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Interview with Hal Pschunder

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[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[0:00:07] Hal Pschunder: My name is Hal Pschunder. I worked at RCA from, starting on the 11th of November 1974, but I did have two previous summers working in college for RCA in 1969 and 1970. I worked for RCA until it became GE in 1986, and then in 1993 GE or the portion of the defense business of GE became Martin Marietta. Or I'm sorry, Lockheed... Yeah, Martin Marietta first and then two years later in 1995 it became Lockheed Martin. So, the standard thing that we used to joke about at work was we could hold onto our jobs we just couldn't hold onto our company.

[0:01:03] Speaker 2: Could you just start with the first project that you worked on, and were you nervous about it? How did you get help and so forth?

[0:01:11] Hal Pschunder: The first project that when I started in late 1974 coming out of MIT Grad School and the Army, I wasn't too nervous because I already worked, as I said, before with the same group that had hired me. The Advance Technology section of Moorestown, upstairs in building 108. I already knew most of the people that I was working with.

[0:01:34] Speaker 2: When did you work with them?

[0:01:36] Hal Pschunder: From... Well in '69 and '70 when I was a summer student, and then beginning in the... Apparently I did a good enough job that they wanted to hire me when I finished with the Army and with Grad School.

The first project that I worked on was a bandwidth reduction system. Where you would take a picture and do a two dimensional Fourier transform on using a Fast Fourier technique that had been perfected several years earlier up at Princeton University. Then using that, throwing away three quarters of the digital information, transmitting the remaining quarter, and then at the far end you would use an inverse Fast Fourier transform. You would basically be able to reconstitute the picture. The idea here was to try to reduce the amount of information, the number of bits that were actually being transmitted. Because that was the idea. Nowadays, of course we have those techniques are very well used in many video games and other digital transmissions. Back in 1974 we were doing some pioneering work on that aspect. We did work with both a group in Camden, New Jersey and in Moorestown where we built this big box

there that did the FFT and the inverse, and the compression and decompression. That was using the blazing technology of ten megahertz, of course today's computers there go probably about a hundred times faster.

[0:03:31] Probably what took an entire refrigerator sized rack there could probably today be done on a handheld computer.

[0:03:42] Speaker 2: When you were working, was there a formal or informal mentor that you had?

[0:03:47] Hal Pschunder: Well, I would say probably the mentors that I had there were some of the senior engineers that I worked with initially. I am thinking specifically of Dick Perry and Lloyd Martinson. Also my immediate boss Hank Halpern, he was very helpful in guiding there in what I was doing. I mean it was an interchange of ideas. I brought some new ideas from Princeton and MIT, but they had the wisdom of what actually worked in the field. At the time when digital technology was just beginning they were able to provide some of the practical aspects of the theoretical things that I was better versed in.

[0:04:38] Speaker 2: Did you feel that they valued your input?

[0:04:42] Hal Pschunder: I think so. I mean, as a collective team we did... The team got an award there for the work that we did. It kind of nice to be able to be recognized in the first thing that you were doing, right out the block that way.

[0:04:59] Speaker 2: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

[0:05:00] Hal Pschunder: Yes.

[0:05:01] Speaker 2: What are some of your fond memories of RCA?

[0:05:07] Hal Pschunder: Well, I guess there's many a different good memories that I have of RCA. I guess I should really start off with volleyball. My dad mentioned that. He was a member of our volleyball team. We formed the first league that's still going today, here in 2015. It started in 1975. I was one team captain and there was this vivacious young lady who was captaining one of the other teams, and to make it a long story short there I ended up marrying her. I'm still married to her. I'm very grateful to RCA and for that. She worked at RCA for a number of years until we had our kids.

Another thing that I really liked about RCA was the fact that they had publications, the RCA Family, which was a publication that went out every month or so. It listed the people who were working for the

company. The different aspects that they did. It was a lot of human interest there. People's anniversaries of their working for RCA would be recognized there. Even the people who retired from RCA were mentioned there. That's something unfortunately that successor companies have abandoned, and today most of the communications that come down with emailing they are more and more in the aspects in exhortations there to do better or to make more profit for the corporation. There's a lot less human interest than what we had under RCA.

RCA also, I mean it was not all work, we did work hard, but we also had good times together.

[0:07:07]

Going out to lunch with fellow co-workers was always a highlight of most days there. Being able to go out to lunch with my wife was even better I would have to say. Still, two things that RCA that again the successor corporations have sort of given up on, one was the RCA Store. Where you could buy a lot of the memorabilia that's here in this room and this museum here at Rowan University was probably bought at one or another of the RCA Stores. Also RCA had annual Christmas parties, or parties for the employees and their dependents, you know spouses and children. That was always a big highlight there. I know my two daughters really enjoyed going to the RCA Christmas parties there. Where they were treated like the little royalty that they were.

I should also mention one thing that I think helped in RCA, which is still in some extent there, and that's the Engineer's Union ASPEP. The Association for Scientific and Professional Engineering Personnel which still represents the engineers at Moorestown. I was in a councilman for ASPEP for about 30 years for five different counsel groups. Including the time that I spent out at Kwajalein Atoll in the Pacific Ocean. But I think that ASPEP was a very humanizing aspect for RCA there. It sort of provided a counterweight for some of the top level people there. There are... You know, as in any corporation, has people who are interested more in business than they are in their people.

[0:09:08]

ASPEP tried to keep the people aspect of it. Not only the contracts making sure the people were paid a fair and living wage, but also that they had a chance or an opportunity there to voice their ideas, and their grievances.

