

RCA



BLOOMINGTON BOOM

RCA Delivers for Nearly 50 Years

By **Brenda L. Holmes**

Gib Apple has become the unofficial historian for all things RCA in Bloomington. Having worked for the company for three decades and serving as plant manager for two years, he can pinpoint the moment when he realized the company's time in Monroe County was limited.

"In December of 1985, the sale of RCA to General Electric (GE) was announced. To many employees this was 'the beginning of the end' as GE had not been a successful competitor," Apple says during a presentation to the Monroe County History Club in May 2018.

His presentation is available on YouTube. It offers a vast amount of information from the first sightings of RCA location scouts to the very end when the last television came off the assembly line.

Out-of-town visitors

Radio Corporation of America (RCA) was formed in 1919 at the urging of the U.S. Navy to assure the country could handle internal communications in the case of a national emergency, according to Apple. The business quickly moved to consumer electronics and introduced a crystal radio with headphones in 1926.

"On August 4, 1939, two gentlemen visited the Bloomington Chamber of Commerce asking questions about the city and said they were just looking around as a company might want to start a new plant in Indiana, Illinois or Ohio," Apple explains. "They declined to give their names or the name of their company."

Two weeks later, they returned, identified themselves as location scouts for RCA and asked for more detailed information from the

1940s

chamber employees. Upon leaving, they declared, 'Forget we were here. Most likely nothing will happen.'

"Mayor Loba 'Jack' Bruner and the city fathers didn't forget," Apple offers. "An industrial committee developed a proposal that was accepted by RCA. This was a lifesaver for the Bloomington community as the city and county were just coming out of the Great Depression."

RCA purchased a building on South Rogers Street from the Showers Brothers Furniture Company in 1940, which became known as Plant One. The Nipper Radio, named after the famous RCA K-9 mascot, first rolled off the assembly line on June 9, 1940.

Mostly female workforce

In those early years, the vast majority of RCA's workforce was made up of young women with high school diplomas. Women continued to hold more positions throughout the company's history in Bloomington.

"Females were preferred as they were thought to be more receptive to repetitive assembly line work and their smaller hands were better suited for pick up and placement of small parts that went into making radios," Apple outlines.

One million radios had been produced by December 1941, but production slowed after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The U.S. entered World War II and the facility received its first war contract from the Army Signal Corps for tank transmitters and receivers.

"In September of 1942, work began on a secret project for the U.S. Navy called Madam X," Apple explains. "Bloomington was the first of five plants to produce this item. Employees who worked in the Secret Room were required to sign an oath that they would not discuss their work outside the room. And it was explained to me that it was to be kept secret forever."

According to the *Hoosier Times*, Madam X or the VT Fuze was "used to electronically detonate a projectile's payload when it was in range

of its target."

He recalls that the project's cost was a staggering \$800 million in 1945. In recognition of its work, the facility was awarded a special Navy flag with three stars for its effort to support the country during a time of war.

In the late 1940s, RCA auto radio production moved to Chicago in anticipation of demand for console and table model radios and record changers. During the 1948 Monroe County Fair, RCA unveiled a demonstration of the television.

"Receivers were set up with cameras rolling. Hundreds of people watched themselves on television," Apple shares. "The new miracle of television was launched in Bloomington."

The plant begins assembling black and white sets with 12.5-inch screens. As broadcasting stations were cropping up across the country, the demand for television sets soars. Hundreds of new workers are needed to keep up with demand.

"In January of 1954, RCA showed the public the first 15-inch color television set broadcasting the Rose Bowl parade from Los Angeles, California, to Rockefeller Center," Apple offers. "Initial production of color television was in small quantities that steadily increased. The first year Bloomington manufactured 4,355 color TV sets."

Television boom town

In 1956, a new 120,000-square-foot warehouse was built for \$750,000 to provide space for warehousing and shipping facilities, supporting the ever-increasing production of television sets.

"The warehouse was named Apple Hill because part of an apple orchard was removed to provide adequate space," Apple jokes. "It was not named after me."

Production went from 10 sets per hour per line to 60. The company added 1,100 new jobs in 1956 and 3,000 more in the early '60s. When Plant Two was complete, production volume doubled, and



RCA employees leave Plant One circa 1940s or 1950s. The building, on South Rogers Street, was purchased from the Showers Furniture Company in 1940 (photo courtesy of Monroe County History Center Collection).



