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Interview with Thomas Petruzzelli

RCA Heritage Program

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[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[0:07.2] Thomas: My name is Thomas Petruzzelli. I started RCA in August of 1950. I worked there as an assembler first on a line where we were producing television sets but my goal was to be a tester at RCA, which I had already went to school for. I had went to Radio Electronic Institute in Philadelphia for an eight month course in radio and then television. And television was on the rise and after that, I got a job with Motorola Corporation installing antennas with the hope of getting into the servicing field and repairing television sets. After about two years with them, I realized there was no hope for me there. So I bailed out. I went out and worked for small businesses doing television repair and re-servicing, Frankfort radio and Givert Stern different companies like that. And then I got married in 1951 and by chance my brother-in-law who was working at RCA got me a job there. And I found out it was a family-oriented place and the only way you could get in there more or less if you have had a relative working there and the place was loaded with relatives. But in any rate, after about a month on the assembly line, my upgrade came through and I became a class A tester and a class A tester does just exactly what... we test whatever we were given to test, I wound up in 17 building.

17 Building originally was the home of the Victor's Talking Machine Company and if you go there today and at the entrance over the wall engraved in stone it still says Victor on it and the tower which was the ... it graced the skyline of Camden, had his logo on it which was Nipper the dog listening to a record that was called his master's voice. That was worldwide. That was RCA's logo for a long period of time. They eventually changed it and they put some, I don't know what you call it, space age lettering, RCA it said. Everybody in the plant, we shook our heads. We couldn't understand why they would let a valuable piece of history get shelved. And it's four, what do they call them, stained glass window. They were round and when they lit it up at night, you really see Nipper listening to the record. Well, that was I think, one of them went to Washington with some institute in Washington that collects junk like that. Another one went somewhere else. So there was not too many. There's only four of them. So where they all wound up later on, they came back when they got rid of this space age lettering. But that originally was a factory that made cabinets for the Victor Talking Machine. And if you went inside the building, it had huge round columns in it, but they were hollow and they would force air through a vent. They had a washed air system on the roof where water poured over the screen and air would suck down in to keep the humidity in the building high on account of the wood, wood shavings and things like that. It's fire. So the whole building was a concrete building. But in the meantime, the talking

machine was no longer made there and so they used it for other manufacturing. So that's where I started my testing on for fourth floor. Tom McIntyre was my supervisor, a good man. I spent at least 20 years in the commercial end of the business before I got into the government. And during that time, I worked for what was **Global** Communications and that was a transceiver used for radio, for fire and police and we sold them all over the country. And then also I got involved in the radio marine. I came from New York. It was something that wasn't basically a Camden thing and a guy by name of Charlie Anzo was the boss. We got along famously and I worked on navigational radar and what did it say, microwave transmitters. And then from there, that job completed and then I was put on another job for AT&T. It was a microwave relay system that would go around the country and they get all their communication for AT&T. When that completed, what else did I do? During the layoff, I wound up in 1- building which was originally the building that housed where they made records. One time with Camden was the hub for records because of the talking machine. They needed records for talking. They even came out with the 45. Just they practically gave the instrument away just so you could buy the records. So it was interesting growing up through that. I never saw records there, but I did get down into the kilns where they kept the master copies and those kilns were kept at temperatures over a hundred degrees to keep those master copies from warping and the building still could be there. It sat along the river. After that, I came back and I worked on main frame computer and then what else? I spent about, like I said, about 20 years in the commercial end of the business and then after that I wound up in 3 - building where I got involved in more government contracts. I had a top secret clearance. I was welcomed there. They didn't have to train me. So at any rate, I worked on P-3C radio. It was a transceiver. My particular job was just the receiver. Somebody else did it on the transmitter, other people made modules that went into the receiver, but I was the one who finished the receiver and said it's okay to go and install it together as a package. After the P-3C, I got involved in Trident, Trident Radio went into the warhead of the rocket. And it would use telemetry to let the people who were testing the rockets, what was happening while I was flying down range. It even had a self-destruct button in case the thing went off course and rather than hit something valuable, it would explode up in the air. But that was interesting, I mean, it was computerized testing. We had a set up where we just installed the radio and we did tests just by flipping different switches. But when it came to troubleshooting, that's where the problem lied with that. we had to be able to jump into where we were without disturbing the rest of the test. If not, you would have to go back to square one and start at the beginning. So we had to find shortcuts out how to do that and we did.

After that I got involved in the Apollo 17 Project and that was building the LEM radio and the LEM radio proved to be a very valuable piece of

equipment because it was communication between the lunar module and spacecraft. It also had a ranging system which could be used if they needed as radar. We did that with environmental testing and we got through that.

