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Interview with Frank Keith

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Recommended Citation

RCA Heritage Program, "Interview with Frank Keith" (2015). *RCA Oral History Transcripts*. 20.
https://rdw.rowan.edu/rca_histories/20

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File Name: 0806151412_Frank_Keith.mp3

File Length: 0:18

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[0:00:07] Frank Keith: All right, my name is Frank S Keith, K-E-I-T-H. I started and...I'm a little vague on this, so I think as an electronic technician in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1957 and ended up as being Vice President of International Marketing for RCA in Princeton in 1985-86.

[0:00:33] Interviewer 1: What were some of the first projects that you worked on?

[0:00:36] Frank Keith: The first project would involve the super power tube division of the industrial tube and semi conductor division of RCA, and the super power tube division was formed to make the five megawatt power tubes for the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System.

[0:00:57] Interviewer 1: Was that...some other major projects that you worked on?

[0:01:01] Frank Keith: I was in that division for, uh...from 1957...Well, I started out as electronic technician, then I graduated from college with a degree and was promoted to an engineer. I worked in engineering for two or three years and then I was asked to move to Washington DC, to become the division liaison to the Department of Defense.

[0:01:29] Interviewer 1: Did you feel like RCA recognized your work?

[0:01:31] Frank Keith: Oh yes, very much so.

[0:01:35] Interviewer 1: How did larger companies, or how did changes in the company kind of change over time that you saw in your time there?

[0:01:44] Frank Keith: Well, I was very fortunate because I was able to progress throughout the company, through a number of different divisions, and I thought that was primarily because the leadership at the top of the corporation was looking to move younger people up into more serious positions, and I was a benefactor of that.

[0:02:09] Interviewer 1: And then going off of that, how do you feel...Do you have any other co-workers or supervisors who kind of stick out in your mind?

[0:02:16] Frank Keith: Yeah, early on there was a gentleman by the name Dr. Lloyd Garner, who basically ran the super power tube division of the industrial tube and semi conductor division. He was a significant mentor. Unfortunately he is long deceased. And then later on there was a fellow by the name of Joe Kern who was the Corporate Vice President of Marketing, and he was the one that eventually took me

from a division to the corporate staff in New York City. And the most significant mentor I had I guess was a guy by the name of Ed Griffis who became the CEO of RCA and he helped me along in the latter part of my career.

[0:02:58] Interviewer 1: So kind of overall what was it like to work for RCA for so many years?

[0:03:01] Frank Keith: I thought it was very interesting, very fascinating. In my case I was transferred I think six or seven times, so I was very fortunate to have a very understanding wife. Her attitude was don't come home and tell me about the rumors, come home and tell me where we're going and how much time I have to get ready. I think I pulled that on her six or seven times.

[0:03:24] Interviewer 1: What was it like having to transfer so many times? Did you always feel like you were welcomed within the company no matter where you were?

[0:03:30] Frank Keith: Yes, very much so. Eventually we had three children, and because of the transfers I think all three children have a different perspective on life than they would have had if they'd been located in one place all the time.

[0:03:48] Interviewer 1: Did you spend a lot of time with your co-workers outside of work, like do you remember any office parties or kind of things that happened?

[0:03:54] Frank Keith: Yes I did, when we were in Lancaster Pennsylvania. I had two tours of duty in Lancaster Pennsylvania. That's where I started, moved to Washington DC, and came back to Lancaster, and that was a very...what I call a cohesive group. Everybody knew everybody. Everybody was supportive of everybody, and there were a lot of ... I remember we had a great big...at our house, a great big outdoor lawn party and it was typical of somebody to do that a couple of times during the summer.

[0:04:23] Interviewer 1: Was there any other kind of RCA traditions that socially, maybe not within the company, but the co-workers kind of...the people you worked with had a tradition with?

[0:04:33] Frank Keith: Well, I think we all stuck together. It didn't matter where you were. Even when I was in an international position, there were a number of RCA people, or ex RCA people living in Switzerland where I was living, and we managed to get together several times. So it was a camaraderie that existed.