RCA created these bumper stickers boasting Bloomington as the “TV Capital of the World” (courtesy of Monroe County History Center Collection).

the city proclaimed it was the “Color Television Capital of the World.”

At the time of its peak Bloomington employment of 8,000 people in 1967, RCA’s sales of color television sets exceeded \$3 billion. Buses were needed to bring people in from communities such as Bedford, Bloomfield, Linton, Loogootee, Martinsville, Mitchell and Nashville to keep up with the workforce needs.

A different time

Alexandra “Sandy” Lynch has been working with Apple to preserve the information he has collected over the years. She is preparing a proposal for Arcadia Publishing Co. and hopes to publish a historic book on RCA’s time in Bloomington.

Lynch worked at the facility from 1977 to 1983.

“I wrote a weekly employee newsletter. We had classified ads and all sorts of stories about the plant,” Lynch recalls. “Back in the ’40s, they had a newsletter called the *Bloomington Bomber* and then it became the *RCA Family News*.”

In addition to the newsletter, the staff produced a quarterly magazine that was sent to employee homes.

“I coordinated something called the Activities Association,” she adds. “This really harkens back to a different era of manufacturing when employees were treated as a family. And not only did they work together but played together. There was a softball league and a rod and reel club. There was a horseshoe pitching league ... many different activities.”

New product line

RCA introduced the video disc system as an alternative to the VCR in the 1980s. Apple was instrumental in this new venture.

“I was lucky enough to be the manager of the whole video disc situation from one end to the other. About 200 new employees were added to the assembly lines. By 1984, VCR prices plunged, and all video disc

production was halted. Employees were laid off. It was very successful, but short lived.”

The year 1985 was a rollercoaster of activity for the Bloomington business. The first computer-controlled color television final assembly line was developed, adding a level of accuracy not possible with the human eye.



Cover of the RCA Family Newsletter from Christmas 1963.

Then RCA sold to General Electric. Production of a 15-inch GE television begins. But almost immediately, all the consumer electronics sold to French company Thomson SA. In 1990, there were 1,635 employees – average age was 47 with 24 years of service.

“I was the 10th plant manager and it was a tremendous privilege. I’m very proud of all the people who worked at RCA to make our products. It was as good as it gets,” Apple reflects.

He describes a world-class celebration on Oct. 18, 1990, to mark the 50 millionth RCA color television produced in Bloomington.

“Governor Frank O’Bannon, IU basketball coach Bob Knight and the country-and-western star Lee Greenwood attended ceremonies. Greenwood delighted the audience with his hit, “God Bless the U.S.A.,” and coach Knight

offered all employees a rare opportunity to attend the IU afternoon basketball practice if I would close the plant.”

Last big push

Thomson invested in the property, adding a new distribution facility named Park Hill. This brought the operation’s total space to more than two million square feet and boasted the most automated color television assembly plant in the world. The company’s 1,800 employees produced three million televisions annually.

Additional record-setting years followed, but price erosion caused flat revenues in 1996 and Thomson suffered a worldwide loss of \$202 million. All television production was moved to a new operation in Juarez, Mexico, and the company announced the impending closure of the Bloomington facilities.

“This was a tremendous shock to all employees. The facility closed March 25, 1998, ending Bloomington’s long history of 47 years and 10 months in consumer electronics production. At the time, the plant was still producing more than 15,000 color TVs daily,” Apple says.

Lynch, who hadn’t worked at RCA for many years, remembers that it was a tremendous blow to the entire community.

“I think it was pretty devastating because at that point, they still had over 1,000 employees,” she reveals.

After Thomson left town, Apple petitioned the city to rename Thomson Community Park, dedicated in 1992, to RCA Community Park. The vote was unanimous, and the name was officially changed in 2009.

Several former RCA employees still get together – more than 20 years after the facilities closed – for monthly luncheons and an annual picnic.

Apple and Lynch have teamed up to keep the history alive for the community. The Monroe County History Center recently created an exhibit – “Women and RCA” – focusing on RCA’s secret work during World War II.

RESOURCE: View presentation on the history of RCA at YouTube and search for ‘Gib Apple.’