

***Anecdotes in this interview are to be used as a reference not as direct quotes or in exhibits. John wrote a history of Tek that can be used if information is needed.**

Washington County Museum
Oral History Interview with John Kobbe
At: Kobbe's home
Date: May 15, 2012

Informant: John Kobbe
Priscilla Kobbe (wife)
Interviewer: Beth Dehn
Transcriber: Ellen Rogalin

J = John
P = Priscilla
B = Beth

B: So John, can you tell us about . . .

J: I was just talking about the way I found Tektronix. At that time there was nothing here, not even Intel. In fact, Intel's about the only imported, I think, company, that strictly didn't start here. Maybe you can think of others, but ... Anyway, when I got out of the Navy in 1951 I needed a job. So, I grew up in the Douglas County area and came to Portland to find a job. And, I wanted a job in electronics, and I didn't even know anything about tech even existed until I went to the chamber of commerce. They said this new start-up company that's got this place over the hill in the country. It's a, I kind think of the word, but a very going operation. So I went out and interviewed and got a job.

B: What year was this?

J: 1951. And the reason I found Tektronix was I went to the chamber of commerce ... I went through after the recorder was on. OK, now, your turn.

B: My turn, ok. So you said you were originally from Douglas County and you moved up here. What was your educational background and why did you choose Tek then, or you were looking for electronics, it sounds like.

J: Well, I was in the Navy and I got the electronic training because I was always interested in electrical things when I grew up. And, actually that's all the formal education I have. I went to night school some, but ... I did quite well in the electronics Navy school and, well, let's see, your turn.

B: OK. In your email you told me that you worked on second generation, which was oscilloscopes?

J: Yes.

B: Can you describe what that was, what your projects were?

J: Well, I'll start out with a little bit of history. Jack Murdock and Howard was a very good combination. Jack knew how to work with people, _____, anti-union. He believed in treating customers so they didn't need any union. Anti-government interference, and Howard concentrated on electronics. And they got basically a good team for Howard to work with, mechanical specialists and two or three hundred specialists so that they left Howard to do most of the work. That's Howard Vollum I'm talking about. And Tek got into developing various different parts like transformers, coils, capacitors, resistors, and then CRT. This was about 1952 and they became kind of over-extended and they really depended on this new generation plug-in scopes to get them out of the, over the hump financially. And it turned out it was a success and they kept on growing. OK, now your turn.

05:20

B: What did you, well how did you... We've heard so many things about the culture of Tektronix, that it was a really, that it really encouraged innovation, encouraged people to try new things. Do you have stories or memories of working with Howard Vollum in that sense?

J: Well, yes. They were free with, as far as the engineers were concerned, we were free to take any part out of the stock that we wanted, even for our own projects, well, as long as it didn't happen too much. But, uh, and we did. And actually did a lot of the work at home that ended up being in the oscilloscope. I guess other people did home projects that got to be the start of another company like **Winstead** and, well, nothing comes to mind more. I should be able to name quite a few. Ok, your turn.

B: How would you describe Howard Vollum at that time?

J: He was a very difficult fellow to communicate with. I had that problem. I was not the only one that had that problem. You'd try to discuss something with him and if you didn't agree with him then he'd add you to his negative list and after a few times even if you were right, if you didn't agree with him, that was a negative as far as he was concerned at the time. Although later on I got a very good compliment from him, about 1980 when they did that interview. You've got that interview?

B: From the museum, no, maybe Oregon Historical Society . . .

J: PBS

B: Oh, PBS has it.

J: Then by Jack, oh, the lawyer, I can't think of it . . .

B: It's on the tip of my tongue; I'll think of it after a while.

J: **Or see**, I think

B: Oh, that one wasn't on OPB, I don't think. That one was a different one.

J: Well, anyway,

B: But anyway, go on, I could probably find it and email it to you.

J: That was quite a very long interview with Howard. He did . . . it's all on tape. I guess on video.

B: The OPB one, "The Spirit of Tek," yeah; a whole bunch of you old techs were on it

J: Cassidy, Castle. Jim Castles. Jack Cassidy was another person. Well, anyway.

B: It's somewhat difficult to work with. But, I mean, Tek had such an amazing success and what do you account for that? Why was Tek so successful, Tektronix?

10:01

J: Well, why was Tek so successful? I can't point to any one.

P: Well, it was the atmosphere, mostly, wasn't it, that encouraged . . .

