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Interview with Bob Reisse

RCA Heritage Program

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[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[0:00:07] Bob:

Yeah. My name is Bob Reisse. I'm from Cherry Hill, New Jersey. I started RCA not as out of college, I started at Bendix Aviation out of college, and I lasted there four months. It was such a boring job that, uh, it was hard to take, and the draft was on. And you, if you quit or drafted for a job, you got, uh, drafted into the Army. And I met a guy on the bus going out, I said, "How do you like your job?" He said, "This is garbage." And I said, "What can we do?" And he says, "Well, you can join... we can join the navy, go to OCS, and it's three years. So you lose an extra year, but you're an officer. You're getting more pay."

And so that's what we did. We, uh, went down... we were in New York. We were in downtown New York, and signed up for the, uh, Navy, up in, uh, Newport and, uh, we went up there, and it was four or so months. And then, uh, after graduation, they sent me out to, uh, Treasure Island in California for six months of electronic study, which I learned more there than I did in college. It was, uh, five days a week, eight hours a day. No duties, so we had the weekends off. And we, uh, bought a car, and we used to travel around California, and all the, uh, parks, the national parks and everything, so it was great. And then I had to serve three years in the navy, and I got out in '48, I think. Or '53, '50, um, '58 I guess, and I started RCA.

[0:01:59]

I came in, and I think in interviewed with... by Bye Pewitt. I think he was there, Sam, uh, Bye Pewitt, and he was very good. And he hired me, and that's where I started. And, uh, I was there till GE came in, and GE bought up RCA. And they said... I was near retirement. I was within a year of retiring, and they said, "We'll give you a year's pay, and, uh, you could take your lump sum and leave." And uh, that's what I did... I [chuckle] it was great. I took the lump sum, and the one year's pay, and left and uh, it was... it was a good deal.

[0:02:44] Male Speaker:

So you started at RCA around '58?

[0:02:47] Bob:

Yeah.

[0:02:49] Male Speaker:

Okay. What was your first project?

[0:02:50] Bob:

Oh boy. I... probably just the little amplifiers, and then, ah, then I got into...uh, multipliers started, and I was able to, uh, get a job, uh, in ATL because I said before that the fella I was working for, we built a radio this big, and then we're gonna make a small box radio. And he

called a meeting of... he had seven engineers sitting around and he said, "What color are we gonna make the knobs?" And I said, "I can't, I can't work for this guy. It's gonna be a disaster." So I was able to go up to Advanced Technology for Max Malchow, and, uh, Max went out to somewhere in the west, and came back, and knew all about multipliers which... varactor multipliers, which was a brand new thing at the time.

And he taught us, he gave us the formulas; you look at the diode, you could look at the capacitor, the voltage breakdown, and you could tell how much power it would handle, you could tell the efficiency by the Q of the diode. You could tell everything that was going to come out. And he in the lab ... we spent a couple of months in the lab just building units, not for production, just for test purposes. So we built them, and you measure them, and you could tell that his formulas were correct. The efficiency came out, the power came out, everything was working.

So, when I got a... then I got a call back to go back to my old group. And a good engineer, George Inishamore, was working on a multiplier. And he was working on it for about 15, 20 days, and he wasn't getting anywhere. He was using voltage pump, which Max said you don't use voltage pump. You got to use a current pump. Instead of putting the diode this way, you put it this way.

[0:04:50]

So, uh, the group leader says, "How long will it take you to make a breadboard?" And I said, "About three hours." So he says, "Go ahead," because we... that's what we were doing for months. We were just doing the same stuff. So I did, and that's that started the multiplier, uh, game; that worked out. And, uh, then I was the multiplier man for a couple of years. It was very interesting.

[0:05:17] Male Speaker:

Do you have mentors? Did you have people looking after you when you first started here?

[0:05:22] Bob:

Um, yeah, I'm sure there were. Uh, I think the group leader... I think Bye Pewitt was very good. He was very hands on, very instructional. So, I think he... the group leader usually provided the efforts, yeah.

[0:05:46] Male Speaker:

So, what project do you remember the best?

[0:05:49] Bob:

Well, I think the , I worked on the TIROS. The first thing was this ... the TIROS Satellite. We put on a beacon transmitter that just... that could locate where it was. And then we went on to the one-man in space, which I think was Mercury. We made the communications or the PA for him. And then the two-man was Gemini. And then the

space station, I think, was the most interesting, because going to the moon and all this business was very interesting. So, uh, that was, I would say the most interesting job.

[0:06:34] Male Speaker: And what did you do on the lunar projects?

