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Interview with Joe Howe

RCA Heritage Program

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[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[0:00:07] Joe: Joe Howe, spelled H-O-W-E. Not "How-e", Joe Howe. First at RCA, that was co-op. That was co-op out of Saint Joe's University. The monitor there said he decided after looking around the country to start a co-op program, so all of you students--

[0:00:34] Speaker 2: Mm-hm.

[0:00:35] Joe: Get together, talk it over. We did, and he said, "Okay, now go out and find yourselves a job as a co-op."

[0:00:45] Speaker 2: Mm-hm.

[0:00:46] Joe: So I took a train from south Philadelphia all the way up and around, over the bridge to Camden., walked in, introduced myself, and said, "I'm here to find a co-op job." That was it. They gave me a job.

[0:01:02] Speaker 2: What did you do?

[0:01:05] Joe: Initially, I worked in a parts department, incoming equipment to feed the rest of the engineers there on the programs they were working on. That was the first start.

[0:01:20] Speaker 2: And, when did you return to RCA?

[0:01:24] Joe: Well, typically as a co-op does, at the right times of the year you go back and you do your studying, and then you go back to the job as a co-op. So it was back and forth throughout a four year period.

[0:01:39] Speaker 3: Five year.

[0:01:40] Joe: Five year period. Yeah.

[0:01:43] Speaker 2: And you said you were in the service for a few years, for six months? And then did you return—

[0:01:48] Joe: Yeah, I was under protest because I was doing my PhD when I got a phone call saying you're drafted. I said, "You can't do that, I have a..." You know, "I'm here, and I have a part that I have to finish." They said, "You better show up." So, I showed up and shipped me out to the woods.

[0:02:11] Speaker 3: Fort Dix.

[0:02:12] Joe: Fort Dix, cold. Typically barracks from World War II. Cold water shaving, showering, bitter cold. Yeah, I enjoyed... That's a fun thing, I did not enjoy it.

[0:02:33] **Speaker 2:** Yes. Then you returned to RCA right after that as a full employee?

[0:02:38] **Joe:** Right back, and they by that time had a critical skills program and shipped me up to Fort Monmouth.

[0:02:47] **Speaker 3:** Right, well that was with the service.

[0:02:49] **Joe:** With the service. It was a service program at Fort Monmouth, and I went back into Camden but they sent me up there, and I spent the rest of the time, those whoever, part of RCA but studying at Fort Monmouth.

[0:03:06] **Speaker 2:** And as an engineer with RCA, what project do you remember doing that was really important?

[0:03:15] **Joe:** Two. One was ... morning time she would come down and find me at the dining room, dining there, doing the arithmetic unit for the 501 processor. When we took on our competitors and they killed us. I think we released I don't know how many machines to factory, but didn't go. Yeah.

[0:03:44] **Speaker 3:** Yeah, I remember the name Bismack, is that what we're talking about?

[0:03:47] **Joe:** No.

[0:03:48] **Speaker 3:** No?

[0:03:48] **Joe:** No, the RCA 501.

[0:03:49] **Speaker 3:** Okay. Okay.

[0:03:51] **Joe:** 501.

[0:03:52] **Speaker 2:** And then you said there was another one that you felt was another major project?

[0:03:52] **Joe:** Yeah, I had a group of people, very talented engineers, who did a lot of the work for the government in Washington. All the different departments that—

[0:04:16] **Speaker 4:** Different agencies?

[0:04:19] **Joe:** Agencies, yeah that we're doing work there. It was exciting work, and it was interesting work. Including putting a man on the moon where one of our engineers figured out how to use a specific board that he had—

[0:04:33] **Speaker 4:** Nosson.

[0:04:34] **Joe:** Nosson figured out—

[0:04:35] **Speaker 4:** He's going to be here next week for an interview.

[0:04:36] **Joe:** Good. He's the one that did the design.

[0:04:41] **Speaker 4:** That's right.

[0:04:42] **Joe:** From an existing board with a couple components changes to measure the distance that they were going down; either foot-by-foot or fractional foot-by-foot to put it down softly on the moon. Did it at home at home at night, brought it in; built the board, went down to Washington, and said, "Okay, here's the backup." Didn't want to trust just one plump.

[0:05:07] **Speaker 4:** That's right.

