

Early Michigan Traffic
A Personal Recollection
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In the Beginning

In the beginning it was all on CW since virtually everyone operated CW. A few well-to-do hams did have elaborate AM phone stations far beyond the resources of most, including those of us with only paper routes or family allowances. But somewhere in every phone setup, you'd see a bug or hand key in plain sight, used or not.

Our early stations were simple, perhaps only a two-tube regenerative receiver and a single tube Hartley or TNT transmitter built with a few odd parts on a real breadboard. My first rig in 1931 was a Super Wasp kit receiver and a 201-A TNT transmitter, both running on the same three 45-volt B batteries. The filament A supply was a discarded 6-volt car battery my dad thought too small to crank our 1926 Reo in winter. The transmitting antenna was single-wire fed, so called because a lead-in wire was tapped 16' off center on a 135' flattop. Revived recently, it's now called a "Windom" after W8GZ who wrote the original 1929 QST article. The un-tuned feeder wire could be any length and was clipped right on the ¼-inch copper tubing plate tank coil, just far enough from the hot end to permit oscillation. Subsequent reports of heavy chirp would force a further move back toward the cold end. Tuning was accomplished using a flashlight bulb in a loop of wire held close to the hot end of the coil, but not too close since the whole out-in-the-open coil carried the full plate voltage. We lived dangerously.

Full QSK was expected so no serious operator ever used the same antenna for both receiving and transmitting. I had 50 or 75-feet of bell wire (a dime's worth) strung around under the eaves for the receiver. The best and strongest antenna wire was old green #9 HD copper, available free from Ma Bell's Long Line crews. Big 6-inch glass insulators were a dime, three for a quarter, at Woolworth's. Of course, pin-type line insulators were always gratis from either the town dump or the one down behind the power house. Total cash outlay for antenna systems the first ten years was about 75-cents.

Most of us started QRP; mine was two watts, estimated input. The only meter available was a 79-cent Readrite milliammeter in the B+ lead. No voltmeter was necessary since the plate voltage was assumed to be 135, or 180 if we could afford another Banner B-battery from Kresge's. 180-volts was considered the upper limit for a 201-A, then around 5-dollars new, and its 5-volt filament had to be adjusted with a 6-ohm rheostat to something less than full brilliance. "TNT" meant the plate was tuned but the grid wasn't, though of course, there was a grid leak. It was the simplest possible transmitter of that day. There were no capacitors, inductors, Hertzies, or even electronics then. All we had were condensers, coils, cycles, and just plain old electricity. How were we to know this was the beginning of a vast new technological revolution?

During the late twenties and early thirties our radio parts came from Kresge's Dollar Store with the green front, not to be confused with their red front dime store next door. People were still

building their own broadcast receivers. In 1929, a Pilot Super Wasp receiver kit was \$ 29.50 at the dollar store, quite a substantial outlay for a kid of 14. It was fun to build with neat 5-prong plug in coils, each band in a different color, and a state-of-the-art 222 screen grid tuned RF stage ahead of the conventional triode 201-A regenerative detector. Then came transformer coupled 3:1 audio stages, 201-A and 112-A, all of which drove a beautiful tapestry covered scratchy sounding RCA 103 cone speaker; just the thing for CW. An old Brandes headset plugged right into the 112-A B+ line, now and then a real shocker at 180-volts. To complete the station, we'd send to Leeds in New York for a Bunnell Gold Bug key on sale at \$3.98 and we were in business.

These rigs did their thing best on 80-meters. 40 was pretty shaky and the higher bands were simply out of the question: the receiver had 2 degrees band spread on 20, and the transmitter was far too unstable even with the big copper tubing tank coil (to reduce —circulating current, whatever that was).

With AC power any line voltage change would produce a corresponding jump in frequency. The frequency would also swing with the antenna in the wind. Fortunately, our receivers were broad tuners. Later on, as the art progressed, we'd upgrade to crystal control with two, maybe three, 1-inch square X-cut quartz crystal plates each in a big round holder. Crystal frequencies were determined mainly by consensus, not actual measurement. The only frequency meter we'd ever seen was the one on the power plant switchboard which pointed to 60-cycles. Thus the TNT was replaced with a 47 crystal oscillator driving parallel 46s, running as much as 35-watts and the Super Wasp went AC with the new 36, 37, and 38 indirect heater tubes.