- [0:04:53] Interviewer 1:** How do you think RCA affected South Jersey overall, just because you've been in so many places? Does South Jersey have a specific kind of draw to it?
- [0:05:01] Frank Keith:** Yeah, I'm not the right person to ask that question, because of the six or seven positions I had. It was only at the very end that I was transferred to Cherry Hill, but I was on the corporate staff at the time, so I was not involved in a South Jersey division, but I...Even to this day everybody...We've lived in South Jersey since 1980, and even to this day people have a fond remembrance of RCA and all it did for the communities in South Jersey.
- [0:05:34] Interviewer 1:** We've heard that people call RCA family a lot, I mean you being in so many different places, like you definitely felt that?
- [0:05:41] Frank Keith:** Definitely, still family. I still communicate with some of the friends that I made in different places all around the world.
- [0:05:53] Interviewer 1:** How would you sum up your career at RCA? Was it kind of a job or did you get more from it as from just having a career there.
- [0:06:00] Frank Keith:** I got more from it than RCA paid me. No question about it. And as I said, so did my family. We were very fortunate to have an international assignment in Geneva, Switzerland. And all three of my kids were with us when we were there. All three speak at least two languages, and one, Casey, speaks four and that's because of that assignment. They all have passports, they think nothing about...If you say let's go to Switzerland or let's go to Argentina tomorrow, they would say let's go.
- [0:06:32] Interviewer 2:** Do you have any particular incidents or stories that you can relate from over your career working for RCA?
- [0:06:40] Frank Keith:** Yeah, I can. When I was in the international part of the...on the corporate staff, we had occasion on several occasions to have the CEO of RCA, Ed Griffis, come to visit us in Geneva, Switzerland. One of the interesting things about Ed was whenever we would have a luncheon or a dinner, he had a...I'm going to use the word 'fetish' but that's not the right word...but he has a fascination that you had to have a roundtable. That's the way he wanted to have lunch, at a round table, not at a square table. So when I knew he was coming to visit us in Geneva, Switzerland, I knew there was a luncheon involved. I had to go out to the restaurant to make sure they had a round table and make sure that the people at the restaurant knew that that was going to be our table for whatever day we were going to have lunch. And by the way he also practiced that for a long time. Griffis had a...he lived in Gladwin, but he was CEO of RCA, so

typically on Mondays and Fridays he would not go to New York City. He would have his office in building 206 in Cherry Hill. And he had a special luncheon come-call a cafeteria set up there especially for him and the other people that worked for him, and it was all round tables.

[0:08:10] Interviewer 1: Oh this is a good question; you said...Being in the international division, do you think that RCA was one of America's most important companies?

[0:08:18] Frank Keith: They were initially, internationally because we owned all the patents that had the black and white television and color television. And any company anywhere in the world wanted to make, that wanted to get into the television business had the license, that technology from RCA. So this goes way back when all the TVs and radios were made with receiving tubes because RCA owned all that technology. At that point in time, I think we were one of the most important companies in the world. Also, RCA initially was a communications company back in 1919, 1920, and everybody respected the communications, the abilities of RCA Globe Com and so forth.

[0:09:07] Interviewer: Was that it? Yeah, thank you very much.

[0:09:09] Frank Keith: Okay. The other thing that was really funny, if you want to pick up on this, I mentioned that Ed Griffis lived in Gladwin and when he came to New York, well he had two chauffeurs. One drove him to New York in the morning, and he would pick Ed it up at his house at like 5:30 or 6 o'clock in the morning. He'd try to get to New York before, try to get to New York before 8:30, when he would have his first meeting scheduled. So that chauffeur was worn out by the time he got home, so he had a second chauffeur that picked him up in the evening, and I distinctly remember having meetings with Ed like at 4:30 in the afternoon, and his chauffeur would show up at 30 Rock at 4:45 so he could get through the Lincoln tunnel before all the traffic. If there was a meeting going on, it didn't matter what it was, at 4:45 he left, went downstairs and found another chauffeur. And the another thing is the morning chauffeur stopped at a news stand...I've forgotten where, in Conshohocken maybe, and picked up the Wall Street journal and New York Times so that by the time Ed got to New York, he knew everything that was in the papers, and you had to know that because you aren't there and try to tell him something that was in the papers he would already have read all about it.

[0:10:31] Interviewer 1: Thank you very much.

[0:10:32] Frank Keith: Yeah.

[0:10:33] Interviewer 2:

Did you have any dealings with John Mastran?

