

HEERENVEEN NEWS

by: Gerrit de Vries and Aletta van Meurs

Writing August 24 in the year of 1964 I remember even after 50 years to this day very well when I knocked at the door of Tektronix in the Heerenveen plant for my first working day. At that moment I could not imagine that this wonderful American company would shape my life for the next 35 years.

Hi folks, my name is Gerrit de Vries and I am looking forward to share some stories with you about the former Tektronix plant in the Netherlands. The publications will cover some history details of Tektronix Heerenveen from the start in 1961 until closure of the factory in the year 2000.

Also development of the rural city of Heerenveen will be touched slightly because Tektronix has accelerated its development. During this period several Tektronix Inc. people have been part of the Tektronix Heerenveen organization or visited us, and this aspect will also be highlighted.

In spite of closure of the factory and lay-offs which was caused by a worldwide changing economic and technological developments there are no hard feelings by the former Tektronix employees, there is an active Facebook site where we share the good memories and where now and then a reunion event will be organized.

I hope that you will enjoy the Heerenveen publications in subsequent Newsletters and that it might lead to interaction between the TRVP (Tektronix Retiree Volunteer Program tekretirees.org/) in Beaverton and the former Tektronix employees in Heerenveen.

This article was published in 1986 to celebrate 25 years Tektronix Heerenveen. I have added some pictures and personal notes.

TWO CULTURES MEET

The year was 1946. In the United States the foundation was laid for a firm that was to expand to a world-wide concern with upwards of 21.000 employees and that had a leading position in the world's electronic industry: Tektronix.

Fifteen years later. The Heerenveen city-council is enthusiastic to learn that a – until then unknown American firm Tektronix – will open a plant in Heerenveen. While there was a great stir in Heerenveen over the sale of no fewer than nine and a half hectares of land for industrial development, Tektronix was founded officially. In a building in the Sieger van der Laan straat three man – Klaas Dolfing, Chris Holleman and Jan Wedman – took up their first duties, which were distributing instruments that had arrived from the United States.

Meanwhile, in the Marktweg, construction had started for a new factory building in which Tektronix Holland was to expand its activities.

Note Gerrit: below Sieger van der Laan straat on the right new Tektronix factory building Marktweg



Crates and Boards

“It was a wonderful period”, says Adri Leewis – now seventy – who was among the first people to start work in the Sieger van der Laan straat. As Personnel Manager it was his duty to recruit employees for the new firm.

“When I started – August 1961 – there had been no time to buy writing-desks. So I began by taking two crates, put some boards on them and that was my desk.”

Note Gerrit: amazing, I did the same 36 years later in 1997 when I was asked to setup a temporary Recall Center for TDS200 scopes. On that remote location I did not have a desk and used carton boxes and a wooden layer to put my laptop on.

Tektronix created a sensation. From prosperous America, it settled in a rapidly developing Friesland. Two complete different worlds – especially in those days. An example: At first salaries were paid in cash, in the canteen. But in the course of time it was decided to change to payment directly into bank accounts. Adri Leewis: ” Then I had to deal with applicants of seventeen and eighteen who suddenly had to open a bank account. People were not used to this; you received wages in cash a bank-account was only for rich people. So in the beginning we informed on how to open a bank account. “

And Heerenveen-mayor Kuperus said in 1961 about the negotiations with Tektronix Vice President Dallas: “We also had to show houses to the gentlemen and for that purpose we went to the Zonnebloemstraat and the K.R. Poststraat. They thought they were neat houses but unfit for their own staff who had to live in Heerenveen. For this highly qualified employees (Americans) they needed houses with a so called English kitchen and central heating.”

It is easy to mention more striking novelties: calling people by their first names... the manager who worked in a modest office... a share in the profits, an unusual phenomenon in Holland... airconditioning, they were all marvelous phenomena in Friesland in that period.

Of course this provoked discussions sometimes even gossiping. There were people who claimed that the beautiful ship's lanterns which still decorate the entrance to the ground were actually clocks precisely monitoring employees coming and going. After 25 years none has ever discovered anything about this system...

