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Interview with Carl Haslett

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[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[0:00:07] Carl Haslett: My name is Carl Haslett. I started with RCA Broadcast 35 years ago. It was this month in 1980. And I worked for Broadcast up until the division was closed, just prior to a GE purchase. So, I worked for maybe a month or two as RCA recording systems on the government side, and then it was transferred to... or became GE at that point.

[0:00:43] Male Speaker 2: Do you remember your first job assignment?

[0:00:46] Carl Haslett: Yes, I do.

[0:00:47] Male Speaker 2: Could you talk to that a little bit?

[0:00:50] Carl Haslett: My first assignment was to... I came into the magnetic tape group of Broadcast, and they were getting the TR800 ready for... um, they had just unveiled it at the NAB show in Las Vegas, and it was a big hit. It was a very sophisticated tape recorder. A big advance in being able to do special effects right on the tape recorder itself. My first assignment was to draw a block diagram of that unit for the instruction books. Because, of course they did all the engineering, got that all out of the way. They're ready to start producing them to give to customers, and they didn't have instruction books. So, as a fresh out of college but with some broadcast background, they had me go around and talk to all the engineers, to get each of the individual pieces, so I could draw a single, block diagram for the whole unit.

[0:01:49] Male Speaker 2: Um, did you have any kind of a mentor or anything when you started?

[0:01:53] Carl Haslett: Yes, I did. The guy I remember most was Walt Murdock. He was probably about my age now. He knew everybody in the plant. There was like, 4,000 people here then, in RCA and all the different parts of RCA. He seemed to know everything about the place; where everything was. As you go down the hall, there was nobody who didn't give a wave to him and say "Hi."

Um, and he taught me a lot about getting... you know, where things were, and getting a good foothold on my career in the Broadcast group. And he was very knowledgeable on electrical circuits; things like that, too. And also, um, for more theoretical mentor was Bob

Thomas. He was like the senior design video engineer, and I enjoyed working with him a lot.

[0:02:55] Male Speaker 2:

Okay, that's great. Um, as far as major projects that you've worked on, what stands out? What do you remember?

[0:03:03] Carl Haslett:

Well, the TR800, getting that into production and demo-ing it to different people. We were on the forefront of what everybody now thinks of as HDTV back then, and trying... even then, we knew that television needed to be improved. So, we embarked on a project to make, uh, what they call component recording. And we stunned the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers by showing up at a meeting that they were going to talk about doing equipment, and how they might do this. We stunned them by showing up with a recorder that actually did what they were thinking in theory. Nobody knew we were working on it. We did it under our advanced development work. So that was quite an accomplishment, and something that, you know, really kept us in the forefront for a couple of years.

And also, when we eventually, were just doing a lot of camera work, it was the development of the first CCD cameras for electronic news gathering. Including a special shuttered one that allowed us to do freeze frames. For example, we shot some video at the racetrack, and did the equivalent of a photo finish using that camera. That was the first time, 'cause normal television cameras in those days were all blurry if you tried to actually shoot something that was moving fast.

[0:04:38] Male Speaker 2:

Mm-hm, so how do you think RCA valued you as a part of the project?

[0:04:43] Carl Haslett:

I think even right up to the end, at least in the broadcast division which is like where I was most of the time, um, very much so. Because we, um... I don't... that's part of the reason I'm still here with all through the following companies. Because, uh, some of the people that were involved then are still here, too. And it, uh, um... I mean, we had all kinds of other activities going on that were supported. Um, just... it was like a family. I mean, we had, uh... uh, first of all, we had a great relationship on being able to buy any RCA products. The "Family Store," as it was called in those days. That kind of, uh, thing where they had, uh, things of value for the employees. Back when we had the 4,000 sum people here, we had two bowling leagues. Those were well supported by... By the company. We had softball games, we had, uh, Christmas parties for each of the individual sections, as well as an overall Christmas party. And I, um... There was recognition for us within our, um, uh,

technical community, too. Uh, you know, were either promotions or special on the spot award type things. So it was... It was very enjoyable to work for RCA.