J: Yeah

P: You were free to really develop whatever was in your mind like taking any of the stock you needed to build something and . . .

J: I remember developing one instrument. A low frequency it was quite predictable but it happened. We went down to the beach and I dug out . . . This was a brand new 1954 Chevy – I dug out from underneath the sand underneath it and crawled in there with pieces of paper I happened to have and that was almost exactly the way it was used to manufacture. (laughter)
_____ transistor curve tracer.

B: OK

J: In fact I have one in the _____. It still works.

B: Did you have a mentor or someone at Tek that was, that helped with what you were working on, the projects that you were working on?

J: No.

P: You were probably more of a mentor for some of the others.

J: I was in some cases I guess.

B: Because I know that the person that recommended we interview you said that you were one of Howard Vollum's top engineers.

P: That's right

B: So how, I guess, what projects stand out to you most that you worked on or maybe that you helped develop?

J: The **circuits** I went into what we call the new generation oscilloscopes and I've got this (rustle of paper). I wrote up, I wrote myself as the third party observer and that's a write-up.

B: Oh, ok

J: That's all the instruments we were talking about.

B: Oh, ok, fantastic.

J: It's not intended for this purpose, but it's kind of technical.

B: Is this something that I can take back to the museum?

J: Sure. You see these were the different ones, instruments. Five thirty-one, five thirty-five, five forty-five. So that was what we called the new generation.

B: Ok. Now did you work for any other companies besides Tek or was your whole career at Tektronix?

J: Well, I was part of the _____ Company for a little while but . . . electronic diversified That was after I got fired from Tek. No, not really quite, but because I went on a leave and didn't show up . . . I didn't renew my . . .

P: You weren't technically fired; you got a pin.

J: And Miles _____ was one of the first four and this is what he wrote; quite a book about himself mainly and it included three-fourths of it I think was about ozone and his own life, and this is what he had to say.

B: Great.

J: She kept that for the kids.

B: That's interesting.

15:00

B: What do you think, during your career, what were the greatest technological advances that you witnessed happening I guess from the 50s on?

J: Well, the circuitry for these oscilloscopes.

B: Do you have any thoughts about the things that are happening now in high tech industry?

J: Any interest? Yeah, yeah. I'm not very good at it. She keeps up more on the operations of the computer; she's a better computer typist.

P: Oh, I'm not really.

J: Than I am.

P: Well, you're more interested in the insides of equipment, not typing. Anybody can type.

J: I can't even find the t's (laughter)

P: He's interested in the mechanisms, how things work.

B: So one of the questions, and I think you started off saying this before we turned the recorder on, but if there's some connection to why the silicon forest happened in Washington County?

J: Well, obviously it was because of the electronics that grew out around Tek. And they would have gone to the east side if – I mean it was kind of a toss of coins, I think, and probably they found a place cheaper to build out here then.

P: So you think it's mostly the spin-off from people who left Tek – there are a lot of people that left Tek and developed their own companies.

J: Yes, yes, directly. Roger Jenkins is another one I was trying to think of before. He inherited

P: What did he do?

J: He started Rogers Oregon

B: Oh instruments, yeah

J: That was one of the first ones. Maybe it was the first one cause Howard and him were discussing it _____ quite often.

B: Someone described to us that it was not competitive, that it was sort of a supportive atmosphere, that spin-offs were encouraged almost by Howard Vollum?

P: Somebody said that the spin-offs were encouraged by Howard or whoever . . .

J: They had a department that took care of these spin-offs later on. The first ones they didn't _____ formally at all. And they would keep an interest in it, I think. I was going to say it wasn't exactly encouraged but it wasn't discouraged very much if any.

P: And what was the department?

J: I don't know what they called themselves.

P: Did they help people that wanted to start the new companies?

J: They do the paperwork and formal lawyer work. I wasn't involved in that; I don't really know.

P: Who else would have been able to answer some of these questions? Is there anybody left?

J: There's actually nobody that worked with; I think that _____, but he's not very well.

20:00

B: So what is your connection with Oak Knoll Winery? This is completely different. I know these are two entirely separate things, but . . .

J: I considered meeting you out there because I knew you had said...I was working as an engineer and Ron Vuylsteke was working building switches. We lived next to each other and he started making home wine and I liked the wine, so (laughter)Soon after we bought our farm, Ron & I considered starting a winery in the barn, after it was cleaned. Shortly after that I rode to Hillsboro a new way (to me) with the neighbor He drove by some property that used to be a dairy barn and it was "for sale". (That is where the winery is now). We checked on it and we bought the whole place for, including the dairy milking building for \$35,000.

