

The man who planted Silicon Forest

By MIKE ROGOWAY
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Hewlett-Packard had its garage. For Facebook, it was a dorm room.

Oregon's tech industry traces its roots to a signature innovation in an electronics store on Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard.

There, in the years immediately following World War II, Howard Vollum crafted an obscure instrument called an oscilloscope. And from that sprang Tektronix, at one time one of the nation's leading tech companies and godfather to succeeding generations of Oregon technology.

May 31 marks the 100th anniversary of Vollum's birth. Tektronix will observe the milestone Friday with employees at its Washington County campus, and the University of Portland will mark Vollum's birthday with a public ceremony that afternoon that will include two of his sons.

"He was one of the stars of the electronics industry in the 1960s and '70s," said Aziz Inan, a University of Portland engineering professor who's helping to organize Friday's festivities to remember Vollum and his influence.

Tek's oscilloscopes — arcane instruments to measure the output of electronic devices — worked behind the scenes to win the space race, develop the color television and usher in the information age.

Founded by Vollum and his friend Jack Murdock, Tektronix employed more than



Howard Vollum inspects oscilloscopes in May 1949 at Tektronix's Southeast Portland offices. Tek was 3 years old at the time and demand for its scopes was high — customers had to wait months for delivery.

20,000 at its peak in the 1980s. It spawned legions of spinoff tech companies, helping Oregon transition from a natural resources economy to a modern one.

"With his technical genius, he was the person behind all this," Inan said. "So I see him as the father of the electronics industry in Oregon."

Tek wasn't the first com-

pany to make oscilloscopes, but its first commercial model — the 511 — was more precise and compact than others at the time.

Selling for about \$800, the 511 was an immediate hit with customers. With production initially confined to the 6,000-square-foot building on Hawthorne, Tek couldn't keep up with demand — it took up

to six months from order to delivery.

The University of Portland uncovered an original 511 as it prepared for Friday's anniversary, and the VintageTEK museum — an association of retired Tek employees — restored it.

As Tektronix grew, Vollum transitioned from being an engineer to a businessman.

He was Tek's president from its founding in 1946 until 1971 and remained chairman until 1984. Forbes named Vollum one of America's wealthiest men that year, estimating his fortune at \$220 million.

You wouldn't have known it by the way Vollum carried himself, said Russell Fillinger, an engineer who joined the

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Howard Vollum

Life: Born May 31, 1913, in Portland; died Feb. 5, 1986, at age 72

Family: Married; five sons. His wife, the philanthropist Jean Vollum, died in 2007.

Education: University of Portland (then known as Columbia University), 1931-33; Reed College, 1934-36

Tektronix: Co-founded the company in 1946 with Jack Murdock and served as Tek's president from then until 1971. Vollum was chairman from 1971 to 1984; he served as vice chairman until his death.

Public celebration: 3 to 5 p.m. Friday at the Donald P. Shiley School of Engineering at the University of Portland.

Vollum

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company in 1957. While Tektronix became an industry powerhouse, Vollum knew many employees by first name and retained an interest in every aspect of the company, picking through parts bins to see what went into each new generation of technology.

"He still felt that desire to be a good old engineer again," Fillinger said.

Tektronix not only grew, it sprawled. Portland State University famously chronicled its influence with a 2002 poster of the "Silicon Forest Universe," which traced dozens of tech businesses to their roots at Tektronix.

Enduring companies such as Mentor Graphics, Planar Systems, InFocus, TriQuint Semiconductor and many

others started at Tektronix or with former employees, often with Tek's backing.

Tek itself, though, gradually became unwieldy, making computer monitors, color printers and even office furniture. In the years after Vollum's death in 1986, Tektronix laid off thousands of workers and shed business lines as it returned to its roots in test and measurement.

Tektronix ultimately sold itself, too. Washington, D.C.-based conglomerate Danaher Corp. paid \$2.85 billion for the business in 2007 and now operates Tektronix as a subsidiary that employs 1,000 or more designing oscilloscopes at its Washington County campus.

Curt Bludworth, Tek's vice president of human resources, said those workers are carrying on the tradition of innovation that Vollum started.

"It wouldn't be here right now," Bludworth said, "if it hadn't been for him."