[0:05:07] **Joe:** Yeah, he gently lowered them down on the moon. He was a very creative electrical engineer. Very logical.

[0:05:18] **Speaker 4:** One step for...

[0:05:21] **Speaker 3:** Yeah, giant step...

[0:05:22] **Joe:** Yes.

[0:05:25] **Speaker 2:** So, did you have a mentor, anybody like that, that helped to bring you into RCA family?

[0:05:32] **Joe:** When there, yes. It was somebody that I mentored first, and then I worked for him and he reversed it. That was John Rittenhouse.

[0:05:44] **Speaker 2:** And what did he teach you? What do you feel like was the most important thing that he taught you?

[0:05:49] **Speaker 4:** The most.

[0:05:50] **Joe:** What do I want, mostly. Well just... He didn't teach me in the sense of a course or so forth.

[0:06:02] **Speaker 2:** Yeah.

[0:06:03] **Joe:** He just shoveled engineers into me, and built up the thing. So did Jack Welsh when he came in. That was a whole other indication when the bad tough guy from outside came in and took over. Bought RCA.

[0:06:22] **Speaker 2:** Yeah. So you became the manager, and how did you... What was your philosophy in trying to manage people? How did you work with your employees that you were managing?

[0:06:34] **Joe:** Let them go. Let them do their thing. Stay out of their way. They're very good, opinionated, and capable people.

[0:07:01] **Speaker 2:** So, you really let people go?

[0:07:06] **Joe:** Yeah.

[0:07:06] **Speaker 2:** So, were there some... Well you told us about the person that was working on the moon thing.

[0:07:11] **Joe:** Yeah.

[0:07:12] **Speaker 2:** Some other important people ... some other ways that you feel like you just let people just do what they needed to do, and you helped foster their success?

[0:07:24] **Joe:** Heavy on them, light on me. It was a good group of engineers. I think, I don't remember how many there were.

[0:07:32] **Speaker 2:** Mm-hm.

[0:07:33] **Joe:** Less than a dozen.

[0:07:35] **Speaker 3:** I was always impressed by the fact that sometimes Joe was the boss and the other person was the person under him, and then they would switch role, because of the way... Like Don Parker was his boss for a while and then worked for him for a while. I think they were perfectly, as far as I knew, there was not contention over that. That's what the job required at the time.

[0:07:58] **Speaker 4:** Now, may have had juncture, Joe became Chief Engineer.

[0:08:02] **Speaker 2:** Right.

[0:08:05] **Speaker 4:** Don Parker became Business Manager of the business area. So he went from manager position of 30 or 40 engineers to the division of 500 engineers, 500 or 600. So that's a significant step. He was definitely qualified because another manager could have been chosen but they chose Joe Howe, so how about that.

[0:08:25] **Joe:** Thank you.

[0:08:28] **Speaker 2:** So by becoming a Division Engineer or a Division Leader, did that change how you were dealing with people below you? No?

[0:08:38] **Joe:** We were all one... I hope. I hope. That's what we were trying to do.

[0:08:42] **Speaker 2:** That was the philosophy, you're all one. Did you feel like you got things coming from the top, too, that you were trying to manage?

[0:08:51] **Joe:** Not before Jack Welsh came in. It was RCA then.

[0:08:56] **Speaker 2:** Yeah.

[0:08:57] **Joe:** When he came in with his reputation, we listened to Jack. Whatever he wanted, he told you, expected.