At first, though, most of us were operating unstable QRP VFOs together with equally unstable uncalibrated receivers. A 1932 log contains a cryptic remark, — “All dial readings with NAA at 10-degrees.” So most of us kept well inside the area where we heard other hams. After a CQ we'd start tuning from the nearest band edge in toward our own frequency, sometimes adding “LF” or “HF” to indicate which one. Other stations were never worked on or near ours because it was too noisy on transmit. So there we were on 80 CW and that's where it all started.

The two-watt 201-A was entertaining but, as they'd say now, not QSO-effective. After a few frustrating weeks in early 1931, it was decided QRO was the way to go. That involved an AC power supply and a 245 tube in the TNT, a big jump to 20-watts at 350-volts. Felt like about the same voltage across the key, too. Now W8EGI began talking to more and different people at greater DX, consistently. A whole new dimension was added when someone asked me to take a real radiogram for local delivery.

Traffic was handled on an individual ad-hoc basis in those days. Schedules were arranged at random, usually after a chance reply to a directional CQ. The old log shows I maintained semi-regular schedules with W8BYD in Cleveland, W8GUC in Kalamazoo, and W8DYH in Detroit. Of course, there were Trunk Lines and Transcons for the big boys, not us. We all mailed our monthly reports to the SCM even if we weren't that organized. Actual routing of messages was left to our own initiative or just inadvertence.

The bulk of our outstate traffic was relayed, that is, if we could find someone in the right direction closer to destination. Delivery was always made by the last receiving station, no matter where the addressee, since even then, it was not considered proper to hold anything over 48-hours. I don't remember anyone ever using a cancel and file service message. Maybe it wasn't invented yet. I suppose we felt an obligation to get the traffic through.

The landline wasn't used then, simply because universal telephone service was far in the future. Only a relatively few individuals had phones so almost all deliveries, even local, were made via that late, great American institution, the Penny Postcard (a First Class Letter cost twice as much). In those days there were 14,000 daily passenger trains carrying the mail to every city, town and village in the United States and Canada, and each train carried a Railway Post Office in which clerks sorted mail en route. Half of all Federal employees were mailmen and they came twice a day.

For example, we receive an apparently urgent message at 8:00-AM for Hillsdale. No relay outlet. A glance at the time-table shows New York Central # 38 leaving at 9:05 for Fort Wayne. We quick type up the traffic on a penny postcard, jump on our bike, pedal down to the depot and hand it right to the clerk on the train or just drop it in the slot on the side of the car if the door is already closed. The card will be postmarked —RPO NYC Train 38 and delivered in Hillsdale that same afternoon. All for 1-cent including the card. For extreme urgency, an extra 10-cent stamp would give it special delivery immediately upon receipt at the destination post office. Now the trains are gone, even the tracks are gone, and the mail is gone too; well, it isn't quite the same anymore.

In 1931, all the US hams were listed in a little green booklet, 35-cents from the Superintendent of Documents. A similar pink booklet carried all the commercial stations, including Rocky Point and all the ships at sea. 1932 saw a dramatic increase in the ham population, partly from those caught in the Depression looking for something to do, cheap. With more stations coming on the air and correspondingly more traffic being passed, the heretofore disorganized QSP operation tended to become more systematic and orderly.

My late 1931 ORS was soon followed by an Route Manager appointment and, as an Eastern Michigan liaison station, I found myself maintaining regular skeds with Detroit and adjacent RMs. I remember especially W8CEU in Detroit, VE3JT in Toronto, W8EBY in Cleveland and W9AET in Fort Wayne. Then in late 1932, the Detroit Amateur Radio Association began urging us outstate stations to participate in their ongoing local CW operation, a net of sorts —around 3700. From the beginning grew the idea, which would become QMN just a few years later.