One of the things that ASPEP initiated was the afterhours course program. Where engineers and others could get additional information and basically continue their learning. Because after all engineering is a profession where... I've read at one point there,

every five to eight years half of the stuff that you know is going to be obsolete. Continuing education in the engineering field is very important. That's one thing where ASPEP really pushed there. Over my 38 years with RCA and the successor companies, ASPEP pushed this educational aspect and also tuition refund for people who were going to colleges, ASPEP pushed that. The courses that we took there were really very helpful. I ended up taking over 50 courses including five different courses in five different languages, because we were going to be working with people in foreign countries there. I ended up only using two of the languages, Italian and Japanese, but I also did learn a little bit of Spanish, Chinese, and Korean, too.

[0:10:55] Speaker 2: We've heard the term "the RCA family," a lot.

[0:10:59] Hal Pschunder: Yeah.

[0:11:00] Speaker 2: What's does that mean to you?

[0:11:02] Hal Pschunder: Well, the RCA family was, in addition to that was the name of the publication that we had. The monthly publication that I mentioned previously. The RCA family was the, I think the idea that it was a really good place to work. As my dad can demonstrate there, he started and he convinced me that it was a good place to work, and so I also worked there. One of my two brothers works for one of the successor companies Lockheed Martin to this day. So it's a... You got the feeling that it was a family in the sense that people cared about you, and you were expected to care about other people, too. I believe that some of that has been lost there in the push there in some of the successor companies. They seem to be more interested in developing profits and right sizing the workforce.

Two specific aspects of that I can recall there, I remember under RCA the profit margin typically the division was happy when we made like a six percent profit. Today, any division of Lockheed Martin making less than 10 percent, the people up at the top of that division are going to be under a lot of pressure there to improve their bottom-line. That's sort of a roundabout way of what I see about the RCA family there. It seemed to be more family oriented. The idea that you would want to have your kids work for the same place that you did was very strong there.

[0:13:04] There were many people that were multi-generations working at RCA.

[0:13:09] Speaker 2: What do you see as the influence of RCA on South Jersey? How did RCA change South Jersey in your opinion?

[0:13:19] Hal Pschunder:

Well, RCA of course provided a lot of upper-middleclass jobs, and even some of the senior people there probably had upper-class jobs here in South Jersey. As my father mentioned, there at Moorestown was largely... Because many of the RCA employees lived in the Moorestown or now it's some of the other suburbs of Camden and Philadelphia, they provided a good income. It was and I believe it still is the second largest employer in all of Burlington County. Lockheed Martin in Moorestown. With over 3,800 employees. It provided a good income for people.

RCA was I think a good citizen there. They had 403 acres, I believe if I remember the plan correctly, but it's almost two thirds of a square mile of Moorestown woods under RCA control. They ended up donating a portion of that to develop the CSEDS site. The Cornfield Cruiser, which was originally a large radar ball there in the 1960s. They donated that to the Navy. They've given very generously to the United Fund and other charities in Southern New Jersey. I believe overall the influence has been very positive for Southern New Jersey having RCA there. To some extent the successor corporations as well. It certainly has changed the landscape. Every time you drive up I-295 there you see the Cornfield Cruiser.

[0:15:21]

It's a reminder of the influence of RCA as an economic engine here in Southern New Jersey.

[0:15:31] Speaker 2:

In your eyes, was there a downside to working for RCA? Were there things that you didn't particularly like?

[0:15:39] Hal Pschunder:

Well, downside, I mean really there weren't too many downsides about working for RCA. It perhaps limited people there in terms of whether they would look to go outside of the region. Okay? Because many people who were interested in advancing their careers go from job to job. From one corporation to another and there's a mixing then of ideas and influence there. Perhaps RCA because it was so family oriented, at least in comparison to most other corporations, you got less of the mixing or input from other places or other ideas than possible there.

Downsides, I mean in my career I believe I had 18 different managers. Some of them were very good. Hank Halpern, George Moss, Maurice Ratliff, Eric Thompson are probably four of my best managers that I had. A lot of them were sort of average. Unfortunately of those 18 there were at least two or three that were really not good either managers or leaders. Again, as an Army veteran I have some experience with leadership, and I can tell you there that some of these guys were not leaders and they were not even good managers. What you do in this case and because the

corporation was large enough, RCA was large enough, even RCA in Moorestown was large enough, and you could find if you didn't like your manager you could look for another place within the corporation or within the facility to work. I did that twice. Even the bad aspects there was always a hope there. ASPEP helps you. The Engineer's Union did help there in that regard. Overall the experience was a good one I believe, working for RCA, and even the successor companies.

[0:18:03] Speaker 2: Okay, thank you. Is there anything else that you want to mention in summing up?

[0:18:14] Hal Pschunder: Well, in terms of the training, one of the things that I really liked was that RCA had a thing called the Chief Engineers Technical Excellence Committee. They had basically two functions. One was, to make awards there for the employees. Because it was a chief engineer, it was a committee there of engineers who were looking for the best engineering practices that had been done in the previous quarter or the previous year under RCA. For example, my father, he didn't mention it, but he won one of the annual awards and I believe four of the quarterly awards for the work that he did as a structural engineer. That was a very good aspect of the CETech Committee. The other was also in the education. I had mentioned that there were afterhours courses, but the CETech Committee held classes at lunchtime at RCA. Usually on a weekly basis, and so it was a nice chance for engineers there to present the work that they had done. To let everybody in the other people are interested engineers there learn what had been done, and attending those CETech talks was very interesting. It allowed a cross pollination of ideas, technical ideas. That's still there to some extent today, but it's just barely hanging on. It's not being supported at the division level within the successor companies anymore. That's unfortunate.

[0:20:07] Speaker 2: What was the year you retired?

[0:20:09] Hal Pschunder: I retired in 2012.

[0:20:11] Speaker 2: Okay.

[0:20:13] Hal Pschunder: 25 years after my dad did.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]