

MID CENTURY RADIO

BY K9CC

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Since most of the members of SMC were not on the air (or alive) in the 1950's I thought there may be some interest in hearing what ham radio was like back then. I received my novice license WN9UDK in 1952 and I was very active until I went away to UW Madison to finish my Chemical Engineering studies in 1958.

Getting Interested

Like most homes at that time we had a large floor model radio in our living room. This particular radio would tune far enough above the AM broadcast band to receive the low end of 160 meters and the local (city of Milwaukee) police calls. Yes that's right, the police used medium wave AM radios in the early 1950's, and police cars all had 6 foot whips on their rear bumpers. It was cool listening to the police calls, but I really got excited when I heard the hams on 160, and that's what got me interested in becoming a ham.

1950's Life Style

Let me paint a picture of what life was like at that time, and how I think it made ham radio a little more of a draw, or at least a different kind of draw, than it is today. The "common man" did not travel to foreign countries on vacation. This was far too expensive at the time. A long distance telephone call was an expensive luxury that was very limited in the average household. Yet a teen age ham radio operator would be talking to people all over the US, and even foreign countries. Quite a difference today with unlimited long distance calling, and various "free" ways of communicating with people all over the world. Some of that change was brought home to me some years ago, when a DXpedition on a pacific island used the internet for the first time to verify contacts and avoid unnecessary insurance contacts. I thought this was so cool that I told a co worker about it, who was not a ham. He gave me a puzzled look and said, "Why don't they just talk to him on the internet?"

The 1952 Novice Band

In 1952 all the novices were jammed into 50 kcs of the 80 meter band. And yes the term back then kilocycles not kilohertz. The novice band ran from 3700 to 3750. There were also 2 meter AM phone privileges for the novice. The novice segments on 40 meter and 15 meters came later. The general feeling among novices at the time was to stay away from 2 meter phone,

since the novice license was only good for one year at the time, and we had to get our code speed up to 13 wpm to pass the General class exam. Let me tell you the 50 kc wide novice band was really a baptism by fire. Anyone who put up with the QRM long enough to reach 13 wpm and pass the General class exam really wanted to be a ham. Transmitters were crystal controlled only, and 75 watts maximum. Most of us had very poor receivers with little selectivity, and the band was wall to wall signals day and night. My receiver was a "high end" 16 tube all band radio. At the time, an all band radio was one designed for, and sold to, the general public, not radio hams. My PR-16 all band radio was manufactured in 1935. I know it was high end, because it had a BFO! A typical QSO on the 80 meter novice band was to call CQ and then tune around for an answer. Remember all novices were crystal control only. During peak times I would hear 4 or 5 strong signals in my passband and probably 20 weak ones. Most QSO's would not last long because of QRM, and a lack of skill by the operators on both ends of the QSO. I remember that I appreciated QSO's from General class stations who would occasionally come on the novice band, because those QSO's usually lasted until we said 73.

A Very Slow Start

I was always amazed later when I would hear stories of novices working DX on their first QSO on 15 meters, since my start was very slow. My first QSO was on August 11, 1952 when I was 15 years old. It took 15 more days of concentrated activity before I worked anyone outside the city of Milwaukee, and a month before I worked anyone outside the 9 call area. I did manage to work Cuba on 40 meters before I got my General class. That was my only DX as a novice. One interesting thing I saw when looking back through my first log book, was that 18 days after my first QSO, I called WN9UTT, but he came back to WN9SZR. I didn't know WN9SZR at the time, but we became close friends later in college. He is now well known with his new call sign, K3ZO. I guess time doesn't change much, he beat me out then, and he can beat me now.

AM Modulation

Probably the biggest difference you would notice if you were transported back to the 1950's, would come from listening to the phone bands. The phone bands were all AM modulation with LOTS of HETRODYNES. The QRM was much worse than today on the phone bands. The QRM on the phone bands was so bad back then, that the sweepstakes scores were higher on CW than they were on phone. You had to be a little bit of a masochist to compete on phone in those days. About the closest thing I can think of today would be putting up with the "pig farmers" on 75 meters.

Contesting in the 1950's

Contesting in the 1950's involved ; paper logging, big dupe sheets to write down who you worked, CQ machines using a tape loop on a tape recorder, holding your pencil in keying hand, or learning to send with your left hand. The SS was 40 hours long comprising two consecutive weekends, you chose either CW or AM phone to compete in, as both modes were run on the same two weekends. The ARRL DX contest had a six QSO quota per multiplier. You were only

allowed to work a max of six stations from any individual country. Imagine today if you could only work a maximum of six DL's or six JA's. The reason for this rule was because there was far less activity from Europe than there is now, and very little from Japan. Therefore, contest organizers didn't want the stronger signal stations monopolizing the DX. Apparently those areas of the world were still recovering from WW2. The DX bands back then tended to have more South American stations and less European stations, compared to now.

Commercial CW

In the 1950's CW was still very much used commercially. One memory I have from the early 50's was going with a friend to the police headquarters in Milwaukee, where I lived at the time. We went to see someone my friend knew who worked there. While we were talking to him, we could hear CW coming through the hallways from an upstairs location. When I asked what it was, he said that it was sending and receiving information with other police departments! Think of how many generations of technology changes that represents compared to today. There also were ship to shore radio stations on a number of maritime bands throughout the HF spectrum to communicate with ships at sea, all operating 24 hours per day Using CW.

CQ WSEM

This is one memory of the 1950's that I have never seen anything written about. Prior to approximately April 1956 ham radio was apparently not allowed in the Soviet Bloc countries. The Soviet Bloc was the USSR, and all the eastern European countries they controlled, such as Poland and Hungary. Starting in April 1956 Soviet Bloc country hams were allowed on the air, but they could not talk to anyone outside the Soviet Bloc. They would call CQ WSEM, and only answer other Soviet Bloc hams. We would try just sending a signal report and they would send one back, but as soon as we would sign our call they would end the QSO. I can imagine the penalty was a little harsher than our FCC. Finally in June 1956 the Soviet Block hams were allowed to work the rest of the world. It resulted in a happy time surge of activity, and the famous Box 88 Moscow QSL bureau.

The 11 Meter Band

Before CB radio was authorized there was an 11 meter ham band. When it was announced that the FCC was contemplating making it into the CB band, 73 magazine had an 11 meter contest in January 1958 to stimulate ham activity. The contest was popular but we did end up losing the 11 meter band.

Sun Spot Cycle 19

I was fortunate to have 6 meter capability during the amazing solar cycle 19. I had a National NC-300 with their accessory 6 meter converter, a homemade transmitter, and a homemade 3 element 6 meter beam. As I remember it, 6 meters was open every day all summer long in 1957. In the morning it would be open to the east coast, than shift down to the Gulf coast, and finally the west coast in the afternoon. This went on day after day. And of course this was all

using the AM mode.

My Introduction to SSB

After going inactive in 1958, I finally got back on the air in 1967 in a minor way, but still no modern SSB radio. Finally in 1971 I bought a used Drake TR-4 and had my first taste of SSB. I was especially impressed with VOX! I always liked full break in for rag chewing on CW, and now we can do it on phone! Then I found out to my disappointment that it is generally not used. And yes I am aware that there is some justification for this.

My Inactive Period

After being very active from 1952 to 1958 I did not really have a station again until 1971. This is reflected in my DXCC certificate, it was issued in November 1957. My 120 country sticker is dated October 1973. Sixteen years to work 20 countries!

I hope this snap shot view of what the hobby was like in the 1950's was of interest.

Thank you
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