Tektronix Museum Celebrates Trailblazing Era Of Pre-Digital Technology

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Company retirees celebrate years of innovation at Raleigh Hills museum

by: TIMES PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Former Tektronix employee and head of VintageTEK, a museum of old equipment, Stan Griffiths talks about the history behind a few of the company's oscilloscopes.

As far as post-retirement hobbies go, the VintageTEK museum provides something of a dream model for beleaguered spouses of unrepentant, high-volume pack rats.

The undecorated, filled-to-the-gills museum for vintage Tektronix equipment at 4620A S.W. Beaverton-Hillsdale Highway started innocently enough. It provided a way for Stanley Griffiths, VintageTek president and board member, to move accumulated equipment out of his and his wife Pat's home.

"My wife is very tolerant of this," quipped Griffiths. "We met at a Tektronix picnic."

Despite a modicum of domestic tolerance, Griffiths and Edward Sinclair, both retired Tektronix employees, realized around 2007 that their collections of old analog CRT oscilloscopes, meters, 20th century gadgetry and company memorabilia might be better situated in a public space outside their homes.

"I'd known Stan for many years," said Sinclair, chairman of the VintageTEK board of directors. "I went to his home to see his collection, which was very significant. I said, 'What are you gonna do with this stuff?'"

The answer led to the formation of a nonprofit, 501c3 organization. Housed in a building situated on a busy, rather nondescript stretch of Beaverton-Hillsdale Highway, VintageTEK seems a world away from the sprawling, landscaped Tektronix campus in Cedar Hills.

Passing through the museum's doors during its normal business hours on Friday and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. offers an immersion into a pre-digital universe from which one of the Westside's largest and longest-running employers emerged.

Technological mecca

From the moment Griffiths and Sinclair moved their collections of outdated, but still functional, equipment they'd acquired over the years into the former print shop in September 2008, others quickly followed suit.

"Ex-techs started stopping by and dropping off their equipment," said Sinclair, 74, who worked in manufacturing and field service for Tektronix from 1960 to 1989. "We had to promise not to sell them."

With equipment dating from Tektronix' founding in 1947 to the mid-1990s, VintageTek's mission includes preserving and sharing company history, providing a place for vintage technology buffs to explore and tinker, and inspiring new generations of science and technology buffs.

While attracting large numbers of younger tekkies poses more of a challenge, VintageTEK is a virtual mecca for retired employees as well as current Tektronix clients from around the world who drop by to explore the nearly forgotten technological treasures.

"Our audience is 50 percent retired Tektronix employees who want to remember the good old times. The other half are Tektronix customers," Griffith said, as well as others curious about technological evolution.

by: TIMES PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - VintageTEK volunteers Dave Brown, foreground, and Philip Crosby, both former Tektronix employees, fine tune equipment in the mini-museum and shop that they run in Beaverton.

Calibrated foundation

Tektronix was built from the work of founders C. Howard Vollum and Melvin J. Murdock, who developed the oscilloscope — an instrument measuring oscillations of electrical voltage and current in electronics equipment from TVs to computers — during the electronics boom in the wake of World War II.

Since moving from a Cedar Mill site adjacent to Highway 26 in 1959, the company has been headquartered on a 300-acre campus at 14200 S.W. Karl Braun Drive in Cedar Hills. In 2007, the Danaher Corporation acquired the company in a $2.85 billion deal.

While the bulky boxes, dials and screens with pulsating wavelengths that characterize the oscilloscopes, tube testers and spectrum analyzers may seem almost quaint in today's world of smartphones and sleek laptop computers, Tektronix is a key link to today's technologically driven world, Griffiths said. Groundbreaking companies such as IBM, Western Electric, the Bell telephone system, as well as NASA and all branches of the U.S. military relied on the oscilloscope to develop their increasingly sophisticated electronic components.

"The digital revolution certainly affected Tektronix," Griffiths said, noting many computers contain virtual oscilloscopes. "And because of (Tektronix oscilloscopes') excellent performance, it helped create the revolution."

Brave new world

While equipment laid out on tables in the long, narrow museum space is for display only, duplicates — which retired engineers drop by to calibrate, repair and restore to their heart's content — are for sale.

"Everything under the table can be sold," Griffiths said. "We don't sell the last one. We keep the best one for ourselves."

Long-term goals of VintageTEK's four-member board, rounded out by Lawrence Mayhew and John Winkleman, include raising $5 million to $7 million to fund academy learning programs, acquire land for a new building and fund an engineering design chair at a major Oregon university.

Sinclair, who would like to develop a virtual online tour of the museum to expand VintageTEK's audience, said he enjoys the range of visitors who make it to Raleigh Hills.

"I like seeing all the people, all technology aficionados, come by," he said. "Fifty to 60 percent of those who come in have not worked at Tektronix. They're just really into technology."

by: TIMES PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - The inside of a Tektronix oscilloscope consists of a cavalcade of transistors and vacuum tubes, on display at VintageTEK in Raleigh Hills.