[0:06:38] Bob: Well, the lunar would be the ... well it was all the transmitter. When the... they said when the man walked on the moon and said, "One small step," we made the PA. And it was in the back of his helmet. And then in the beginning they were worried that the radiation might affect his brain and whatnot, but somehow they got over that. And uh, the PA was right behind his, his left ear, I believe. So he said, "One small step for mankind" and etcetera, and it was very exciting and interesting at the time.

[0:07:22] Male Speaker: Did you have any association when Apollo 13 happened?

[0:07:27] Bob: Uh, no, just... just the news... uh, that was it. No, I had nothing, uh, nothing more than that.

[0:07:38] Male Speaker: As far as your work at RCA, how do you feel the company saw your work?

[0:07:46] Bob: I think uh, I think I was treated very well. I think they, they were very fair. And uh, um, I really had no complaints about RCA. Uh, when GE came in, I... well they gave us the offer to leave, which was terrific. I was near... I was ready. All my kids were... I had six kids, and they were all, they were all through school. So I was ready to take it easy. And they gave us an offer, as I said of the one-year's pay, and your lump sum you could take. And um, it was a great deal [laugh] so I... I took it, and no, no regrets.

[0:08:41] Male Speaker: What about your colleagues, working with your colleagues?

[0:08:46] Bob: Uh, enjoyed it for the most part. There were a few... there was one fella who, Sam didn't mention his name and I won't either, but we used to watch him. He would leave at four o'clock, go to the bar across the street, and we'd look out the window and [chuckle] and watch him. And finally he, he was an electrical engineer. He got out to... they hired him out to Moorestown, and we were happy of that because he was really, uh, just, uh, a drag.

And he used to go... at lunchtime, he'd sit at his desk, he'd put a kind of a cone-shaped thing over his head and go to sleep and hope nobody would wake him till five. But uh, he got out to Moorestown, and he, he left secret documents on a bar, and that kind of triggered his [chuckle] the end of his career. They [chuckle] they filed notice against him and they let him go, but um...

[0:09:48] Male Speaker: But that was one.

[0:09:50] Bob: That was one.

[0:09:51] Male Speaker: What about the rest of your...

[0:09:52] Bob: No um, very, very good. I think they were... it was a good group. We had interesting times, and, uh, not so much outside. I don't think outside, but at work, uh, pretty much. And they did have uh... well they had ski groups and, you know, they had other little exercises going on, but uh... it was, it was pretty nice, pretty nice.

[0:10:21] Male Speaker: So what was the best thing about working for RCA?

[0:10:25] Bob: Well, what I liked was the 40 hours and not much overtime. Some... there were some groups that they did want all this overtime, and, uh, I didn't like overtime. I didn't like coming in Saturdays for four hours, and when you could work eight if you wanted, But, I really liked to keep it... I liked to keep it to the 40 hours straight, uh, so that was the... and they weren't pushy. If you didn't want to work overtime you... they let you off a little easier.

[0:11:03] Male Speaker: What was the worst thing about working for RCA?

[0:11:09] Bob: Oh, I can't think of a negative. Like Bendix Aviation, I could come up with a few of [chuckle] when I started at Bendix Aviation, but RCA was pretty good. They were flexible. If you, if you wanted to go to a, a different group you could, you know, and I was able to do that. And I have no complaints about RCA. I think it was a great, great company.

[0:11:37] Male Speaker: What about RCA's influence on South Jersey?

[0:11:41] Bob: [Sigh] I don't know, I... there were a lot of people... there were certainly a lot of people working in Camden, and in Moorestown, and what not, but I think that was it, just providing pay and the benefits for the people. I don't think they, I don't think they went out of their way to influence South Jersey. They just wanted a place to build equipment and, uh, get engineers and other people there. So, I don't think there was a...

[0:12:16] Male Speaker: In your neighborhood, were there other people working for RCA?

[0:12:20] Bob: Uh, yes. I used to drive in with Sam. He was um, probably a half a mile, mile away from me. And I was the driver, but I had a diesel Rabbit. We used to go with the diesel Rabbit, and I'd pick him up, and we'd go into Camden, and because he had uh... Sam always had Lincolns. He liked them big cars [chuckle] but the, uh, economy was

in the [chuckle] diesel Rabbit. So, uh, it got good mileage and not much problems with it.

[0:13:01] Male Speaker: So, you didn't spend much time with your coworkers outside of work?

[0:13:06] Bob: Uh, I would say not, no, because by... you know when we got married, then we had six kids, and that keeps you pretty busy, uh, without getting into too much other... [chuckle]

[0:13:23] Male Speaker: With reference to the RCA family, what's that mean to you?

[0:13:28] Bob: Well, to me it was just the, the group you work with basically. That, that was it. The uh, the family was just the fellas or the group that you were mainly with. Uh, that's to me, that's what it was.

