

Meanwhile down in Texas, the guys in the Legion of Doom are part of the mad rush of excited hackers who all jump onto one open phone line at once, crowding into a conversation like it's a rush-hour subway. Chris (aka Erik Bloodaxe) and a friend named Scott Chasin have been friends since the mid-1980s, when they both were coincidentally logged onto a Midwestern-based under-ground BBS called World of Kryton. Scott and Chris discovered they had a lot in common: both were babies conceived on the cusp of the 1970s, then raised in the secure style afforded the white middle class in Texas. They share the same hobbies: both do conference bridges, as they call them.

The phone line used by the Legion of Doom belongs to - well, let's say it has been temporarily liberated from a local phone company, allowing anarchic hackers to engage in huge transcontinental conference calls that bridge across this city, and through that state, as one kid after another gets onto the line. If you are on the line, and you have three-way calling on your phone, you can invite a friend to join the conference call, too. Simply hit the flash button that disconnects a call, then call your friend, then flash again. Your friend is three-wayed in now. And if he had three-way calling, he could recruit yet another caller to the conference.

These daisy-chains last for hours, for days, for marathon amounts of time that adults can't even imagine. There is so much to say. Bridges are a great way to get acquainted. You can take a tour of the world on a bridge, talking to one hacker in Holland at the same time you converse with somebody in New York City. In fact, a couple of mysterious New York newcomers named Corrupt and Outlaw brushed up against Texas kids pretty often during conferences. Chris and Scott have never actually met the New York boys, but they've heard of them. Vaguely. They've heard that Corrupt and Outlaw come from a place they dismiss as the "inner-city ghetto," but the New York boys seem to know their stuff.

One night in 1990, on a bridge, about five or six hackers - all kids from Texas, you understand - are hanging out on the line. What are they talking about? Random stuff. Chris isn't on, or so he later claims. Scott is on. Suddenly, another voice calls in to the conference, joins the group in midsentence. The unknown newcomer does not have an accent common to these parts.

"Yo, dis is Dope Fiend from MOD," the newcomer says in distinctly non-white, non-middle class, non-Texan inflection.

One of the Texans (who knows who?) takes umbrage.

"Get that nigger off the line!"

The newcomer is silent.

In fact, the whole conference bridge is suddenly silent, all the chattering boys brought up hard and cold against the implacable word. You might as well have slapped their faces. Interminable seconds pass. Who wants to fill that void?

That's it. As simple as uttering one ugly word. The racial epithet instantaneously moves northward over hundreds of miles of cable, ringing in the ear of John Lee, who sits at his Commie 64 in his Brooklyn bedroom way at the other end of the line.

That word hits John like a billy club.

"Get that nigger off the line!"

Then the newcomer speaks with a different accent, and the words he says to the white boys from Texas are these: "Hi. This is Corrupt."

Who had bleated that word? It's immaterial at this point; nothing will ever be the same again. Not for Chris and Scott, not for the boys from MOD, not for the loose-knit community that makes up the hacker underground.

With that one word, war has been declared.

Chris Goggans is John Lee's enemy - will be forever. But at this point in mid-1990 and after the fateful confrontation, John doesn't even know his nemesis by the name "Chris." He just knows Erik Bloodaxe.

But John has decided to make his enemy's life miserable. So first John must learn Erik Bloodaxe's real name. Chris is so notorious in the underground that it doesn't take John long to get the information he needs.

And it's a good thing, since you can't exactly call directory assistance in Texas and ask for a listing for a resident named Bloodaxe, as in "axe" with an "e." So John bypasses directory assistance altogether. Instead he calls a Southwestern Bell computer, from there logs on to a switch and simply looks up Chris's phone number for the three-bedroom, suburban-type house he was renting in north Austin.

Then the calls start.

Sometimes John uses his street accent to harass Chris. The phone calls are constant. It doesn't help to hang up. The receiver is barely down before the phone rings again. And again. And again. Chris has to take it off the hook, and leave it off the hook for hours. Sometimes, when they prank Chris, the callers say, "Here, talk to your friend," and then before Chris can hang up, he hears a click, and then Scott is on the line, too, three-wayed into the call against his will, and he's saying, "Hello? Hello? Who is this?"

In Chris's mind, this type of harassment definitely falls into the category of Behavior That Is Unacceptable. It's the kind of harassment he could help prevent, in fact, if he were to open his own computer security firm. He's had the idea for such a company for a long time, but now the plan starts really taking shape.

He and Scott talk about the situation a lot, and they even come up with a name for the company they want to create. Comsec Data Security is the full, stuffy name, but neither of them ever think of it in that formal way. For Chris and Scott, the venture would always simply be known by a shortened name, Comsec.

One day during the winter of 1990, Chris gets hold of a copy of The History of MOD, the "phile" written by Eli to commemorate the birth of MOD. Chris feels he has been teased and provoked enough; the MOD boys have logged into the Southwestern Bell switch that controls his phone service and switched his long-distance carrier from Sprint to AT&T. Chris doesn't know this has happened until he tries to dial long-distance. He doesn't hear the familiar click. So then, of course, he has to call up the phone company. Try explaining the situation to a clerk in the business office, and you'll know why he's so annoyed.

Chris figures that John is the one who switched his long-distance carrier on him. He also believes, incorrectly, that John is the author of a manifesto the northern boys call The History of MOD. So Chris gets hold of the Boswellian tale and decides to pull a little mischief.

Chris has an old computer program that will translate any file into a new "language." When he feeds The History of MOD to the program, out pops a "jived" version of the document. The translation program simply searches for certain words or word forms, and replaces them with others.

In goes the original language: "In the early part of 1987, there were numerous amounts of busts in the US and in New York in particular...." Out comes, "In de early part uh 1987, dere wuz numerous amonts uh busts in de US and in New Yo'k in particular...."

Using the jive program is the electronic equivalent of appearing in blackface - a crude, minstrel show in cyberspace: "Some nigga' name Co'rupt, havin' been real active befo'e, duzn't gots' some so'kin' computa' anymo'e and so ... sheeit, duh."

Chris doesn't consider himself a racist. He has black friends at work, he says. Ask him why he jived The History of MOD: he says it just seemed funny. Hilarious, he says. If you're out to get someone, you're going to do anything you can to make him mad, Chris says. Anything. He didn't have a translation program to turn the MOD boys' prose into, say, a Lithuanian accent or something, he only had a jive program.

So what was he supposed to do?

If you lived in the state of Texas, you'd understand, Chris says wryly: "Down here, we all have boots and hats. We all ride on the range."

John sees a copy of Chris's handiwork in early 1991.

He's sitting in front of a computer system that looks like it was cobbled together from junkyard parts. He has a big old TV console for a monitor, a messed-up keyboard and his old Commie 64, bandaged with electrical tape. His computer is a street box, a guerrilla machine. Grunge computing.

And there it is on the screen, The Jived History of MOD.

"De legacy uh de underground 'clandestine' netwo'k continues and so's duz de war (and ridiculing) against all de self-proclaimed, so-called 'elite.'"

John can't believe it at first; it's too outlandish. He reads through it, slowly, amazed.

John finishes reading, then sits for a minute, staring at the screen, staring away from the screen - just kind of staring. And he thinks, This guy really doesn't like me. This is aimed right at me, and only me.