[0:10:36] Frank Keith:

Yes I did. As a matter of fact when you mentioned that the other day, he was in personnel, and now the guy I dealt with in personnel most of the time because I was living overseas was a guy by the name of Frank Muccola who handled all the international money transfer and so forth for personnel, because when I lived in Switzerland I was paid in US dollars and also in Swiss francs. There were people in RCA that handled that whole arrangement for me. I think I mentioned to you there is an RCA personnel guy, Bill Coker, who was...worked for Ed Scanlan at the very end and was involved in...this was in 85', 86' when we were being sold to GE, he was the guy that was involved with all the communications with the RCA employees, so all of us wouldn't jump before the acquisition was taking place. Bill lives in Mount Laurel where I live, yeah. One of the big concerns as we may know in 85' and 86', RCA was sold to GE, and by that time I had RCA branded on my chest, and the underwear I wore had RCA on it and so forth. I had a chance to go to GE up in Fairfield, and I went up there, looked around, and...First of all, we would have to pay at that time...this was 1986, we would have to pay a half million dollars for a house up in Fairfield, Connecticut. I came back and I said to my wife I'm not going to do it because I go up there, I'll be up there for a year, but I'll always be a RCA guy, I won't be a GE guy. Invariably they'll find something wrong with me and I'll be out within a year, so we took our severance and ran, and that was the best decision I ever made.

[0:12:33] Interviewer 2:

What was your opinion of the GE take over?

[0:12:38] Frank Keith:

You really want to get me started on that?

[0:12:40] Interviewer 2:

Yes.

[0:12:41] Frank Keith:

It was the only way Thornton Bradshaw could satisfy the shareholders of RCA. As you may know, RCA was dominated by one person, David Sarnoff from 1919 until 1969. If you read any management books on that, or corporation was dominated for one guy for several generations, it usually takes one additional generation, 20 years, for the residue of that management style to wash through the corporation and then you move on. Now, that's not true today because today they move a little faster, but that's what it was true then. From 1969 until 1985/1986 RCA went through at least one, two, three, four...yeah four CEOs. I'll tell you one other story. The guy that got me to New York was a guy by the name of Andy Conrad. He had hired this guy Joe Kern and they set up a program where they wanted people, high potential people coming out of the divisions to come to New York City, work in the

corporate staff for three or four years and then go into another division, not the one they came from, but some other one. I was designated to go to the consumer electronics division from Lancaster to New York to Indianapolis, but that never happened because Andy Conrad, as you may know, was caught not having paid his federal taxes and his New York state taxes, so overnight he couldn't come into the state of New York anymore. He was fired. Ed Griffis, who at that time was the President of the RCA service company, became the CEO of RCA. Ed and I became very good friends, but then Ed made the big bet on SelectaVision

[0:14:41]



...which was a play only system, and then couldn't compete with the Sony Betamax, and Ed got bounced out, and they brought in Bob Fredrick from GE. Thornton Bradshaw was Chairman, and Bob showed up on a...Well, Bob was supposed to show up...did show up on a Monday morning and Thornton Bradshaw, the Chairman of the corporation, called me, because I was international, the week before and said "Bob has reported to be very interested in international, would you make a presentation to this new CEO of RCA on Monday morning in a field that we think he's interested in." So I went up to the 53rd floor at 30 Rock, and met with Mr. Fredrick and some other people and gave him an hour, an hour and a half presentation on RCAs international business. I don't know whether I should be quoted on this or not, but I came downstairs to where my office was...And by the way Fredrick was supposed to be the guy that was going to save RCA. This was the last chance Thornton Bradshaw had to get somebody in there to really turn the corporation around. I went downstairs to my buddies and said "Hey guys, we're done." This guy doesn't have the vision, he doesn't have the charisma, he doesn't have what the corporation needs to get it past this 20 year cycle. Bradshaw picked up on that in couple of months, and put the company up for sale. The company was sold for what, I think 65 dollars a share, and the share price had been hanging around 40 dollars a share for years and years and years, and that's how he got the shareholders satisfied. GE bought us and broke us up into a million pieces in no time. GE kept...The only thing GE kept...

[0:16:41]

...for long term was NBC, and they made more money...GE paid I think 3.8 or 3.6 billion dollars for RCA. In a matter of four or five years they made all that money back just by keeping NBC.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]