Like I said before, one of the most memorable bosses I ever had in RCA was **Frank Spira**. I hope he hears it someday. Frank was a very nice boss and we worked together as a team and we got through that job. Then I was transferred to, it was called a Shelter. It's a microwave tropospheric shelter that was made for the military. That's where I completed my tour of duty with RCA and then in 1987, I retired and I went on with my life. But I have to say this about RCA, it was a great place to work. I loved my job. I couldn't wait to get to work, that's how good it was. We had a good night shift and we were practically on our own. There was not too many guys on the night shift, so it was like a skeleton crew and we handled everything ourselves. Didn't require a supervisor and they didn't put one on because it cost money. So we had a good time. Some experiences I had were funny and we did some things. But, as a rule, I think most people were happy to work for RCA. RCA was a great company to work for and maybe today it is. I know there's still some work being done in Camden, but it is more or less to keep Camden alive than to keep RCA alive. I know there's one young fellow I left, he was a supervisor and a personal friend of mine. His name was Joe, I have to think what his last name is **Joe Locastro**. When I was leaving, I was like 60-years-old and he was about in his 30's. So he still might be down there in Camden. I don't know.

[11:55.0] Speaker 2: Do you have any stories with any supervisors or coworkers that particularly stick out of your mind?

[12:01.4] Thomas: Well, like I said with **Frank Spira** it was like, sometimes Frank would say to me, "Tom come with me." I said, "Where are we going?" He said we're going to lunch and we go outside and we discussed the job and he say those other guys don't know as much as you, but, he said try to help them out. I said yeah, I always do. So one time we were out and for some reason or other he was running a business outside of RCA, he had like a tap room or a restaurant. I forget which, but every once in a while somebody would say, "Hey Frank, we need rolls." There was this guy name **Art Boas**. He was another tester. He'd go out and get rolls for Frank's business. It was kind of stupid but it all worked out in the end. It was really a good thing and sometimes I met a lot of nice people in RCA. RCA as far as like, we had a motto, like when we were working and I was working with that AT&T project and we had a motto like, let's do it right the first time because the worst thing that could happen is we lose the customer. And that was the motto amongst just workers and we all tried to keep up with that. And like I said there were a lot of guys there, they were rare. I mean, there was one fellow who used to sit in the morning before the work would start at my boss's desk, his name was Bill Kennedy. He was a young guy like me then. And me

and this guy, Al Gussman were sitting next to his bench and this man comes walking by and somebody knew him and they said, "Hey Bill, how are you?" He said fine and he says, how you doing? He said, Oh, we went fishing last week and we got some codfish. So this guy, Billy Beltzer overheard the conversation. So every morning when this guy would walk by, this Billy Beltzer would say did you go fishing over the weekend? And the guy said no, we didn't go over the weekend. So one day, we were sitting there and I looked down near where the elevator is and here comes this man again and he's walking down towards our way and this guy Al Gussman **says to me** codfish and we bust out laughing because we knew the minute he got near Billy, Billy was going to ask him about going fishing.

One day, I was walking towards my car at the end of the day, I was down underneath the Delaware Bridge, there was some parking. And this man was ahead of me and I walked up behind him and I said, "Are you going fishing today?" And he looked at me and he laughed and he said, "You know what, I offered that guy to go fishing" he said, but he told he didn't like to go fishing and we all laughed about that. Another time in three building, we had a guy who was a sweeper and he was deaf. And anybody would walk in they would say like we're so on and so. He'd say, "Fine. How's yourself? And somebody picked up on it and then any times somebody said something somebody would say how's yourself?"

[16:23.2] Speaker 2: So do you have any kind of final thoughts to wrap up your experience at RCA overall how it was?

[16:29.2] Thomas: Well, it was more like a family there. We knew each other and it was a very homey place to work. The bosses all mellowed over the years. You know, at first they were strict and whatnot. But, after you worked with a guy 10, 20 years, you lose that. Like we used to call him Mr. McIntyre, but at the end it was Tom.

He was a good boss, Mr. McIntyre. He was around for a long while. Like I said there were so many things that happened over the years. I can't really remember. But like I said it was a great place to work. If I could go back here right now, I would but my eyesight is no longer ... I'm out of the electronic business. I do other things. I write. I learn to play the banjo, the mandolin. I try to keep active mentally. I write for a website and I have good memories of RCA. I know it was one sure thing, I'll always remember Camden. Camden was a beautiful town at one time. A lot of things happened in Camden, but today, it doesn't work out that way.

[18:16.6] Speaker 2: Do you have any memories of RCA after hours, anything you would do after work with people?

[18:21.2] Thomas: Well, after my wife died, I was taking my pulse in my room where I was testing the radio and I noticed that I had skipped a beat and I went to the nurse and I said, I think my heart is missing a beat. She said how do you know? I said I was taking my pulse. So she hollers over to the other nurse, hey Julie, we got another one. So she said, let me feel it. So she said, you're right. I said, what is it? She said, do you want to speak to the doctor? I said, sure. So the doctor came out and asked me the same question, why did I ever check my pulse? I said, well, I often do that just to see if everything's okay. She said we have a sympathetic nervous system. She said you can create your own problems. You do have a slight... but it's nothing to worry about she said but don't take your pulse anymore. She also got me involved in square dancing because she realized I just lost my wife and I was depressed. I think like I said it was a family type place. Everybody took care of one another.

