

Departure of chip-design legend Bob Pease prompts outpouring in Silicon Valley

April 23 2009, By Mike Cassidy

Bob Pease is a genuine Silicon Valley rock star who I never would have heard of had he not lost his job, or left his job. It's not entirely clear which.

What is clear is that Pease is one of the many brilliant minds that the valley is built upon. The minds who see what others can't, and who do things others might only imagine. In his field -- and his is analog chip design -- he is revered and sought out. He is read, studied and emulated.

He wrote the book (OK, two of them) on analog design. For years he's written a regular column in Electronic Design magazine, [electronicdesign.com](http://www.electronicdesign.com). He's been inducted into more halls of fame than Mickey Mantle. And now he's gone from [National Semiconductor](#), where he worked for 33 years.

"It's caused a terrific stir because the pope has left Rome," says Jim Williams, an old Pease friend and an analog designer at Linear Technologies. "He is an icon across the entire breadth of the analog chip world."

While at National, Pease designed breakthrough chips that flew on Apollo and components that made medical missions to Mount Everest. And, of course, there was his workhorse LM337 negative voltage regulator. National says it had made more than 135 million of them as of the last published count in 2002.

Never heard of the LM337? That's the point.

There are so many like Bob Pease out there --- innovators who are celebrities in their small professional circles but unknown to most of us who go about employing the results of their wizardry. They are not [Steve Jobs](#) or Marc Andreessen or Jerry Yang or [Sergey Brin](#). They are the ones who let Steve Jobs, Marc Andreessen, [Jerry Yang](#) and Sergey Brin do what they do.

It stands to reason that in these tough economic times we are losing more of them than we know. The layoff. The buyout. The early or forced retirement.

I can't say any of that happened to Bob Pease. National said last week that Pease, 68, retired, and that he would continue to work on projects as a consultant. Pease says he'd promised National he would not talk about the circumstances surrounding his departure. But he doesn't sound like a man ready to retire.

"My career speaks for itself," he said when I reach him at his San Francisco home. "Forty-eight years in the linear racket."

Forty-eight years and he's loved every minute of it, working on analog chips -- devices more concerned with regulating current than with turning it on and off, as digital chips do.

"Part of it is that I really enjoy helping people," Pease said. It's so great, he says, when a customer comes along with an ambitious scheme and the belief that it simply cannot be done.

"Oh really?" Pease said he'll say. "Who says you can't do it?"

Solving problems. It's what engineers do.

News of Pease leaving National, coming as it did at the same time the company announced it was laying off 1,725 workers, did cause a stir. A number of blogs reported that he was among the layoff victims. The commenting sections filled with fans praising Pease for his years of invention and inspiration. Blog readers excoriated National for letting a technology treasure go. But it seems National knows just what it's lost in Pease.

"He's a great guy. Absolutely one of a kind," said Dennis Monticelli, a chief technologist and fellow at National. "He can think about things from different angles. He's immensely curious, almost to a fault."

For his part, Pease says he's leaving soon for a vacation in Scotland.

"I'm not going to worry a damn bit about any of this until I get back," he said. And then he's going to start making calls -- to Cisco, to Apple, to IBM, to others _ to see if any of them can use a pretty decent analog guy.

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