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Interview with John Dodson

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[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[0:00:08] John Dodson: My name is John Dodson. I graduated from college in 1954 and came to work for RCA. After the training program I was assigned to the Missile and Surface Radar Division in Moorestown. I worked there for 20 years and then transferred to Camden to work with the RCA team from Burlington in Camden in the Classified Communications Business. Retired in 1994 and right now I'm enjoying my life as a retiree.

[0:00:44] Male Speaker: Very good. The first project you worked on when you showed up, I presumed, right out of school, what was it like?

[0:00:53] John Dodson: It was pretty scary for me that I worked on receivers for the instrumentation radars that were used in Los Alamos and on the downrange for a damp and about the most interesting thing it happened to me besides from working on a little chasse was I managed to meet General Sarnoff in the model shop at Moorestown and I didn't really know that much about him but it was a pretty impressive thing to get to meet him.

After the instrumentation radars were, they were still going along their way but BMEWS came in as our big program and I worked all the way through BMEWS until, basically, the whole program. That was probably the biggest program that I worked on.

Following BMEWS, we were having a hard time with getting new jobs and the departments were given the business opportunities on their own rather than having marketing go on and get them. Our department under Marty Ferguson and Jim Sullivan who were two terrific people assigned me to read the congressional business letter everyday to try to search out new business. It's like cold calling your customers and we found an award from Rome Air Development Center for a new – they called it – The Wide Band Exciter. We had to write a letter to get approved. We got approved and then we wrote a proposal and we won, mostly because I think we underbid the other competitor.

[0:02:55] We ended up working through that and we struck for about a two or three-year relationship where we got out of business that basically stopped the layoffs in our department. After that, AEGIS came along and that became a really big effort although my contributions to AEGIS were only as a troubleshooter. I got into the tactical radar

business and then we got in to the two-pound radar which we ended up in funny places like Pigeon Roost, Arkansas, Eglin Air Force Base, places like that trying to peddle the two-pound radar that actually weighed 10 pounds. We managed to sell about 300 of those and that was about the time – excluding the video disc – that was about the end of my assignments in Moorestown.

I moved into Camden with all of Jim Sullivan's group and we teamed with RCA Camden and RCA Burlington to win a contract with a classified customer and that turned out to be a very interesting 20 years. We worked with really good people from our customer in the south – I shouldn't say that. I was really impressed by them. I think they were probably the best people we ever worked with. They were competent, they had extremely high ethics and they were a pleasure to do business with and there were some nice traveling and some funny things that happened in there but probably we can't talk about them because of the locations. That's about it.

[0:04:56] Male Speaker: When you first started, did you have a mentor, or anything like that?

[0:05:03] John Dodson: It ended up being Jim Sullivan. I worked for him as...He was my leader, he was my manager over the years and he was...he was head of systems engineering, I worked for him. He and Maurice Timkin are the closest friends I had in my total career.

[0:05:30] Male Speaker: What was Jimmy like?

[0:05:33] John Dodson: First of all, he's probably the finest man I ever met and he had a unique way of doing business. He never...he was always able to go in and get something done without hurting anybody's feelings. If he had a lot of jobs where he had to go in and actually take over a job that had failed for one reason or another, he never blamed anybody. He just went in and said, "Here we go. This is how are we going to get out of this together," and it was beautiful. I thought he was really terrific.

I think we would have lost the classified program had it not been for his relationship with some of our customer and I also believed that he allowed us to get access that we could never have gotten except for their trust in him. He was a lot... as good as it gets.

[0:06:30] Male Speaker: What about your coworkers?

[0:06:33] John Dodson: I think I was privileged to work with what I thought was the best engineering team in the world. George, you probably don't know him Jim. Rippies, he is from Moorestown but besides Jim Sullivan there is George Stevens, there was Dean Gamacus and Andy

Chrisanthis who unfortunately died early but in Camden, Conrad Haber. I think he is a fantastic engineer.

[0:07:11] Male Speaker: What was the work environment like in RCA?

