

HAM RADIO ISN'T THE FUN IT USED TO BE

By Bud Peters K6HDE

You might say I grew up along with radio, for I have seen the first battery operated TRF sets grow into what we enjoy today but I still miss the warm glow of an operating vacuum tube. Those early tubes were a fantastic invention. As a child, I used to sit behind our radio and just look at the tubes. I spent my preteen years dismantling junked TRF receivers (Tuned Radio Receivers) for parts. People would throw them out and purchase the newer AC operated ones. I repaired my first radio for profit at the tender age of 12. It was one of those newfangled 110-volt (Back then it was 110 v and later became 120v) AC DC sets that only used 5 tubes in a superhet configuration. It became known as the All-American tube lineup. 35Z5, 50L6, 12SA7, 12SK7 and 12SQ7. The filaments were connected in series so no transformer was needed. Every home had at least one of these small sets in the kitchen and also a big floor model for the family entertainment.

I always knew that I would be an amateur radio operator but I didn't even know they were called hams at that point. I lived in a small town and had not yet met another radio enthusiast. My self-study taught me that a credible radio transmitter could be made using a high voltage spark coil. I couldn't afford to purchase one, the big depression was still going on. Henry Ford solved that little problem for me, at least for my first low power transmitter. Ford coils were to be found in the junk from any auto repair shop. Building a spark transmitter was easy. This project introduced me to CW and the need to study and practice the code. To do this I had to recruit one of my friends down the street so I had somebody to talk to. The spark transmitters worked well for our use and we both were getting pretty good with the code (slow but readable). It seems that our efforts were occupying the entire broadcast band and nobody nearby could listen to their favorite soap operas while we were practicing. This stopped our practice before things got violent and changed my priority to converting old BC receivers to receive the 75-meter ham band. This worked pretty good since the band was not crowded back

then. I soon developed a list of regular hams that I would tune and listen to for hours. They were my hero's though I did not meet one of them until years later.

The second world war began and that ended my pursuit of a ham license. The hams were off the air and everybody was instructed to have the short wave receiving capability removed from their radios. I must admit I did not remove short wave from mine, though the band was very quiet. My time was taken up repairing radios that could not be replaced because of the war. This was difficult because parts were not easily found, especially tubes and filter capacitors. I learned to rewire sockets and use tubes as they were never intended such as 12SK7 to replace a 35Z5 rectifier. I had a nice business going as I entered high school. There was another delay in the pursuit of a ham license. I was called by my church to work in the state of Oklahoma as a missionary for two years. After that I went to work as an aircraft radio installer but for only for three months before I was drafted for the Korean war. I spent my military time in the signal corps radio repair school teaching radio repair to the unwilling.

The only chance I had to try for my ham license was the one time the FCC sent a man to the school to administer the examination. I flunked! I wanted to pass so bad that I froze up on the code. Hunters call it buck fever. I absolutely could not make my pencil move on the paper to write what I was copying. I was reading every word 100%. I can still recite every word of the text but at that time I could not write it down, so no license.

As soon as I got out of the army I tried again and passed. I skipped getting a novice license and went directly to general. This time I would not allow myself to get up tight about it and so everything went smoothly. Then the long wait for my call to arrive, but I didn't waste my time waiting. I used the time to build a transmitter for the great day. I chose to build a clamp modulated 829B 100W rig and completed construction before my license arrived. The first and only time that transmitter was ever tied to an antenna was that glorious day when the world first heard my new call letters, "K6HDE"

The transmitter worked beautifully, I got an answer on my first CQ. I had a very nervous but delightful conversation with Clarence Hamma K6DEO. We became longtime friends. I will never forget that first contact. This was the only time I ever put power to my home built jewel. Clarence told me of a ham about 40 mi away who had a home built 500 watt transmitter he wanted to sell. I went immediately to check it out. What I saw was a 6-foot rack and panel of well-made electronics that I could take home for \$100 and so I did. It covered all bands up through 10 meters with a pair of 8005's in push pull modulated by a pair of 807's. It was crystal controlled but that was no handicap to me. I soon had a VFO built and connected so my second on the air ham contact was with 500 watts. My little first transmitter went on the shelf to eventually be sacrificed for parts for one of my ever-ongoing projects. I wish now that I had kept it, maybe even had it gold plated or something.

I only had my license a few months before I had to go to work real time, working an emergency. Christmas eve 1955 we had a major levee break right here in Yuba City. I was on the other side of the river at the time patrolling with my home made mobile transmitter and a much-modified war surplus command receiver in my car. The bridges to Yuba City were closed to all traffic. It was thought that the break was imminent on the Marysville side of the river where I was working and orders went out for everyone to get to Beale airbase and check into a shelter. I was standing in line for a place in the shelter when I thought this is not what I do. I remembered meeting an officer who was a Ham at the ham club meeting so I went to the base locator and found out where his quarters were. When I drove up he was just coming out the door to leave. It seems he had a heavy date. I told him he was not going anywhere, we were setting up a station in his room. Fortunately, he didn't argue and 10 minutes later he was shinnying up a flagpole with a wire in his teeth for our antenna. He had his own rig but it wasn't set up. He was building his own 3 element 20-meter beam by soldering beer cans together, but it wasn't finished. I don't recall his name but I will never forget his call K2ICV. We used his call for the entire emergency. It turned out we were a critical station as the air base phones worked, but there were no phones working in town, so for the next three days and nights I and this officer ham operated the main communication link to town from the airbase. This was

important for the airbase was the main source of men and supplies in the fight to keep the river out of Marysville. It was the middle of the third day before I got any message about my family. They were reported safe staying with relatives in a town about 40 mi away. The problem had been I was not operating using my call, but using the call K2ICV belonging to the officer who owned the station and my family had asked a ham to listen for my call. The news of my family's safety was like eight hours' sleep.

