

# Business equipment collection presents a social history

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Tom Russo is so incredibly human and warm it's hard to accept that he's passionate about machines.

So passionate, in fact, that in his own time and with his own money, Russo has established a museum - believed to be the only one of its kind and scope in the country - devoted solely to the evolution of [business technology](#) through the centuries.

The setting of this temple to early technology is an ordinary, three-story commercial building on a highway in Wilmington, Del., that's loaded with 3,000 items showing the history of everything from primitive counting and adding devices to cash registers.

"I guess wow is the word most people say when they step inside here," Russo, 82, said as he recently led visitors into the jaw-dropping space that has also served as headquarters of the Russo family business, D.O.E. Technologies, since 1983.

Today, that business, which began as an office-equipment company and now focuses on specialized software services, is being overtaken by the nearly 10-year-old Thomas A. Russo Museum of Business History and Technology. The entire first floor and part the second have been invaded, to the occasional consternation - and also pride - of his three adult children, who now run the company.

"Dad has definitely pushed his way in here," son John says, "but we're

putting up with it."

Mary Jo Russo, Tom's wife of 61 years, good-naturedly gripes that she shares her husband's retirement not with golf, but with a museum. "And it's tough competition!"

After his U.S. Navy service, Russo got his first job in 1954 with what was then Remington Rand (later renamed Sperry Rand), a business machines manufacturer. He rose quickly in the ranks, and, by 1971, had had five promotions - and just as many family relocations, the last one landing him in Philadelphia.

Russo, by then a father of six, realized his family had to be the priority. He resigned from Sperry Rand that year and started his own office machine business.

Through the years, his company prospered, and Russo became a national figure in the industry, serving as president of the 5,000-member National Office Machine Dealers Association.

By 1998, when he presumably retired and handed over the company to his children, something nagged at him as he saw the country's vintage business equipment being bought up by collectors in Europe, especially in France and Germany.

Russo started scouring flea markets and auctions, buying vintage pieces in order to preserve them. "I didn't know exactly what I would do with them," he admits. But as happens with so many passions, the collecting soon became its own engine, and with the growing Internet, the opportunities multiplied.

Fast-forward to 2005; he realized he had treasures that others needed to see. A passion had become a crusade.

"What Tom Russo has done is rare, and that's because he's a unique individual," says Rob Lukens, president of the Chester County Historical Society in suburban Philadelphia. "He has put together an encyclopedic collection, and, in the process, has presented a social history of commerce and business."

Lukens, who has a Ph.D. in history, notes that Russo's collection is of great interest to scholars, and also a draw for cultural tourism. "These are machines that changed people's lives and make history come alive."

Russo, in fact, became a self-taught historian through collecting, and ended up, to his own surprise, the author of three books.

Antique Office Machines tracks 600 years of calculating devices. Office Collectibles looks at the 100 years from 1900 to 2000, and Mechanical Typewriters studies the evolution of that faithful friend to generations of office workers and students.

He also studies how office technology changed women's lives. Because of the shortage of manpower during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln's secretary of the treasury startled the country by hiring women to fill vacant government clerical positions. It seemed women's smaller hands were well-suited to the typewriter that Christopher Latham Sholes had recently invented.

And when touch-typing came along in 1878, women excelled at that skill, giving them options other than working in the needle trades in teeming factories, Russo said.

The Russo collection, which includes James Watts' 1795 version of a copier and Thomas deColmar's vintage 1820 calculator prototype, also features magnificent cash registers, many elaborately adorned, as well as adding and billing machines, paging and calling systems, early postage

meters, and photocopying devices.

Along with the historic Sholes typewriter model is a rare recent acquisition: the Japanese Otani. It was the first in Japan, invented in 1914 by a company now familiar to moderns as Canon.

Throw in signature-writing devices, coin counters and sorters, and, of course, those dictating machines so well remembered by generations of secretaries and bosses, and there's a visual feast for visitors.

Ask Russo what's ahead, and he doesn't miss a beat. He dreams of a larger permanent space where visitors can better see how innovations in business technology have revolutionized our lives.

There was the Corona Animal Keyboard model from 1935 marketed to children so typing would be fun - and accessible. Its slogan was, "A gift to help little fingers guide eager young minds."

Today, many of Russo's most enthusiastic visitors are children, some of whom have never seen a typewriter, let alone used one. And as a grandfather of nine and great-grandfather of two, Russo savors their reactions.

"Thank you for letting us come to your museum," wrote a fifth grader who had toured with his class. "It was cool to see all the different kinds of typewriters and the math machines. Thank you for being the coolest!"

High praise, indeed.

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