- [0:09:08] Speaker 2:** So, how did you... When it was RCA then, how did you get to do what the larger RCA wanted you to do, and lead those people below you?
- [0:09:17] Joe:** Well, management was almost of the same ilk, until they lost their way in a father-son, hierarchy and put too much money into the retirement fund for the corporation, and it was bloated. GE, when they came in saw that they syphoned all the money out of that, and bought RCA, with RCA's money.
- [0:09:53] Speaker 2:** How did you and your division keep up with all the technological changes?
- [0:09:58] Joe:** Frequent visits to Washington D.C. because most of our work at that time, with the engineers reporting to me worked for the intelligence agencies in the government around Washington.
- [0:10:13] Speaker 2:** What was it like working with Washington?
- [0:10:16] Joe:** Good. Good, they invited us down frequently. I remember clearly the time they said, "Hurry down." The overhead look down arrangement that they had gotten from us was shining on buses of people coming in striking. It was a big strike at the time. "Come on down and look at this." And we did, and we saw people getting off, pouring off the buses down there, arguing with the federal government about, I guess, money, hours, so forth. But, we got along with the people down there very well. They were kind enough to say, "You guys got to see this." And we rushed down, Rittenhouse and I in my car; took John down, too.
- [0:11:10] Speaker 4:** So you went... As the Chief Engineer he became promoted to a Division Vice President of the communications systems in Camden.
- [0:11:17] Joe:** That's more than I know.
- [0:11:19] Speaker 4:** And that had five major groups. They sailed for the year to over two hundred fifty million dollars so he was responsible in that position. So all the managers, they weren't called Vice Presidents. Joe was the only Vice President, reported to him, and so frequent managing reviews etcetera. That's what you were the shining best to him.
- [0:11:46] Joe:** Yeah Joe (P), you should be sitting here.
- [0:11:50] Speaker 2:** I wonder what it was like... What was the best thing about working for RCA?
- [0:11:58] Joe:** Our priest at Saint Joe's told us, "Go find a job." Okay, and he scattered about, I don't know, seven, eight, or nine of us to go out and start a co-op program at the university.
- [0:12:18] Speaker 2:** Mm-hm.
- [0:12:18] Joe:** I don't remember why I picked Camden to go over and see RCA, but I did. That was a good thing for me, but I don't recall why I left southwest

Philadelphia and upper Darby and got on a train, crossed the bridge, and went down there. But I went seeking... We had no guidance. "Go find yourself a job." "Where?" "Anywhere, just go do it." That was the priest.

[0:12:53] Speaker 2: What is your best memory of working there?

[0:12:55] Joe: People. People. Walked in, the first thing the guy said was, "Come up and I'll talk you into what you should be wary of and so forth." And let me know about all of the people that were selling the goods to the company, and coming in with bribes of a bottle of liquor or some kind of box of golf balls, or something like that. He set me straight right away. You know, "Stay away from that. Don't have anything to do with that."

[0:13:25] Speaker 2: So did you enjoy managing people?

[0:13:31] Joe: It was a job.

[0:13:32] Speaker 2: It was just your job?

[0:13:33] Joe: It was a job. Yeah.

[0:13:35] Speaker 2: And you liked the people that you worked with a lot?

[0:13:38] Joe: They were all good people. They were really good engineers. Good people.

[0:13:42] Speaker 2: And what was the hardest thing about working for RCA? Was it the change over?

[0:13:53] Joe: Morning times when I was sitting at the dining room table designing boards, circuit boards, and so forth, and she would come down and find me.

[0:14:03] Speaker 3: Joe did six in the morning until sox at night. I mean, as far as the time—

[0:14:09] Joe: I wouldn't do it if she didn't like it.

[0:14:12] Joe: Yeah.

[0:14:12] Speaker 2: So, it was a lot of time. You would have liked to spend more time with your family?

[0:14:20] Joe: It was equal.

[0:14:21] Speaker 2: Equal?

[0:14:22] Joe: I think they got 12 hours out of the 24.

[0:14:30] Speaker 2: Did you socialize with your co-workers?

[0:14:33] Joe: Sure.

[0:14:33] Speaker 2: What did you do? What kinds of things did you do with your co-workers?

[0:14:37] Joe: You know better than I do. Meals, shows, gatherings at each other's houses at some point.

[0:14:46] Speaker 2: I heard about Christmas parties.

[0:14:48] Speaker 3: Mm-hm.

[0:14:49] Joe: Yeah.

[0:14:49] Speaker 3: Yeah. Well, we met because there was an engineer working at RCA while I was at here, what was then Glassboro State. This was a guy who was married and his wife went to college with me, and that's how we met. He was a blind date. The engineer set it up, and the wife set me up. So, I'm grateful for that.

[0:15:12] Joe: And on the first date she drank too much, and wobbled across the floor ...

[0:15:15] Speaker 3: You!

[0:15:15] Joe: And I said, "That's the girl for me."

[0:15:17] Speaker 3: You have to erase that part.

[0:15:22] Speaker 2: So you moved from south Philadelphia to south Jersey; what was it like when you first moved here? Did you move to Cherry Hill?