B: What year was this?

P: It was about the same time we bought this place – 68 was it? 69?

J: It was after that. Maybe 70, 71. The winery was incorporated . . . Oh, we almost didn't get it because county rules and Homer, Homer . . . yeah, I don't think you know him, new route or new ways, it was part of the county, so he managed to get the rules changed or something so that we could start it. So that almost didn't get built.

B: And it was the first winery in Washington County. It has a website now.

J: I don't know.

P: I think Ponzi thinks they were, but I think we beat Ponzi.

J: But Honeywood, Honeywood in Salem was a big one . . .

P: Yeah, but that wasn't in Washington County. She's talking about Washington County.

J: I know, I know. It probably was. Most of them are in Yamhill and

B: Further south, yeah.

J: Further south

B: So you worked in high tech but your hobby, well, it's not maybe not a hobby, but it was kind of helping set the winery up?

J: Yeah.

B: Whatever memories do you have of working in Tektronix? I just I'm just getting at maybe stories or memories that you have of a project?

P: Well isn't some of that in this other piece of paper? (paper rustling)

J: Yeah

B: Great. So when you very first started – I'm trying to imagine what Tektronix was like at the very beginning. You obviously worked up to becoming a top engineer – what else was happening at the time there? Oscilloscopes, mostly?

J: Well, I was considered a production worker, testing and fixing if there was a problem.

25:00

P: What were they producing besides the oscilloscopes?

J: Well, the oscilloscope was basically it except they produced several different square wave and timing circuit generators that you used to calibrate and test oscilloscopes.

P: Did they sell those to other companies? They must have.

J: Yes, yes, they sell them to like, a lot of the customers were big and some of them were overseas. Quite a few actually and they had their own testing calibration department so they'd need these to test.

P: Was HP one of them or not?

J: HP had also customers overseas, sometimes the same distributor Tektronix had, but that was before they got into the _____ business. _____. They started out that way. I got another little story about the, we didn't write down that one . . .

P: I don't know, what was it? Oh, you mean you wrote another little thing?

J: Well, anyway

P: Well, it's pretty much what's in here.

B: In here? OK. Well, this is great because we can use this when we're putting together; hopefully we're going to be doing a small exhibit about the history of the silicon forest in Washington County. Have you visited our museum?

P: I – where is it?

B: It's right – currently it's on the Rock Creek campus, the PCC

P: Oh, no I haven't.

B: We're very small. We're trying to move to downtown Hillsboro soon

[Discussion about location of museum]

J: We have our own little museum.

P: Yes, do you know about the Vintage Tek?

B: Yes. Have you worked on that?

J: I have some, yeah. I'm pretty well known out there.

B: And that's on Beaverton-Hillsdale . . .

P: In Multnomah County, just outside Washington County

J: Yeah, they're open Fridays

B: Saturday, yeah

J: Yeah, basically only Fridays, to the public.

B: Well, is there anything else that you would like to add to . . . That's a broad question. I feel like there's a lot of information in here I need to . . .

[Discussion about how any more information can be sent by email, then about the current exhibit at the Washington Museum (comic book artist)]

J: Now Tek had a comic strip to demonstrate instruction manuals, so

B: Really?

P: Isn't that on the website, John, on the Vintage Tek website?

J: I don't know

30:00

B: That's good to look for

P: I saw stuff on the Internet for some of those cartoons. And they may at the Tek museum, you need to check, they may have some of that. Because it really was from Washington County, not Multnomah County.

B: Who started that museum?

P: I think Ed Sinclair and Stan Griffith. Did Ed Sinclair and Stan start the Vintage Tek?

J: Yeah. Actually, this is the manual that explains what each instrument is. Oh yeah, this is a 1956 catalog and that explains a whole bunch of them.

B: Do you still make things today? What are you working on?

P: Oh, he's got stuff all over the place. He's got stuff in the barn, stuff inside the house, show you the project room and then he always works out on the front door. . .

SEARCH TERMS

Chamber of commerce
Circuits
Douglas County
Ed Sinclair
Electronics
Howard Vollum
Jack Cassidy
Jack Murdock
Jim Castles
Navy
Oak Knoll Winery
OPB
Oscilloscopes
Rogers Oregon
Ron Vuylsteke
Silicon Forest
Stan Griffith
Tektronix
Vintage Tek Museum

