but Hopper plans to raise money through the online crowdfunding service Indiegogo to pay for larger quarters and a larger collection of classic machines.

A lot of computing history was made in Greater Boston. The Cambridge company Bolt, Beranek, and Newman — now part of Raytheon Co. — pioneered the architecture of the Internet; the now-defunct Digital Equipment Corp. of Maynard developed the first minicomputers. For decades, the Boston area was home to a host of major computer firms, including Digital, Wang Laboratories, and Data General.

In 1979, Digital opened a museum of computing in Marlborough. In 1984, the Computer Museum opened on Museum Wharf in Boston, where it would remain for 15 years. But as the region's once-mighty computer companies began to fade, support for the museum also dwindled. In 1999, most of the collection was moved to the Computer History Museum in California's Silicon Valley, and the local museum merged with the Boston Museum of Science.

Hopper said it's time to revive a local computer museum. She'll begin with her personal collection of gear, acquired over decades at her own expense.

In addition, the Rhode Island Computer Museum in North Kingston, R.I., has offered to share valuable items from its collection. "If we have extras, we'll give them to her," curator Dan Berman said. "If not, we'll put them on loan."

A switched-off computer isn't all that interesting to look at, so Hopper plans on a museum in which visitors can actually use the exhibits. "Everything in here is capable of working," she said.

YOON S. BYUN / GLOBE STAFF

Mary Hopper said she was inspired by the Living Computer Museum in Seattle, which is backed by Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen.

Hopper was inspired by the Living Computer Museum in Seattle. Backed by Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen, the Seattle museum features a collection of massive computers like the 360, which made IBM Corp. the world's dominant computer firm from the 1960s to the 1980s. These giant machines still work.

"When they see the old disks spin at 2,500 rpm and they see the old tapes spin, it's fascinating," said the museum's business manager Bob Barnett.

In the same way, Hopper hopes to fascinate visitors by letting them play games originally created for the Apple II or the classic IBM Personal Computer.

It's an open question whether visitors will flock to a museum full of outdated computer gear. "Collections of old computers are not as interesting as old airplanes," said Paul Ceruzzi, chairman of the space history division at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air & Space Museum in Washington, and author of a history of computing. His own museum has a major collection of computer hardware, but there's been little interest in putting it on display, Ceruzzi said.

But Hopper believes it's vital to build a museum to preserve Boston's digital heritage. "If we don't do this," she said, "nobody will."

The Digital Den is located at 134 Massachusetts Ave. in Cambridge. It will be open to the public through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., and will be closed on Labor Day.

Hiawatha Bray can be reached at bray@globe.com.