[0:15:33] Joe: Tomatoes running down the curbs delivering to the facilities for the—

[0:15:40] Speaker 3: Campbell's Soup.

[0:15:41] Joe: Campbell's. Yeah, Campbell's.

[0:15:43] Speaker 3: Yeah, we were in Cherry Hill in the early days. I mean, a lot of still farm land left.

[0:15:48] Joe: Not many of us.

[0:15:49] Speaker 3: And...

[0:15:52] Speaker 4: 1959 to '60.

[0:15:54] Speaker 3: Yeah. Yeah, we moved in '58.

[0:15:57] Speaker 2: You moved to Cherry Hill...?

[0:15:58] Speaker 3: Cherry Hill.

[0:15:59] Speaker 2: In 1958?

[0:15:59] Speaker 3: Yes.

[0:16:00] Speaker 2: It was all farm land, and not very many people living there?

[0:16:05] **Speaker 3:** No, we were like the second house I think in the development that became Kingston Estates. I don't know how many hundred houses are there.

[0:16:15] **Speaker 2:** How many people who moved in after you were RCA people?

[0:16:21] **Joe:** A lot.

[0:16:22] **Speaker 3:** Yeah.

[0:16:22] **Speaker 4:** A lot.

[0:16:23] **Joe:** I wouldn't venture a number.

[0:16:36] **Speaker 2:** No, yeah. A good portion of them?

[0:16:29] **Joe:** Yeah.

[0:16:23] **Joe:** And so, did RCA have any direct relationship with the businesses in your neighborhoods, or was it just... Because Cherry Hill became much bigger, right?

[0:16:40] **Speaker 3:** Right.

[0:16:40] **Joe:** Yeah.

[0:16:40] **Speaker 2:** How has Cherry Hill changed, and do you think RCA had an impact on how Cherry Hill changed?

[0:16:48] **Joe:** Don't know.

[0:16:49] **Speaker 3:** Don't know.

[0:16:52] **Speaker 2:** Do you think... Did they do programs with the kid's schools or anything like that?

[0:16:59] **Speaker 3:** Not that I am aware of. When our children got to high school and we'd go to Back to School Night where you sat in your child's seat, we'd see all kinds of RCA people, but we didn't know our kids were in class together. You know, that kind of thing.

[0:17:13] **Speaker 2:** Yeah. So there's that kind of thing happening.

[0:17:14] **Speaker 3:** Yeah. But there wasn't socializing in the town as RCA people.

[0:17:21] **Joe:** Mm-hm.

[0:17:21] **Speaker 4:** Here in the 1960s RCA was hiring engineers by the dozens. That's why the growth from in Cherry Hill. They buy a new house.

[0:17:32] **Speaker 3:** Yep.

[0:17:32] **Speaker 4:** And they neighbored and so on and repeat. Cherry Hill when we moved to there in early '60s. It was sixty five hundred and we left there in '85. You left a little bit early.

[0:17:43] **Speaker 3:** Mm-hm.

[0:17:45] **Speaker 4:** It was seventy five thousand.

[0:17:46] **Speaker 3:** Yeah.

[0:17:48] **Speaker 4:** RCA had a tremendous impact on that. Because all the professional engineer who could... not only South Jersey, they come from all over the country to come and work there. Joe knows because I was one of them and had a little accent, you know.

[0:18:04] **Speaker 3:** Really, Joe? I hadn't noticed.

[0:18:10] **Speaker 2:** How did your kids think of your work?

[0:18:16] **Joe:** You know, I don't know that there was a connection there between where I worked and the kids.

[0:18:23] **Speaker 3:** I don't know. You came home with some kind of a little manipulative kind of thing that was an early computer thing. I remember them playing with it, and of course I hate to sound sexist, but the boys figured it out earlier than the girls did.

[0:18:43] **Speaker 2:** Did any of your children become engineers?

[0:18:45] **Speaker 3:** Not per se, we have one in IT.

[0:18:49] **Speaker 2:** One in IT?

[0:18:49] **Speaker 3:** Yeah. We sent him to computer camp, that's why...

[0:18:53] **Speaker 2:** You sent him to computer camp?

[0:18:54] **Speaker 3:** Yes.

[0:18:56] **Joe:** He services all ...

[0:18:59] **Speaker 3:** Yeah, he's still paying us back.