[0:07:16] John Dodson: I thought it was pretty good. I did work for some other companies later in my career and it was completely...I felt a completely different atmosphere. Moorestown, I always thought was very cooperative. People would help one another. People would sacrifice for your job. I think they did a great job and I think Tom Howard was one of the best engineers. Unfortunately, he committed suicide while working. It was a terrible loss.

We teamed with two different companies and one company was very good technically but they were absolutely horrible to work with. They were like all individuals. They didn't work with one another and they didn't work with us and it was very hard getting anything done. The other company was ethically bad and not too good technically. We only teamed with them once, so that was about as bad as it gets.

[0:08:38] Male Speaker: Outside of work, did you ever associate with any of your coworkers?

[0:08:43] John Dodson: Yeah. Particularly at Moorestown we were all younger and we formed sports and dinner associations, we went to baseball games together, we bowled, we had parties. As we all got older, we settled on maybe three or four like the Timkins, the Rippies that I talked to you about and the Sullivans, pretty much like that. We had a fair-sized family. I think we all had fair-sized families, so we were pretty busy.

[0:09:29] Male Speaker: We've heard this term come up again and again, "the RCA family." Does that mean anything to you?

[0:09:37] John Dodson: It did and I think it would not probably survive in this environment but the RCA family... an engineer who was working for me, George Ombruster, he had his – I think – his second heart attack. He couldn't come to work and I used to take his paychecks to him for two years 'til he could get recovered and get back to work. I don't think there'd be many companies doing that now. One of our managers, Marty Ferguson he personally put my oldest daughter through college by allowing her to work not only during the summer but over Christmas vacations and you name it. She's our only child that didn't have a debt when she came out of college.

[0:10:39] Male Speaker: What about your supervisors? What was it like to work for them?

[0:10:42] John Dodson: I only worked for one, Jim Sullivan, and so it was nice. I spent 40 years with the same supervisor.

[0:10:56] Male Speaker: You just made a passing reference to the video disc but we've learned a lot about it and we've already seen how it became a huge failure for RCA. What was your association with the video disc and why do you think it failed?

[0:11:19] John Dodson: We were involved because our general manager volunteered our services to Princeton and to Consumer Electronics. The basic decision that was made that was wrong was not to use a laser contact for the making of the disc. RCA elected to use contact recording and the cutter for the disc, at best, could run at 33:1 real time, so if you had to go on an hour program it took 33 hours which was totally impractical.

What they had hoped to do was to continue to improve the cutter but they didn't know where they were going to end up, so they asked us to build a piece of equipment that would digitize the information, the raw material off the video tape or the tape recorder. We would digitize it and then we could play it back at any speed that the cutter happened to end up at. We also were supposed to have an enhancement box that Princeton Labs was going to make to put in series with the readout so that they could, I guess, emphasize color and even more definition. We never saw that. We never made... That never got delivered.

Princeton was involved as a technical overseer and I believed there were two schools of thought--that one was in favor of using the contact recording and the present cutter and another group was pushing something else which involved the flying-spot scanner. I never found out what it was or what's into it.

[0:13:18] It seemed like there was a lot of tension between some groups even for something as simple as buying the A/D converter. There were only two units in the country that would work, one was completely linear and one was an inter-writer. We picked the completely linear one but we had to go to Princeton and hook it up, played material into it, play it back and let them judge which was the better picture. We did that but time just passed and finally the cutter got to be 2:1 and they said, "Okay, we can do it," but they didn't need to slow down so that was it for us. When they completed making the disc they found out that Indianapolis didn't have any software material. They had Elmer Fudd and somebody else and they had to go off and this basically stopped the program and went off to try to get some software material that they could actually sell. That was about the end of ours.

The funnies part was the story I told you a little bit earlier about when Jim and I went over to accept our honors and awards for getting this job and Mr. Layer proceeded to tell us that if we overran the program, both of us would be fired and instead of getting a big pat on the back we thought we were going to get, we ran back out of the office to try to find out what we're going to do. That was about it. We had virtually no say on what was done regarding the disc. We just built the little machine and hope that it would be used.

[0:15:20] Male Speaker: Basically, they just took Jimmy and his team and stuffed them into this area to make it work, is that what happened here?