I learned that my home was one of the lucky ones, the water stopped ½ block away. After three full days the bridges were opened to limited traffic. To get home I had to talk my way past an armed guard at every intersection including the last turn into my subdivision. That armed guard was not allowing anyone to pass so you could guess, I was tired, sleepy and wasn't in the mood to argue. I just said "you better have some bullets in that gun because I am going home and just drove right past him. Nobody shot or came in after me so I guess I won that bout. I had completed my baptism of fire and felt like a real ham.

I met an avid CW ham and we became good friends. Many of our crazy ideas were jointly conceived. Larry Murdock (K6AAW) was a free thinking can-do type of person, so we got along royally. Even though I never got near as expert at CW as he was, we could work together on field days. He would be the operator and I would keep log. We always made top score for the club operation. I used my Swan 240 SSB rig that I had modified for CW operation.

Larry would set up two keys, one for his right hand and one for his left. He was equally good with either hand. In the slow hours about 2 AM we would answer a CQ, as always sending to match the speed of the transmitting station. Sometimes the station would come back faster. We would match his speed again, he would come back faster. After about three or four cycles of this Larry would drop the weight off his bug and hit him with full speed. After a couple of seconds pause we would hear ".. - - .. " question mark. The contest was over, there were no further problems with anyone trying to upstage Larry. We would log the contact and move on.

Field days were fun, building things was fun, mobile runs with the club were fun, fox hunts were fun but sometimes the fun moved into more shady areas. There was a time we took advantage of the hysteria related to the launch of the Russian satellite, sputnik. We listened to the radio broadcast of the sputnik signal and I told Larry, I can build something that sounds like that, and I did. I built a little fist sized battery operated one tube transmitter that was being keyed at the same cadence as the satellite except we operated right in the middle of the 75-meter band with 25 mw. The club listening frequency at the time was 3940 khz. We used it to fool several members of the club, then assuming that the satellite would be the subject matter under discussion at the coming MARS (Military Auxiliary Radio System) club meeting we took it with us to the meeting. We were right, the guest speaker worked for what he called the Mini-track station. After his talk, I went out and turned on my little transmitter in the car and went back in with my surplus ANGR9 receiver that was battery operated. I reported to the speaker that we were receiving a satellite signal, right now. I turned on my receiver and he was convinced and excited. Everybody that attended the meeting had to check out the signal. I looked up and saw our guest speaker on the phone. That's when we decided that was a good time to disappear. I don't think the Mini-track station ever did locate sputnik that night.

On another occasion when I had built an audio oscillator inside of a single earphone powered by a hearing aid battery also inside. There was a tiny push button where the cord used to enter the earphone to key it. Larry had an idea for some fun with it at a MARS code practice session that was coming up. We arrived to find there was a good crowd but the teacher wasn't there. He finally arrived about 20 minutes late acting like he could be late, it's you guys that need me attitude. To warm up he sent a string of V's. It was followed by a weaker identical string of V's. from Larry's pocket. The operator started sending his practice text and everything he sent was echoed identically speed and text. The group started complaining about the echo in the room and started looking for its source. The teacher helped out by sending random text which also seemed to echo. Everyone was checking all around for the source of the echo, even sticking their head in the AC Duct in an attempt to find the source of the echo. About that time the teacher sent a long and complicated string and Larry echoed"...." Question mark with my

little oscillator from his pocket. That's when they caught on so we confessed. There wasn't much code practice that night by the time everybody had a chance to play with my oscillator. Everybody had fun except the teacher.

There was a memorable time at a MARS field day one year. There was One member who insisted on working 10 meters though the band was dead. He had built a Heath kit single band 10-meter transmitter and he was going to use it. We soon found out that when he keyed his rig every other station at the site was wiped out. As usual I was 40 meters and we would answer a CQ then 10-meters would come on with a long call and blank out the station we were working. They would be gone when we could hear again. Nobody could reason with 10-meters even though he only made 2 contacts in 8 hours. At this point I won't name names but somebody snuck up behind the 10-meter position in the dark and put a screw through his coax. This of course put him off the air. He could tell something was wrong but he just kept trying until he ruined his finals, and melted his tank coil but there was no farther interference for the rest of the field day. The only person who was mad was the 10-meter operator.

Fox hunts were a lot of fun, even though the members didn't have any DF Equipment for HF, at least not at first. I discovered that when fox hunting on HF that the whip mounted on the rear bumper of your car was directional. I would find a good intersection and do an O turn while watching my S meter and head in the direction of the strongest signal. It works, I was always able to find the fox. Those years were a lot of fun but as I think about it the most fun was associating with the greatest bunch of radio enthusiasts in the world. Maybe your rig came out of a box and it's not 6-foot-tall, weighing 300 lbs. You can still have fun. The guys are out there and they are anxious to talk using modes of communication that I never heard of during my heyday. I guess I have to admit ham radio is still fun but there is something real special about making a contact with a rig you built yourself.

I am afraid that radio has advanced faster than me and it is a bit more complicated building the equipment, and that has slowed me down a tad. I think I will leave it to you new

guys. Go to it and remember to have fun. But remember, we are still prime emergency communications. If you can't move in to a location and set up your station including antennas in 20 minutes you need more practice. If you really want to have fun, build your own equipment.

BUD PETERS K6HDE