



left to right: Howard Vollum, Tektronix; David Packard, Hewlett Packard; John Fluke Sr., Fluke Corporation

AeA's Founding Forces - West by Northwest

By Ken Harper

As we move through AeA's 60th year, the winds of war literally blowing in Iraq on the day of this writing, it is appropriate to reflect on AeA's origins and what they have to say about the confluence of extraordinary people, extraordinary times, and the extraordinary opportunities that resulted.

The official history of the AeA has yet to be written, but the elevator version goes something like this: In 1939, two Stanford graduates, Bill Hewlett and David Packard, launched what was to be a legendary company in a Palo Alto garage, developing electronic instruments. By the early 1940s, the U.S. was gearing up for war in Asia and Europe, Hewlett was in the Army Signal Corps and Packard

was minding the store in Palo Alto. To compete with established East Coast giants such as RCA, Westinghouse, and GE for military contracts, and to showcase the talents of California-based electronics companies, Packard put together the West Coast Electronics Manufacturing Association, or WEMA as it came to be known.ⁱ

World War II proved to be serendipitous – if any war can be said to be serendipitous – for what came to be the Northwest chapter of AeA. Bill Hewlett met Howard Vollum, the future founder of Tektronix, in the Signal Corps' Electronic Training Group, where they collaborated on the kinds of instrumentation required for mortar-locating radar. This led to

improved methods of cathode ray tube manufacturing, the essential visualization element for radar and sonar. Better instrumentation led to more precise detection systems and ever improving electronic components for tracking, communications (radio and the nascent television), and computation.

Hewlett told his partner Packard that he wanted to hire Vollum, but the Oregon native had plans to return to Portland and begin his own electronic instrumentation company, Tektronix, which became the Rose City's first electronics company. The so-called "Vollumscope," or Tektronix's first large selling oscilloscope, was "made from surplus parts the government had all but given away."ⁱⁱ

Just as World War II brought Bill Hewlett and Howard Vollum together, events on the East Coast leading up to the war brought together two westerners who were to become pillars of the West Coast electronics industry: David Packard and John Fluke, Sr.,

Born and raised in Tacoma, Fluke graduated from the University of Washington in 1935 with a BSEE – as well as a Naval ROTC commission. A chance to earn an MSEE at MIT took him east. It looked like he might stay after, joining General Electric in Schenectady, NY in 1936. Before he got married the following year, he roomed with a Californian by the name of Packard and another half-dozen GE engineers. It was the beginning of a life-long friendship.

Just prior to the attack on Pearl

before starting the John Fluke Engineering Company in the basement of his Springdale, Connecticut home in 1948.

By 1952, the company had outgrown his basement and his family was growing as well. The question Fluke faced was whether to expand his business on the East Coast and remain there forever or see if his electronics company could be transplanted to his native Northwest. Part of the decision process involved an exchange of letters with the friend he admired most — Packard. The Californian extolled the beauty of the orange groves south of the Stanford campus and encouraged him to avoid “an intellectual vacuum like Seattle.” Fluke explained that he “just wanted to move home.”

Packing a boxcar with company equipment and personal belong-

ing, Fluke moved to Seattle, and he carried with him David Packard’s notions of Seattle’s intellectual environment as well as improve its overall business climate: The Fluke Corporation joined the Seattle Chamber of Commerce, and Fluke himself co-founded the Seattle Area Industrial Council to promote the region to other companies considering relocation. Likewise, he volunteered his time in Olympia pushing for public policies that made the state more attractive to high tech companies and their prospective employees. A long-time member of UW’s Engineering Visiting Committee, Fluke funded the school’s first chair in engineering and made a major contribution to the Washington Technology Center’s permanent home on the UW campus. He was also a tireless booster of the Seattle Symphony.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the early 1950s, in a post-

Then...



An early piece of Tektronix machinery

and Now.



The Fluke 8508A Reference Multimeter

Harbor, Fluke was called to active duty, working in Admiral Rickover’s unit of the US Navy Bureau of Ships in Washington, D.C. Discharged in 1946, Fluke stayed on the East Coast, spending two years as a consulting engineer for American Machine and Foundry

ings, he made the trip west—by northwest. A month later, the John Fluke Manufacturing Company resumed operations in Seattle, Washington – virtually the first electronics manufacturer in the State of Washington.

Fluke did his civic best to dis-

war economy, the growing electronics industry congregated at three places: the I.R.E., or Institute of Radio Engineers – the forerunner of the I.E.E.E.— held its annual conference at the Grand Central Palace in New York; the National Electronics Conference, which took

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At every show engineers stood ready to discuss their latest developments, while Vollum himself presided over demonstrations. Shown here is Vollum in front of the Tektronix display at a WESCON show in the mid-sixties.

place at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago; and the Western Electronics Manufacturing Association's conference that, to paraphrase Dave Packard, existed to show electronics manufacturers and their customers what was being done out west. The role and the impact these conferences had in shaping the modern electronics industry is inestimable, considering the effort required to transport and set up equipment. WEMA's conference, by the way, later became WESCON and was a long-term fixture for electronics industry marketing.

In 1956, John Fluke and Howard Vollum formed the Northwest Electronic Manufacturers Association (NEMA) that, in 1959, merged with WEMA, and opened its roles

any electronics company west of the Mississippi. Some 19 years later, WEMA completed its eastward "migration" when, in 1978, the *American Electronics Association* opened a Washington, D.C. office on K Street.

AeA has grown tremendously and changed dramatically over the past 60 years. However, from its inception in California during World War II to its present status as a national body with an international presence, AeA has always been about advancing the business of technology. In the Northwest, particularly, this has meant collaboration between leading-edge industries not just in electronics per se, but in bio-technology, nano-technology and emerging fields, as well as education, from K-12 all the way through undergraduate, graduate

to

and post-grad research programs with the area's leading institutions. Obviously, AeA has fostered and maintained much needed relations with local, regional, state, and federal government bodies on matters of mutual concern and benefit.

John Fluke used to joke about his products: if it works, then it must be a Fluke. But AeA's success has been anything but a fluke – rather, the result of leaders seizing the moment to do what was required in order to have a safer, more viable future. Our past makes for a worthy prologue for our future, advancing the business of technology as well as *advancing business through technology*.

ⁱ *The HP Way: How Bill Hewlett and I Built Our Company*, by David Packard, (HarperCollins, New York)

ⁱⁱ *Winning with People: The First 40 Years of Tektronix*, by Marshall Lee, (Tektronix Publications, Portland)

ⁱⁱⁱ The information on John Fluke, Sr., was provided by his son, John Fluke, Jr.

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