[0:15:29] John Dodson: Yeah, there were only three of us. There was Jim and Tom Bolger who was a great engineer and myself. It was a pretty simple thing. We bought the video recorder from Ampex and we actually measured the specs on the Ampex machine and they didn't work. They didn't meet their specs so we consult their representative and the guy says, "You're the first guys that ever measured the things," but Ampex did the right thing. They went back and they fixed the – they got their dynamic range the right thing – they fixed it all up and they went on use that to sell as a competitor against us, of course. We used that and all we had to do was just convert it over to whatever output they wanted but they never got around to using it.

[0:16:25] Male Speaker: We've also gotten some indications that there were some very, very long delays in the development of the disc. Is that what your experience was?

[0:16:34] John Dodson: Yea, We were on schedule. We made sure of that but we were a wrinkle on that old program. I think eventually if they got to get the thing down to work and play, say, 4:1 or something like that they might have given it a whirl but the thing it took the time was to improve the cutter and when they got it down to 2:1 they thought that was enough.

[0:17:07] Male Speaker: Being an engineer requires keeping up with the technology. Did RCA help at all with that?

[0:17:13] John Dodson: Yeah. They offered a lot of courses and it was pretty tough. You worked in a group that if you didn't keep up, you might not be there that much longer. Yeah.

[0:17:31] Male Speaker: The assessment of RCA in the technical community, what's your perception of that?

[0:17:39] John Dodson: Do you mean when I was working?

[0:17:41] Male Speaker: Yes.

[0:17:43] John Dodson: I thought in the defense electronic business that we were, I thought we were very close to the top, probably self-serving a judgment but I didn't work... had to run in's with other companies and I think that if you counted meeting schedules and cost with the technical, I think we were very good.

[0:18:07] Male Speaker: We've also heard from others about the RCA parties, the Christmas party, etc. did you have any experience with that?

[0:18:19] John Dodson: Yes. The one thing I learned was never take a vote on what to serve at a Christmas party because you'll need at least 50% of the people. So...yeah, I thought they were nice; particularly the ones at Tavistock were nice. I guess those things aren't probably allowed anymore.

[0:18:51] Male Speaker: You were here in the transition to GE?

[0:18:55] John Dodson: Yes.

[0:18:57] Male Speaker: What changed? What was it like?

[0:19:02] John Dodson: The accounting changed. They are much more aggressive business wise and the atmosphere changed. I didn't consider them a people-friendly company. It didn't affect me but it affected some of the younger people that were just passed 35 or 40. They were not allowed to be in the GE fast track program. I thought that was unfair. Basically, I felt that they were better suited to be in a commercial business because cost-plus contracts you don't benefit yourself by laying off people that could be working for you. I will say on GE's behalf that they did honor all their commitments to their retirement programs and things like that.

[0:20:11] Male Speaker: Okay. How would you sum up your time at RCA – your career? Was it just a job or was it more than that?

[0:20:22] John Dodson: I would like to think it was more than that. I had the privilege of working with some really good people and having some pretty interesting jobs. I, although I was a manager. I was never in management. I was a technical manager and that made it a lot nicer.

[0:20:46] Male Speaker: Okay. Did you feel that the RCA management valued your input?

[0:20:56] John Dodson: Yes. I think that was rather... the nice part about it. We had a pretty, pretty reasonable exchange between, as managers, because most of us had known one another over 40 years by the time it was over.

[0:21:19] Male Speaker: How did it feel to retire?

[0:21:24] John Dodson: Great. We had been very fortunate in life. We had four children, ten grandchildren and everybody is in pretty good shape.

[0:21:36] Male Speaker: What was the best thing about working for RCA?

[0:21:41] John Dodson: I don't know. You got to work on things you enjoyed. You got to work with people you liked, doesn't get much better than that.

[0:21:51] Male Speaker: What was the worst thing?

[0:21:56] John Dodson: There weren't a lot of them. There were just a few incidents mostly with managers that were there for a short time but most of the time it was pretty good.

[0:22:07] Male Speaker: Good. Any particular stories or incidents that you recall as you worked through RCA, worked on the programs?

[0:22:20] John Dodson: I think the funniest one was when I was with Max Lear; I always got a kick out of telling that one but otherwise pretty level.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]