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DIDs do fun stuff



It's All My Mother's Fault!

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As I approach my 50th year in ham radio, I find myself reflecting on what this hobby has meant to me. This article is not a narrative of equipment upgrades nor specific ham radio accomplishments. Art Collins, Lloyd and Iris Colvin, Danny Weil, and the like set the high bar for me. My reason for writing this article is to document the effect my mother's seemingly random decision had on my life.

As a youngster in the early 1950s, as rock 'n roll was entering the world, I wanted to listen to my own radio. No way was that to be played on the family radio. My mother, knowing my penchant for taking anything and everything apart, thought, "I wonder if the kid can actually build something rather than destroy it?"

She thus went a couple of blocks from our house to consult with a radio/TV repairman. Everyone within a half mile knew of this man; he seems he was a "ham radio" operator, Erv, W9QHR. He operated a homebrew 15-meter, crystal-controlled, 300-watt AM transmitter. This was in the days of 21-megacycle IFs in the TV sets. His antenna was a ZL special on a windmill tower. Growing up in Wisconsin, I have seen many windmill towers, but none as magnificent as that architectural wonder. The transmitter was in a "building" at the base of the tower. It used the four legs of the tower as the side supports and housed an old "pole pig" transformer hooked up backwards for 110V line voltage. An innocuous lever switch located near W9QHR's left knee remotely operated all of this. This guy was really infamous; he had more FCC letters than I had QSL cards.

Erv suggested that my mother buy one of the three-tube Philmore radio kits. "Let the kid try to put it together; at least he'll be occupied for a few days," he said to her. Mom and Dad thought this would be a great idea. Little did they know that there were "ham bands" on the radio in addition to the AM stations. Their adventures with the kid were just beginning!

A few blown fuses and a trip to see Erv with my non-working creation under my arm and I was ready to hear the world. Lo and behold, I could hear W9QHR talking to the world. Curious as to what the other side of these conversations was about, I made another trip, a pilgrimage down the street. After all, I only had to turn on the TV at the right time to hear W9QHR's side of the conversation.

I then introduced the term "antenna" into the family vernacular. I thought it would be okay, because it had been weeks since the word was dead during one of my experiments. While my father, a WWII veteran, had a fair understanding of radio, he apparently missed a part of his schooling. We overcame this, and a wire was allowed to proceed from my radio to a convenient tree. Holy Moley! I could hear the ends of the Earth, or at least California, which some Wisconsinites still considered the end of the Earth.

I muddled along like this until I reached junior high school. Kids from all over town were now thrown together. Among them was a budding geek, geek being what it was before geeks rose to prominence and gave the term new meaning. I discovered he was a ham radio operator, Morse code from a ham and intended to get a ham license. It took me no time at all to thrust myself in the midst of all this and get a Novice license, KN9DID. W9ADM was our Elmer.

During a family trip to Omaha, Nebraska, I discovered that right across the Missouri River in Council Bluffs, Iowa lay ham radio World Radio Laboratories. Loaded down with every penny I could scrounge together, I made the trek. After a recount of my findings, I decided against a Globe Chief 90A usuriously priced at \$59.95, or a KWS-1 at \$2095.00. I returned with a 6AG7, a tube socket, resistors, condensers, and an aluminum chassis.

Now my folks were in real trouble. A new word was again added to the family's vocabulary—TVII! I believe my father added a few words to my vocabulary that I did not hear again until boot camp. Antennas, transmitters, more fuses, "curious" neighbors (remember 21-mc TV IFs), peeps, squawks, shrieks of pain (high voltage), and joy of dubious accomplishments ensued. I talked to the ends of the known Earth—California. I then began to collect some dubious mail myself, in the form of Official Observer notices. I came to realize that under no circumstance was I to transmit during the "Lawrence Welk Show" again, or I would be relocated.

I managed to get through high school, sports, and girls, in spite of all of it interfering with my hobby. I once got pinched for reading a ham radio magazine folded into my geometry book. Remember that QST was in the smaller magazine format then.

When the day came to fly the nest, I decided I would enlist in the Coast Guard. My scores on the aptitude test showed, guess you can't see it, enough about radio/electronics to qualify for Electronics School. This got me around a bit — Connecticut, Texas, Louisiana, al

of radio stations. I even wound up on the old-time LORAN station in Korea for a year. It was decommissioned the year after I left. I don't know if my stay there accelerated or decelerated the military's decision. I tried to operate from Korea, but it was 1961 and even still under United Nations control and the red tape was impossible. I did discover that the military's knowledge of antenna systems was inferior to mine, and I made a few unauthorized changes. After this tour of duty I was sent to Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin to serve on a buoy tender/ice breaker for seven months or so.

Now things got even weirder. Having had two months at home to buy a '53 Mercury and outfit it with a crystal-controlled DX-35 with a PE-103 for power, a Gonset converter under the dash, and the usual (for then) 8-foot whip with 75-meter loading coil, I made my appearance at my new duty station.

Any arrival on the small ship Mesquite (crew of 40 to 50) was greeted with curiosity, to say the least. One guy, Ron Gorzynski, was outside the bounds of normal, however. He hailed me as a celebrity. Before the whip even stopped swaying, he enthusiastically introduced me as a guy who had wanted to be a "ham" for as long as he could remember. Alas, it wasn't my personality or prior military accomplishments that attracted him. It was the mobile rig. I was about to become an Elmer whether I liked it or not.

I was pressed into service immediately — before my seabag was unpacked, if I recall correctly—and invited to Ron's home. He had a young lady who announced after one of my visits, "That person will never darken my door again." My days as a life-long bachelor (I was all of 22 years old) made some of my social graces suspect, I guess. Amateur radio prevailed, however, and I passed my Novice license, WN9FNI.

In the course of those meetings, I was privileged to meet what I thought were all of the other members of the family: mother-in-law, brother-in-law, etc. I figured I was in the clear, until I was introduced to Ron's wife's sister, who was working out of town and were married within three months, five days after I left the military. Sue, not having been part of this hobby, sometimes had a hard time coping with the idea that a new 6146 had priority, in my mind, over the other mundane needs of the family, such as food and clothing. (I stuck it out, though, and we celebrated our 42nd anniversary last year.)

I now had a hobby, a vocation, a wife, an extended family, and my lifelong friend Ron (then WA8KEM) all traceable back to my hometown. For a long time now Ron and I have lived on opposite shores of Lake Michigan, only 100 miles apart but separated by time and distance enough away from one another to stay friends. Our hobby has kept us close. We both chase DX — the student has surpassed me as it should be — and have been active on the satellites since AO-6.

In 1998 Ron changed his callsign to K8DID, his daughter Deanna's to K7DID (I gave her her Novice test), and Deanna's husband's to K5DID.

Ron's wife Bonnie recanted her earlier demands and allows me to visit once a year for fishing—twice a year if her sister accompanies me, if only briefly. Bonnie's call is KA8DID.

Ron claims he changed all the callsigns to honor his Elmer. I think the DID just had a better ring to it on CW.

Thanks Mom and Dad.