[0:13:48] Male Speaker: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. So, how would you sum up your experience?

[0:13:54] Bob: I, uh, I enjoyed it. I, uh... the, the work was very interesting. The pay was good. The hours were good. Uh, the vacation time, I got... I ended up with four weeks at the... towards the end of my career. Four weeks was a good vacation time, and you were able to take it. They didn't nitpick when you, you know, half a day here or half a day there. They let you take the time off so it was good, wonderful.

[0:14:30] Male Speaker: How did your kids view your job at RCA?

[0:14:33] Bob: I think, I think they enjoyed that it was secure. I think they enjoyed that my wife kept them busy and, uh, fed, and all that [chuckle]. And, you, know were able to relax and have a good time. And we'd... swimming pool and all that business. So, I think they were happy. They still speak to us [chuckle].

[0:14:59] Male Speaker: So, would you sum this up by saying, well, this was just a job, or was this a good journey, or how would you...

[0:15:06] Bob: I think it was a very good job. It was interesting. Uh, that first job I had was boring at Bendix Aviation. That was boring and that's a tough, that's a tough way to go through a week with a boring job. This was always interesting, interesting work and, uh, good people, so it was great.

[0:15:28] Male Speaker: Did you notice a change in environment with the GE takeover?

[0:15:33] Bob: Yes, I think the... GE came in, and the first thing they wanted to do was, uh, get rid of people. They came in, and they had their own engineering group doing similar work. So they bought... I think they bought, they bought RCA just to get the television part of RCA. They didn't need the engineering part because they had it. So their big

thing, as soon as they came in, they wanted to shrink the engineering department and... uh, which turned out to be an opportunity because they... if you wanted to leave, they would give you a year's pay and, um, if you were in the right position, you could go right into retirement, so... and I was in that position. So it was it was terrific [chuckle]. It worked out great.

[0:16:29] Male Speaker: Anything you want to add to uh, the story, Bob?

[0:16:33] Bob: No, I, uh... the work was always interesting, and that's the main thing. You're going in there for 40 hours or so, and you want an interesting job, and it was... uh, the work was interesting and you could... if you wanted to switch positions, if you didn't like what you were doing there, if it got boring, you could go down and you had to see the manager or the chief engineer, but you could go somewhere else and, uh, that was a good opportunity.

[0:17:02] Male Speaker: This one small step for a man...

[0:17:04] Bob: Mm-hmm.

[0:17:06] Male Speaker: You made that radio, the PA.

[0:17:09] Bob: I made the, the PA, yes.

[0:17:11] Male Speaker: How did you feel when he, when he was doing it?

[0:17:14] Bob: Well, I think we were... [chuckle] we wanted to make sure it worked. He had, he had uh, I think, backups. He had, I think two backups beside the main one. So, we were kind of confident. The, the first thing though, uh, with NASA... maybe I told you, I think. They, uh, were so crazy in the beginning. They wanted to make sure all the parts were high reliable. They wanted to look at the sand before they made the transistors. They wanted to know everything. And we couldn't get anything out the door because they had so many tests. None of the parts would last through the tests.

You had all these tests that we couldn't get any parts to use because everything failed. So finally NASA said, uh, "Forget that, give us your best shot." And then we were able to make a radio. I mean, the parts were reliable, but if you'd put enough, uh, sanctions on them, enough tests, you can break anything. So, once they relaxed, and we had like, a couple of backups... they didn't have just one radio, they had backups. So everything worked out, uh, fine. Uh, we didn't have... I don't believe we had a... we might've had one failure but not... it was nothing, uh, nothing big.

[0:18:40] Male Speaker: Okay, very good.

[0:18:43] Bob: Was an interesting time [chuckle].

[0:18:46] Male Speaker: Good. All right, Bob. Well, I appreciate you taking your time out for this. This is important to get all of the story down.

[0:18:52] Bob: Mm-hmm. Yeah, it was a good, a good company and uh, very interesting people too. We met some very interesting people.

[0:19:00] Male Speaker: Yeah.

[0:19:02] Bob: I told you about Max Malchow [chuckle] that's a... that's my...

[0:19:06] Male Speaker: You told them. Tell me.

[0:19:08] Bob: Yeah. Well, I um, when uh, the guy wanted me to... we were going to build a small box and uh, he wanted to know what color we were gonna make the knobs. I got out, and they put me up with Max. And Max was, he looked like a farmer, but he was the smartest guy I've ever met there. He taught us the multipliers, varactor multipliers. And I told you he gave us the formulas. How much power it could handle, how... what the efficiency would be, everything. So, then when I got back and built that first multiplier that went into production, it was, it was great and uh, he just... he gave you all the knowledge you needed, and that was a wonderful thing. But, he was a good man.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]