



Fred Barnum, a formal employee in the "Nipper Building" who penned a book about its history, calls RCA Victor a "special place to work." Barnum said employees in the building formed a tight-knit community.

New uses, but echoes remain

RCA building, landmark of recording, turns 100.

By Megan DeMarco
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For 100 years, the stained-glass images of Nipper - the fox terrier with its head cocked toward an old phonograph's horn - have glowed above the Camden waterfront, atop one of the city's most historic structures.

The "Nipper building," on Market Street between Delaware Avenue and Front Street, now houses a sports bar and luxury apartments. But references to its status as the birthplace of recorded sound remain at the former factory of the RCA Victor division of Radio Corp. of America.

At Victor's Pub, on the first floor, the cabinet of a Victrola serves as a hostess stand, and 78 r.p.m. RCA Victor records with the familiar maroon labels hang on the walls.

In the lobby of the Victor Loft

apartments, a phonograph stands ready to be cranked, and a timeline depicts people and events associated with the building: Caruso, Elvis, the first moon landing. Historic photos line upstairs halls. Outside, bricks bear faint inscriptions dating to 1936.

To celebrate the rich past of the landmark, once RCA Building 17, a fund-raising event for the Camden County Historical Society will be held at Victor's Pub on Sunday. The afternoon will feature an illustrated lecture by RCA historian Fred Barnum of Cherry Hill, and demonstrations of original Victor talking machines and Victrolas.

The Nipper building is a "visible symbol of Camden's glory days, when the city was a true industrial giant," said Sandy Levins, president of the society.

"For countless South Jersey

residents of a certain age, it's hard to remember a time when we crossed the bridge and didn't automatically look for those gorgeous stained-glass windows, lit up with Nipper listening for his master's voice, reminding us we were home."

The six-story structure (not including its tower) is among the last remnants of a 58-acre industrial complex. The area surrounding the 75-foot tower began as the headquarters of Eldridge B. Johnson's Victor Talking Machine Co. in 1901, which was sold to RCA in 1929, then morphed into a General Electric aerospace division in 1986 and The Victor, the commercial-and-residential venture owned by Dranoff Properties, in 2003.

In 1929, when RCA purchased the Victor company, the facility had 2.5 million square feet - the equivalent of 10 city blocks - across 31 buildings.

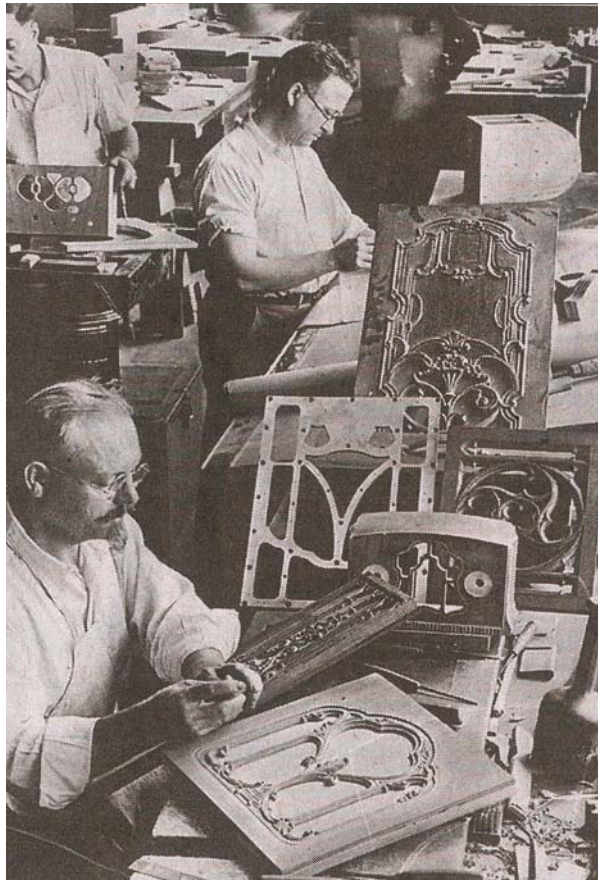
From it came some of the most influential technologies in U.S. history. The radios used in the 1969 moon landing were manufactured there, as were the TV broadcast antennas installed atop the World Trade Center north tower and the Empire State Building. Defense equipment in both world wars and the first mass-produced televisions came out of the complex.

The Nipper building was begun in 1909 by Victor as a factory for wooden Victrola cabinets. By 1916, the building had been expanded several times and its famous tower added.

The building was closed after Martin Marietta took ownership of it in 1993. It was sold to the City of Camden that year and remained vacant until Dranoff Properties rehabilitated it.

Carl Dranoff, president and chief executive officer of Dranoff Properties, said the structure's past is something its residents treasure.

"The rich history and industrial characteristics of the building are what make it a truly unique place to live," Dranoff said.



Workers construct radio cabinets for RCA Victor in May 1934 in the "Nipper building."



The lobby of the building. Though now a sports bar and luxury apartments, reminders of the building's role as RCA Victor's home base still linger.

At the Historical Society event, Barnum will auction a signed copy of his 1991 book, *His Master's Voice in America*, a comprehensive account of the Camden plant's history. Only 5,000 copies were printed, with 3,000 pre-sold to former RCA employees.

"It's the only documented evidence of the Camden plant story," Barnum said. "From the beginning, I knew what I was doing was special."

Demand for the limited-edition volume has grown over the years. A few years ago, Barnum said, he sold 20 copies to a local Barnes & Noble store, and they were gone in three days. The book has fetched up to \$1,200 on eBay, he said. A copy recently listed on the online auction site was priced at almost \$550.

Barnum said he was not surprised that the book remained in high demand, as RCA employees were a tight-knit community with a sense of their own history. A single family often would yield multiple RCA employees, Barnum said, and married couples would tell stories about



A Victrola sits in the Victor Lofts apartment complex located in the RCA Building in Camden.

meeting on the factory floor.

It was "a special place to work," said Barnum, who joined the company in the mid-1980s. "It was called 'the RCA family.' We really did everything together, and that all changed."

Sunday's fund-raiser is expected to attract many company alumni.

The Nipper building is "a potent emotional symbol for the RCA workforce," Levins said. "This is celebrating history at its very best - honoring an important part of the city's vibrant past, along with so many of the people who tell the stories that bring that past to life."