[0:06:20] Male Speaker 2: You used the term “family.” We’ve heard a lot about the RCA family. Um, what’s it mean to you?

[0:06:31] Carl Haslett: Well, um, when I came in, there was about six or seven of us that hired in within that year. And we... In addition to hanging around with some of the older employees, we kind of formed, I don’t know, I wouldn’t call it a clique. But, it was a group of us. You know, we did a lot of things outside of that. We’d go to, uh, happy hours for example on Fridays. A lot of us were on those bowling teams I mentioned. Uh, we had some other interests like scale model railroading, things like that, that we got together outside, and that’s why it was more than just a 9:00 to 5:00, or 8:00 to 5:00 type of job. I think that’s the best way to describe it. It was, um... uh, and like the older... And managers as well as engineers were pretty, um, like friendly and just interested in things that were going on besides what you were working on. For example, uh, this is kind of a funny story. I had... I guess it was about around 1985. I bought a boat off of Paul Morocco, who was by then the government communications recording manager. He had bought the boat from Charlie Rockfus, who was the mechanical, uh, manager for that group. And then I ended up selling the boat to another engineer in the group. So, there’s that kind of a thing. Where you knew so much about what other people did, and their outside activities, that you kind of shared experiences and things like that. So, um, that’s just the kind of thing that, you know, is like a family.

[0:08:38] Male Speaker 2: Talk about your co-workers at work.

[0:08:44] Carl Haslett: Well, um, we were, uh... yeah, there was kind of two groups of us. There was the younger guys who had all come in right there in 1980, ‘cause they were staffing up for, uh, this push toward higher definition television, as well as digital recording. Um, we would go to lunch together all the time actually. Um, meaning we were younger, and all of us at that time were single. Uh, we would go to the... There were maybe six or seven lunch places right around here because of, again, 4,000-sum people plus Campbell Soup. One thing we rarely actually did was eat in the RCA cafeteria. We would tend to... And we had a little bit of free cash (chuckles), freer cash maybe than the older folks. And, uh, so we would go up the street to Shirley’s or George’s, or the New York Deli place. Uh, places like that to eat lunch. So, we actually eat lunch together almost all the time.

[0:09:52] Male Speaker 2: Mm-hm. What was it like working with them?

[0:09:56] Carl Haslett:

Oh. Um, it was good. We were... We were all from the different schools. Like, you know, there was... I was from Lehigh University. Um, one of the other fellas was from Drexel. There was a young man I remember... This was especially interesting. He actually was one of the Vietnamese children airlifted out of Saigon; then went to school in Texas because his... His family, or he had family in Texas, was able to go there and become educated. And he spoke excellent English by the time he became an engineer. His name was P.T. Chung. And he was, uh, so interesting to be able to listen to some of his stories, but, he was a real hard worker. Uh, and just to understand, you know, somebody coming here under those circumstances, whereas the rest of us were, you know, Americans pretty much, that grew up and got the chance to go to college, and work for a corporation.

Um, Doug Lidow was one of my roommates. Actually, he and I roomed together the first two years that I was here, because I knew him from Lehigh from, uh, before. Uh, I actually didn't come here until I had my Master's degree. So, he had a head start on me. Uh, but we got re-acquainted and, uh, we roomed together the first two years. Um, let's see. Um, Jim Chamberlain is, uh, had come from the graduate school. Um, he was an expert in, uh, the beginnings of what you think of as video, um, movement on the screen. Things that everybody takes for granted today in the video games and stuff. He's one of the people who developed that early on, and ended up coming here.