Note Gerrit: On my Job-interview in 1964 at Tektronix the personnel assistant said to me; my name is Joop and the General manager is called Tom (McLean). I loved this as a 17 years old boy, it was so different to what I expected, It made me feel at home.

Fast Growth

It was a foregone conclusion that Tektronix Heerenveen was to develop into a big concern for Friesian standards. The Friese Koerier, then a daily newspaper, predicted a very big growth: “Tektronix Holland intends to start with 100 employees. It aims at reaching a second stage soon when 300 to 500 people will be employed. Then it is hoped to expand to twice this number of employees. “ And the headline ran “1,000 Employees”.

That big the plant has never been. But the growth was respectable indeed during those first years. Personnel manager Leewis: “Employing all those people was not simple at all. By the end of 1962 when the building in the Marktweg was opened 100 workers had been employed. All those employees had first been tested for their suitability. I remember we tested groups of twenty to thirty people. “

After the official opening of the building in the Marktweg expansion continued: in 1966 when Adri Leewis left two hundred people were employed.

An Assembly Plant

The Heerenveen settlement was – and still is – an assembly plant of Tektronix products. During the first years only oscilloscopes were made. For the layman: an oscilloscope is an instrument which

visualizes all kind of vibrations – electric, mechanical, sound – measures them.

Was it difficult to build such an instrument? “No”, Adri Leewis says, “For they were built according to a model.” For most functions manual dexterity was a prerequisite. People who tested the final product were required to have wider technical knowledge: MTS or HTS level.

1962: Official opening

On June 22, 1962 the Queen's Commissioner in Friesland Mr. H.P. Linthorst Homan officially opened the new building in the Marktweg. Also on that occasion the difference between two cultures were underlined again. But at the same time it was clearly expressed that a strong tie had been established. Earl Wantland, since the start the General Manager, addressed those present in Dutch.. Adri Leewis was next to make speech in pure American.

And the opening act: from loudspeakers which were everywhere the Frisian hymn The Waldsang sounded, to the purpose of everybody, while on the screens of eight oscilloscopes the musical vibrations were shown. It was, a newspaper wrote: Undoubtedly the most original way in which the Waldsang has ever been played. “

Refreshing

Five years Adri Leewis worked for Tektronix and before and after he was a civil servant. How does Adri Leewis look back on his years in industry? On his period with Tektronix? “It was an inspiring period. You worked with a firm that was in full progress. Every day something new could happen. Especially at first, when the new building was under construction. As a staff member you were daily involved in this, but afterwards too. I thoroughly enjoyed it. The atmosphere in the firm was very modern for Dutch standards and there was a high degree of openness and honesty. I remember the management meetings; they were very spirited gatherings where everybody very candidly expressed their opinions. Very often they vehemently disagreed. The disagreement was about matters concerning the firm, there were no personal conflicts. After the discussion it was always clear that personal relations were very good. Another example: Once a year assessment interview with your supervisors; a really frank conversation. That is an aspect that you hardly ever experience as a civil servant.

After Tektronix I worked for the local government of Amsterdam and sometimes asked for such an assessment. They weren't used to doing things like this... “

Expansion

Tektronix expanded more and more in the course of the years. In 1963 there were 186 employees. In 1964 it proved necessary to extend the existing building, which was completed in 1966 when 2,000 square meters were added. In 1970 – there were 330 employees – there was another extension of 4,000 square meters workflow.

Note Gerrit: With the first extension a new warehouse was created including a loading dock for daily transport to and from the airport of Schiphol near Amsterdam. The second extension was intended to house production of the new 7K series. On the picture below a part of the 7K employees is shown in front of a mega 7504 scope.



Precision Instruments

To make clear what exactly Tektronix produces excursions have been organized since the firm started. In the 1960's a group of teachers from Heerenveen visited the plant. A test set-up had been made that showed the use of Tektronix oscilloscopes with heart tests. One of the lady-teachers had herself "examined". Suddenly turbulent waves showed on the screen, although she stood there impassively. The cause showed itself soon: she saw the young male teacher she had been secretly in love with for a while.