

The BlackBerry Widow's Tale

A settlement of the patent fight with RIM could net \$1 billion for the late Tom Campana's NTP.

Tell corporate executives they could soon lose their addictive BlackBerries, and they'll blow a fuse. Tell them the culprit is a tiny company whose only mission appears to be suing big companies such as BlackBerry maker Research in Motion (RIMM) for patent infringement, and those execs will start muttering: "There oughta be a law."

But there's more to this story than meets the eye. Behind NTP, the Arlington (Va.) outfit that is suing RIM, is a tall, skinny, entrepreneurial Chicago inventor, Thomas Campana Jr., who died before knowing how much his case might rock the wireless world. Late last month, the four-year-old patent dispute between RIM and NTP moved closer to a potential court-ordered shutdown of RIM's booming \$1.5 billion U.S. business -- or, alternatively, a settlement that could garner NTP \$650 million to \$1 billion, say analysts (see BW Online, 12/01/05, "RIM Loses Another Round").

SUPREME ENDING? Among the biggest winners would be Campana's second wife, Jolietta, who stands to become the BlackBerry widow. She and NTP co-founder Donald Stout together control over 50% of the shares, says an NTP lawyer.

Even as the stakes rise, RIM is still full of fight. After exhausting its appeals in the lower courts, RIM plans to turn to the U.S. Supreme Court. And, urged on by RIM, the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office is reviewing NTP's patents. In preliminary decisions, it has rejected the patents. "NTP has improperly tried to claim for itself what RIM and others independently developed," says David Long, RIM's lawyer at Howrey LLP.

To many, Campana and NTP are no better than corporate patent trolls. But the picture that emerges from interviews with friends and family is far more complex. Campana was an enthusiastic technologist with an effective lawyer. Although his business life had ups and downs, he may well have staked an effective claim to the concept on which RIM later built its business.

TIRELESS INVENTOR. Was the patent office too generous? Did it greenlight a land grab? Those are the questions lawyers are battling over. But if Campana's patents hold up, an inventor whose career was marked by struggle stands to triumph from the grave -- leaving a bonanza to his heirs and investors.

Campana's associates remember him as a relentless inventor. The University of Illinois-trained electrical engineer developed technologies ranging from wireless e-mail to a paging system to track children. It was in 1992 that Campana and his patent attorney, Stout, founded NTP to patent and license more of his inventions. "There really was a company behind the whole thing," says longtime friend Gary Thelen, an engineer who worked at Campana's first company, ESA Telecom Systems (ESA), which later folded. "We were using the [technologies]. It's just that we went out of business."

The son of a milkman who grew up in Chicago's working-class Marquette Park neighborhood, Campana often seemed indifferent to money. He wore battered jeans around the house while fixing neighbors' broken cars. He drank cheap Old Milwaukee beer and drove an ancient white Jaguar.

"AMERICAN SUCCESS STORY." But he was a passionate builder: He crafted an oak fireplace and hitched up a miniature wireless camera to his Lionel model trains. His son, Thomas Campana III, 35, who builds home theaters for a living, says he doesn't know whether he will gain any part of a RIM settlement. "That's not something I think about," he says. "All I want is to see [my father's] name in good standing. It kills me to see his name dragged through the mud.">p> The elder Campana, whose office ceilings were stained beige from his chain-smoking, died in June, 2004, at age 57, of esophageal cancer. He left behind a wife, son, daughter, three stepchildren, and their families. Campana divorced his first wife, Maxine, in 1983 and married Joletta, his former secretary, in 1999. When Joletta took Campana go-cart riding on their first date, "I knew she was the one," says son Tom. "She brought out his fun-loving side. Before, he just worked." Joletta continued to do the bookkeeping at her husband's companies, say former colleagues.

Joletta, now 59, declined comment for this story. But she's campaigning to restore her late husband's name. On Nov. 16 she wrote a letter to her U.S. Senators. In it she recounted Campana's service as staff sergeant in the Air Force, where he worked on wireless radio. "Tom was an American success story," she wrote. "He is entitled to the same patent protection as big companies."

SHOWED OFF DEMO. Campana founded ESA in 1971. A contract engineering company, its first job was to supply gear to a paging company. ESA first operated out of the basement of Campana's four-bedroom home in a close-knit, blue-collar community on Chicago's south side. Neighbors would drop by after their day jobs to work at ESA, recalls Tom.

Eventually the company grew into a 30-person outfit and helped develop paging technologies for Telefind in Coral Gables, Fla. In 1990, Campana's work in wireless e-mail attracted the attention of AT&T (T). Murali Narayanan, then a Bell Laboratories (LU) executive, signed up ESA to help build a system to send e-mails to the AT&T Safari laptop via a wireless paging system.

AT&T showed it off that year at the giant Comdex trade show but later dropped the project. "Campana was an absolute entrepreneur -- a kid at heart," says Narayanan, now vice-president at Mitek Systems, a Poway (Calif.) forgery-detection company.

NAIL-BITER. In 2000, just as RIM was gaining traction, NTP sent the company a letter asking for licensing fees. The legal battle began. NTP sued RIM in U.S. District Court in Richmond, Va., in November, 2001. Stout bankrolled mounting expenses by bringing on more than 20 minority investors.

Not all of Campana's associates support his legal battle. Narayanan ended up testifying on behalf of RIM. "I was surprised [Campana] got the patents," he said. "As a computer guy,

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putting e-mail and paging together seemed obvious to me." Now, Campana's posthumous quest could block Big Business and its executives' manic dependence on the BlackBerry. The inventor who labored to build a wireless future could end up throwing it into a tizzy.