Hackers, Chapters 1 and 2.

Summary:

The first hackers came from the “Systems and Programming” faction of the Tech Model Railroad at MIT. They were fascinated with the complex technology that controlled the model trains. The term “hack” goes back even farther, describing “elaborate pranks” played by MIT students. The hackers often started as bright but misfit kids who liked tearing things apart to understand how they worked. Computers at the time were “hulking giants” with a “priesthood” who completely controlled access. Programming had to be done by punching a program onto cards and submitting them to the priests, who would feed them into the computer and return the results hours or days later. Then TX-0 arrived, and the hackers got direct access to a computer that they could work on “interactively.” They became experts at hacking programs, that is, coming up with elegant ways to write programs to do interesting things, often things that seemed like useless wastes of time to people who thought that computers should be used for more serious applications. They worked at night when no one else was using the computer, and they often blew off courses, believing that their real education was what they were leaning by writing programs. They developed a “hacker ethic” expressing their view of computing and the world. It included the “Hands-On Imperative,” the idea that direct access to computers should be unlimited; the idea that information should be free; an egalitarianism that held that hackers should be judged by their hacking; and the belief that you can create art and beauty on computers and in fact that computer programs themselves can be beautiful.

Interesting points and questions for discussion:

Peter Sampson was able to get the TX-0 to play music by putting 0's and 1's into its accumulator in the right sequence.

The hackers criticize IBM, but could IBM have succeeded with a hacker culture?

Was it OK for the hackers to break into rooms and “requisition” needed supplies?