[19:59.4] Speaker 2: How did RCA reach into other parts of your life?

[20:02.2] Thomas: What's that again?

[20:03.1] Speaker 2: How did RCA reach into other parts of your life outside of work?

[20:12.0] Thomas: Well, it really didn't because I tell you... to tell you the truth. I enjoyed my work so much that I'd rather be at work than being home. First of all, I was surrounded with some friends and then they bolstered me up. After I got over the death of my wife, the friendship even got better. Like, one guy took me to the race track, before we went to work. Another guy, his name was Al Naga and he was always telling stories and we were working on a modem that fit into the Shelter. A modem is a modulator/demodulator and it was the heart of the Shelter. It could enhance a weak signal. It had a special little device that engineering had made that would sample the signal and then try to build up on it. So if it was in a real like maybe a noisy part of the ... like the level of the signal was so low, they would raise the level of the signal and it worked better. And that in itself was a pretty piece of complex equipment to test. And the receiver part and the transmitter part they were normal, I mean, I was working one night and they had a special antenna system that if the antenna ever collapsed and the microwave was spewing out radiation, it will shut down. But one night when I was there, it didn't and there was a quality control man, his name was ... what was his name? Zapparito and he's sitting there watching me run it through these tests and he said, "Oh my god! I'm getting a big headache," and I said take an aspirin and then for some reason, I checked the output antenna and it was disconnected. I think I got radiated, too. But we don't know. It never affected me. I did mention it to the engineer and they said they will look into it and they put something where it would never happen again. But those are some of the things that you come into. We had a man get killed out in 53 building. He was a wireman. He didn't realize the grounding strap that grounded the

equipment wasn't in there and so when the capacitors were charged up to 25 million volts or something like that and he just put his hand in the air and that was the end of him. That was about the only death I ever heard there at RCA. He was a wireman. I worked out in 53 Building that was transmitters, too. That was commercial transmitters like the ones you put on top of buildings for WPTZ and all that. Any other questions?

[23:55.1] Speaker 3: They sometimes talk about RCA changing South Jersey; do you have any opinion there on RCA changing South Jersey?

[24:07.6] Thomas: Oh yes, RCA. At one time Camden was a thriving community and a lot of people lived in Camden. Over the years, they moved out for one reason or another. There's too many poor people in Camden. That's what killed Camden. But Camden itself is a nice town. It's got Brownstone. You can go there and look at Brownstone buildings that you can't see anymore. Doctors used to have their offices right on Cooper and Market Street. Professional people resided there. But as the town degraded, they all moved out. That was Camden, but the New York Shipyard and RCA, Campbell Soup. Campbell Soup was a big manufacture there. They came out with the first tomato that can be picked by machine. I called them rhinoceros hide tomatoes. Because one time, I think I had my car parked outside and I said, can I have some of your tomato? He said, yeah. I took a couple. I couldn't even bite into them. They were that thick, the skin on them. When Campbell Soup moved out that was the **death note** for Camden.

[25:34.9] Speaker 3: What about this neighborhood? Did you have other neighbors that work for RCA?

[25:40.0] Thomas: Yeah, I had some neighbors here that worked for RCA but the Morristown plant was separate from us. They made it that way just for contract reasons. And that's another thing, AEGIS. AEGIS was a giant... well, not a giant but it was a big antenna system that could pick up information from different frequencies at the same time. And it fit inside a huge golf ball, out in Moorestown, I don't know if you ever saw it. Well, that's no longer there. But when I was in Alaska after I retired, I saw one of those stations out there. And they were our first line of defense. They were stretched across Canada and United States up there and they would be getting messages coming in from all over the world into those things and they could detect whether they were Russian or not. We were having the cold war with Russia. Now the cold war started right after World War II, people don't realize that. But, that's life. I don't know what else I could add to it except it was a memorable place for me. I always have that fond memory of RCA when I think about it. And at one time, a ferry used to... where the parking lot is now, a ferry used to come in there and there were stores and you could actually go home and takes the ferry to Philadelphia. That was many years ago. They closed that down I guess at around the early 1950's.

[27:40.8] Speaker 3: Okay, Tom. We appreciate you taking the time to do this and as you said you are part of history. You know we'll put this all together with all the other...

[27:55.5] Thomas: **Right.** I think that I lived through some of the best times this country ever is going to see, as a kid and growing up and even into World War II. I mean World War II was a big experience for me. I didn't plan it that way but that's the way it worked out.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]