[0:11:47]

Um, but it was a... Like I say it was... Everybody had, um, a wealth of background knowledge. That's one thing that definitely, for RCA in general. Even a few of the, of the older engineers that I work with, and maybe didn't have necessarily a college degree or an advanced degree, the wealth of knowledge that we had in constructing and building that equipment and solving problems. Uh, there's so many times that we would just band together, and work to get something out to that National Association of Broadcast convention every year. To get new technology rolling and working.

[0:12:33] Male Speaker 2:

How did you stay up with the technology?

[0:12:36] Carl Haslett:

Well in those days, uh, no internet of course. We had... First of all within broadcast, there was the Society of Motion Picture and television Engineers. So they published a journal. Uh, we had the I-EEE Journals on various topics, and technical magazines that have kind of gone by the wayside or had become web-based these days. I had already had, uh, my Master's degree, but, a lot of RCA was very supportive of people going and getting advanced education at Drexel or Penn and so on. So, there were opportunities like that to

stay abreast of the technology. And we were, uh... especially us younger guys were, um, taking along to all of these National Association of Broadcaster conventions, or the SYMTI conventions twice a year. Again, to see what the competitors are doing, and to keep up with, uh, the papers that were being presented.

[0:13:44] Male Speaker 2: Talk about your supervisors. What were they like?

[0:13:47] Carl Haslett: Uh, my first supervisor was Ukah Hemmeweiman, who went on to, um, whenever RCA, uh, ceased to exist or at least the broadcast division did, he went on to be a manager at Panasonic. And uh, he was... He was from Finland, and he had a, uh, tremendous background in television. Um, he was great to work with. He always called us "fellas". That's again that family idea. It was always, "Fellas, fellas, we must get this research finished." Or, "We must get this circuit board done by the week, end of the week." Um, he was really good to work for.

Um, Dick West was another manager that was very dedicated toward getting things accomplished and done. Uh, as I remember Lee Hedland was head of the entire group of the tape world, and he was a... He really was a pretty good iron hand, 'cause we got caught a lot of times coming back from Friday lunches, taking two hours 'cause we would ride over in a large nine-passenger station wagon to someplace in Philly that has lunch. And come back and, uh, he would be kind of looking and seeing us come down the hall. So we all had to stay, you know, 5:30-6:00 or whatever to be sure we had put in the time.

[0:15:26] Male Speaker 2: How did they treat you?

[0:15:29] Carl Haslett: Uh, I would say certainly fairly. And uh, more than just a manager-employee kind of thing. They were... um, quite often we were... Well for example, uh, the bowling teams had a combination of managers and engineers. Um, so we socialized as well as, uh, working, uh, on the projects. They were, um, only demanding when... And it was a group kind of thing. We knew we needed to get things done and out the door. Um, but nobody... Rarely do we have any personal problems with any of the managers.

[0:16:16] Male Speaker 2: Okay, now, RCA Broadcast basically closed rather abruptly?

[0:16:23] Carl Haslett: Yes, it did.

[0:16:24] Male Speaker 2: Did that mean you got laid off, or what happened?

[0:16:27] Carl Haslett: Well, it was a... It was a real surprise. Um, I know for a couple of reasons that the abruptness came all the way from the top. Because

myself and a couple of other engineers were scheduled to take a camera up to one of the vendor locations. I mean, a very extensive trip. And I know there's no way they would have planned that, and had that up to the last second if... If they had any inkling that, that was going to be closed, and that project would become cancelled. Um, what happened to... All of the engineers were either able... They either decided to go out on their own. But, the rest of RCA was still in a hiring mode in most places. So, I actually interviewed at Moorestown and ATL and, uh, the government side. And that's like... Because I had known there was a large synergy between the government recoding group, and they were on the fifth floor and we were on the second floor in the old buildings. So myself, folks like Tim Orman, um, Matt Tige, and a number of other engineers, I guess, Tom Casney would be one who's still here. Um, we were told, "If you just want to come up here and work, just come up here and work. You can interview the other places if that's what you want to do, but, we have plenty of openings up here." So, it turned out that it was just a very... Just worked out well for everybody that all the engineers ended up being placed, or if they had decided to go out on their own, they did. But, no one had ended up losing up a job, in the engineering world anyway, with the result of that closing. So, it just was very fortunate timing.