[0:19:06] **Speaker 2:** So, how would you sum up your time with RCA?

[0:19:10] **Joe:** It was a good time. Good company, good treatment, access to almost anybody that you needed to get. I mean, up the corporate line to the president. Other than that, if you needed to see someone or if they wanted to see you, it was very flexible at that time.

[0:19:36] **Speaker 3:** One of the things that I would say from my viewpoint, RCA did not require things. You didn't have to be a company wife.

[0:19:45] **Speaker 2:** Mm-hm.

[0:19:45] **Speaker 3:** And you know, we had a large family. There's no way that I could have found that time to have to go be anything for... They treated us lovely when there were social events and all that, but I never felt like I had to be something because of his job.

[0:20:02] **Speaker 2:** Right. Especially because he had an important management—

[0:20:04] **Speaker 3:** Yes, exactly.

[0:20:05] **Speaker 2:** Yeah. There were probably parties and things like that.

[0:20:08] **Speaker 3:** Right.

[0:20:13] **Speaker 4:** Also RCA had developed a policy in general to hire people from within, grow up managers to vice presidents. Very seldom would they went on the outside to find somebody else. That in itself, in a company that's growing is an enormous, enormous potential, and a good benefit for the employees. The patient be respected it, because it may have helped them, they may make it.

[0:20:42] **Speaker 2:** Do you agree? So one of the things he's saying is, one of the reasons you were able to rise to so much and have so much leadership at RCA is because they hired from within. And they brought people up from within.

[0:20:56] **Joe:** They did.

[0:20:56] **Speaker 2:** Yeah?

[0:20:57] **Joe:** Yeah.

[0:20:57] **Speaker 2:** Do you think that was key to your success as a...

[0:21:02] **Joe:** Had to have been something, yeah.

[0:21:03] **Speaker 2:** And you're doing something right, too? Well, thank you very much you're your interview time.

[0:21:12] **Joe:** Okay.

[0:21:12] **Speaker 3:** It was very interesting.

[0:21:14] **Joe:** Sorry.

[0:21:14] **Speaker 2:** Don't apologize. It was great.

[0:21:21] **Speaker 2:** I think he has something he wants to share with you.

[0:21:22] **Joe:** Oh, okay.

[0:21:34] **Speaker 2:** They have all kinds of really great artifacts.

[0:21:39] Speaker 3: Well, there goes one.

[0:21:43] Speaker 4: You may remember this. This is four word memory, designed in 1959 to '60, Antonio Genary gave it to me.

[0:21:53] Joe: Oh!

[0:21:53] Speaker 3: Oh!

[0:21:55] Speaker 4: I don't know if you remember.

[0:21:56] Joe: Oh, I remember Tony.

[0:21:57] Speaker 4: I put the glass around and pocketed it like that.

[0:21:59] Joe: Yeah.

[0:21:59] Speaker 4: It was, I guess this was... I had this since 19...

[0:22:02] Speaker 2: Can you turn it this way? So that they can...

[0:22:04] Joe: Oh yeah, sure.

[0:22:06] Speaker 2: The camera.

[0:22:06] Speaker 4: Since 1960. Tony wanted to get rid of it so I took it. A few years later when we were working on the order then.

[0:22:12] Joe: Yeah.

[0:22:14] Speaker 4: This is the first one thousand word memory. It was built in Malaysia. I kept these two together, and very soon it will be in RCA.

[0:22:26] Speaker 3: Yes.

[0:22:26] Speaker 4: In this museum here. You had a lot to do with this. The design of the [0:22:34.4 inaudible], remember that [0:22:36 inaudible] Bill?

[0:22:37] Joe: Sure.

[0:22:38] Speaker 4: That's right.

[0:22:38] Joe: Sure.

[0:22:44] Speaker 4: I've got a collection here.

[0:22:45] Speaker 2: So do you remember helping build those? Those circuits?

[0:22:52] Joe: I built some.

[0:22:53] Speaker 2: You built those?

[0:22:54] Joe: Not those specific ones, but I built some.

[0:22:56] Speaker 2: Just like that? On your dining room table?

[0:22:59] Joe: No, yeah. Assembly to go in.

[0:23:02] Speaker 2: Yeah.

[0:23:03] Joe: Get it soldered.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]