

# Project looks ahead — way ahead

## Colossal clock in Nevada would tick off the next 10,000 years

By Patrick O'Driscoll  
USA TODAY

MOUNT WASHINGTON, Nev. — Forget the Y2K bug. Some high-tech dreamers want you to think about Y10K.

In the final months of society's mad dash to the new millennium, they're making a curious plea: Slow down and think instead about what's ahead in the next 10 millennia.

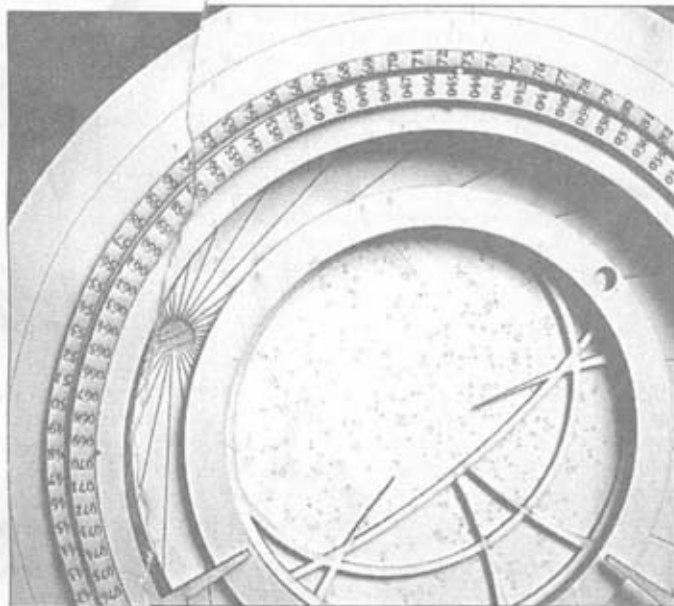
To dramatize their deep-time message, a California-based group of computer entrepreneurs, futurists and thinkers intends to build a gigantic clock that would last at least 10,000 years — a project on the scale of Stonehenge, the pyramids of Egypt or a European cathedral.

The clock would tick once a year and chime just once a century. Supercomputer designer Daniel Hillis, who came up with the idea, calls it the world's slowest computer.

The group hopes this solar-powered "millennium clock" will become a cultural icon, maybe in the way that the first photo of Earth from space in 1969 boosted the environmental movement. The clock is meant to inspire people to look beyond the short-term business of everyday life — last night's lottery, today's pop quiz at school, tomorrow's day trades on Wall Street — and consider humankind's long-term responsibility for the planet.

The group has picked an 11,676-foot-high ridge of limestone cliffs in the Snake Range of eastern Nevada as the place to build the clock. Miners would excavate a vast cavern in the rock to hold and protect the monumental timepiece.

"Two thousand feet of limestone is a good roof," says Stewart



By Rolf Horn, the Long Now Foundation

**Big time:** A model for the face of the 'millennium clock' shows how years would be designated with five digits, such as 01999.

Brand, the group's leader. His 1960s book, *The Whole Earth Catalog*, was a best-selling bible of self-sufficiency.

Brand, 60, insists this is no millennium joke. He and his band of visionaries — including Hillis, musician Brian Eno, Broderbund Software co-founder Doug Carlston and Global Business Network Chairman Peter Schwartz — have created the nonprofit Long Now Foundation to direct the project. The foundation:

- ▶ Is spending \$500,000 on an 8-foot-tall prototype that looks something like a futuristic jukebox. (The full-sized version would stand 8 stories high and cost tens of millions of dollars.) The working model's builders, led by Hillis, hope to finish it in time to chime at midnight when 1999 turns to 2000.

- ▶ Just paid \$140,000 for 80 acres high on Mount Washington. The money came from three computer heavyweights: Lotus software founder Mitch Kapor, Priceline.com founder Jay Walker and Bill Joy of Sun Microsystems.

- ▶ Is brainstorming plans for



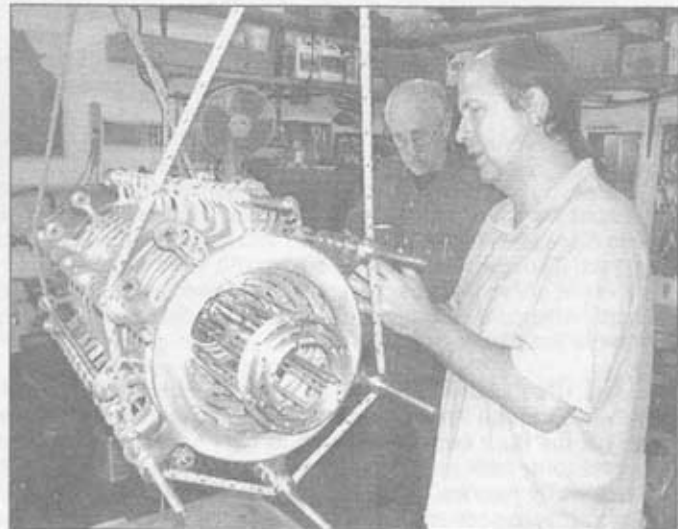
By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

a library to last 10,000 years, perhaps housed in the same mountain site. A conference next year at Stanford University will explore what information should be preserved in it.

- ▶ Is listing dates on its Web site ([www.longnow.org](http://www.longnow.org)), publications and correspondence with a fifth digit for the year. For example: Dec. 31, 01999.

But why 10,000 years?

"Ten thousand years is the



By Alexander Rose, the Long Now Foundation

**Slowest computer:** Computer designer Daniel Hillis, foreground, and Long Now leader Stewart Brand work on a clock model.

size of civilization thus far," Brand explains in his new book, *The Clock of the Long Now*. It was about that long ago that human cultures began.

The desert dryness and remoteness would help preserve a device meant to last 400 generations, the group says. It considered sites in Australia, in Antarctica and even on the moon but liked Mount Washington. Brand already calls it "Long Mountain."

Many details are fuzzy. No one knows, for instance, just when construction might begin.

"One of our mottoes is, 'No hurry,'" replies Brand, who expects to witness at least the groundbreaking, if not the completion. Interim versions — bigger than the prototype but smaller than the 8-story version — could be built in major cities to keep interest up.

Brand admits the whole thing could end up a giant flop.

"It could be an interesting failure," Brand said on a visit to the mountain last week. But even if the clock doesn't rise to the status of icon, "it's still a signal. It's a form of graffiti on the walls of history."

Nearby residents are mostly reserving judgment until some-

thing happens. A few fear the project will disrupt quiet lives and ranches with hordes of tourists. Others welcome its economic potential after a major mine closed this summer near Ely (population 4,900), about 60 miles away.

Officials at nearby Great Basin National Park are encouraged by the project's interest in long-term protection of the planet. However, they are cautious because the clock site borders the most fragile terrain in the park. They are most concerned about several groves of bristlecone pines, which are the oldest living trees on Earth. Some are 4,700 years old.

"The park is a continuing clock of nature that already is going on forever," says Marjorie Sill, a Sierra Club leader on Great Basin issues. She worries that the clock project could threaten that.

Brand insists that won't happen: "This is a timeless landscape. If it isn't kept looking like a timeless landscape, it doesn't work."

He adds, "We love the companionship of 5,000-year-old organisms. Just sitting under a bristlecone is one of the great time-travel trips I know."