[0:18:26] Male Speaker 2:

We also talk about RCA changing South Jersey. Do you have any opinions on that?

[0:18:36] Carl Haslett:

Well, um, up until recently I probably wouldn't have thought that much until... I've been involved in, um, a lot of um, acoustic amateur music in the last several years. And it's really rare if I don't run into somebody who says, "Oh, my dad worked at RCA." Or, they're really aware of what it had meant at one time. Uh, so, it definitely had an impact because it such a large employer, I know long before I was here. And uh, as a result of that it definitely had influence, uh, certainly in the older days. We have a lot of photographs here still in our cafeteria about the... From the heyday, we realize how busy things were. But, yeah...

[0:19:44] Male Speaker 2:

Um, what is your view of RCA in the industry? What was their reputation? Um, how did they stack up against the other companies?

[0:19:57] Carl Haslett:

Uh, in broadcast they were the premier supplier of equipment and maintainers, because of a well thought out approach to having the manufacturing. And uh, a service company that was available, something like 24, 48 hours on-site. A great customer support, that type of thing.

And in the government side, when I transferred over there, 'cause we had maintained that or tried to maintain that reputation. Um, they were a... A premier government supplier for the aircraft tape recorders. Uh, Small ICBM, some other projects over the years that... Uh, the radar systems, I guess, GWEN, the Ground Wave Emergency Network.

Um, I never went any place that they didn't have a superior reputation like that. And I do have another little funny story. Uh, on one of the broadcast trips to, of all places, imagine this being a place you'd have to travel in the middle of winter. The SYMTE convention was at Disney World. So, we go to Disney World, and I was with one of the other managers on the way back. Um, we go in and we have... In those days, there was a company called Travel Co with an RCA, almost like, uh, the RCA pencil I have here with a logo on it. They had the RCA logo on our tickets. Of course, those days everything was tickets and the funky printing. So, we walk up to the counter and, uh, the guy at the airlines says, "Oh RCA, we love you guys 'cause you do the Space Mountain and this, and then all the attractions. And you support all that stuff, so great." (laughs). The manager says, "Well if you like us so well, why don't you bump us up to first class?" And the guys goes, "Oh yeah, no problem." Well, I assume he's joking, right? We give the ticket, we're ticketed in and we go in to the plane, we're in first class. So, we definitely had, uh... You know, RCA really meant something to the world.

[0:22:18] Male Speaker 2:

Okay, Carl. Um, any other things you want us to talk about? Any, uh, other recollections? Any comments you want to make before we wrap this up?

[0:22:30] Carl Haslett:

Um, just that uh, I'm glad to see that there are efforts to keep RCA alive, in a certain sense. Um, one of the things my father had, which is a cherished relic to me, I actually have not only an RCA small gramophone, but, I also have a wax recording disc. In other words, a record maker. It's a lathe that you record a 78, and it'll play on any 78 machine. To think of the legacy of all that kind of stuff not getting lost in the modern world of, uh, dot coms, and all the other things that are happening that... You know, I... I am glad to see efforts like that, and, uh, would hope that, that kind of thing continue, 'cause that's...

[0:23:35] Male Speaker 2:

Um, you now work for L-3. You've been through all the transitions. Um, is there any residual of the RCA family that you can still see or feel around here?

[0:23:47] Carl Haslett:

Uh, a little bit. Um, uh, most of the folks in upper management right now were with RCA at some point. Um, and we still have softball

games, we still have some, uh... Maybe once a year, we have a little picnic thing outside. Um, I guess it's uh, it's not completely been eliminated, but, I think that' because the people are still... uh, a lot of us are still here. And uh, are interested in that kind of thing, softball tournament and things like that. Keeping that stuff going.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]