

Editorial

Just Another Caretaker

My earliest childhood memory is plugging a pair of TV “rabbit ears” into a 120 V wall socket. When I went to “adjust” the antenna, I received a shock that threw me across the room. Ever since, I have been fascinated with antennas, electricity and magnetism. By the time I was six years old, I was connecting batteries to light bulbs, buzzers and coils wrapped around a compass. I was completely astounded that I could make a bulb light or a compass spin, simply by connecting a battery. I thought that electricity was magic, and my parents seemed impressed enough with it as well. Electromagnetism continues to fascinate me to this day.

Radio came into my life during a difficult time in my youth. By the time I was nine, both of my parents had died from cancer — Mom when I was six, Dad when I was nine. I was a pretty troubled kid, despite the heroic efforts of my stepmother Ruth, who came into my life when I was eight. Shortly after my father died, a complete stranger gave me a Heathkit GR-81 regenerative receiver. The first two stations that I heard were WWV and the “Voice of the Andes” HCJB. I had no idea where Quito, Ecuador, was, but I knew that it must be a really exotic kind of place and very far from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where I grew up. I was completely hooked, and I stayed up late every night in front of that little radio, tuning for interesting signals. Radio was an escape from a confusing and frightening world that made no sense to me at the time.

I wasn’t aware of it then, but I began looking for some kind of role model to fill the void left by my parents’ deaths. I found heroes in music and sports. Some heroes were healthier than others. I went down some difficult paths along the way, chasing dreams and getting into a lot of trouble. My interest in radio never went away, and I got my ham ticket in 1976 at age 14.

Unfortunately, I was not introduced to contesting until many years later. I say “unfortunately,” because I believe that I could have really benefited from being around contesters as a young man. Instead, I hung out with the “troubled” kids, as I felt most at home among my fellow misfits. Life went on, and radio took a back seat for a few decades. I earned a civil engineering degree and went to work in the environmental protection field. I developed an affinity for computers and was responsible for implementing geographic information systems (GIS) technology in the state of Tennessee



New *NCJ* Editor Kirk Pickering, K4RO, no longer wonders, “What the heck *is* this contesting thing, and where has it been all of my life?”

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in the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1993 I operated my first contest, pretty much by accident. I had been divorced for a couple of years, and my interest in ham radio was renewed. I caught the DX bug and built a new station on a ridge top. One evening while looking for new countries on 160 meters, I was amazed to hear the band packed from top to bottom with CW signals. I figured out that they were all sending “5NN” and their state. I figured, “What the heck, I can do that.” So I jumped in and started working stations up and down the band. Before I knew it, I had worked all 50 states in one operating session — on 160 meters, no less! I asked myself, “What the heck *is* this contesting thing, and where has it been all of my life?” A few locals had heard me operating in the contest, and telephone calls from AA4NU and WA6KUI (now WO4O) prompted me to continue to operate in upcoming events.

Before long, I was part of the brand-new Tennessee Contest Group and had found a

group of radio operators I really respected. Contesting seemed to help fill that void that had followed me since I was a child, and I found a new group of peers to learn from. The enthusiasm of the contesting community was extremely attractive to me, and I started seeking some new heroes. I was learning about contesting from the likes of K4AMC, N4ZZ, KØEJ and W9WI. I looked forward to the monthly TCG meetings, so I could soak up whatever I could learn about the game. I never knew that ham radio could be this much *fun!*

Thanks to the efforts of WN4KKN (now N5KO) I was introduced to a whole community of testers via the Internet. I spent a lot of time studying the writings of legendary operators such as K3ZO, N6AA, N6ZZ and N6TJ. I was inspired by the passion of K4OJ and the humor and wisdom of contesting’s court jester NØAX. I watched in amazement as N5TJ and K1TO set records and brought home WRTC gold medals (three times). I became a big fan of N6TR’s formidable contesting software, and I tried to learn its every capability. A little bit closer to home, KM9P (later W4AN, now SK) and N4ZZ were demonstrating what was possible from the Southeast. KY2P (now W4PA) moved to Tennessee,

and we became friends. Before long, Scott was travelling to K5ZD and NT1Y and winning the big DX contests. I was scrambling to keep up with the vapor trail that these operators left in their wake. Scott opened the door for me to operate at W4AN and with another amazing crew of operators, including K4BAI and W4OC.

Throughout that period, I tried to learn something from each operator. Regardless of age, many of you have collectively helped to “father me” over the years. The contesting community has inspired me to develop not just into a better radio operator but into a better person. I am eternally grateful to those who spent their time to help me understand how important it is to play by the rules and to strive for continuous improvement with each contest. Contesting is now a part of my life, and I am better off for it. I live with my partner Susie, who has been my guiding light for the past seven years. Every contest I operate is with her full support and understanding. She is my lucky charm. I achieved my first ARRL November Sweepstakes victory right after our first date.

One of the things that Susie and I enjoy

doing is playing traditional music together. Several years ago, I was on the hunt for a vintage musical instrument. I finally found what I was looking for — a 1924 Gibson “Snakehead” A4 mandolin. I could not believe my good fortune! I was the proud owner of a piece of history. I could play it and experience the tone and beauty that previous owners had enjoyed. It wasn’t long before I was reminded that I was only a temporary owner of this fine instrument, and that it was my responsibility to take care of it for the next owner. In other words, I didn’t really “own” the instrument — I was just another caretaker along the trajectory of the instrument’s history.

I feel the same way about *NCJ*. It’s been around longer than I’ve been licensed, and it has been cared for by some of the best people in the contesting game. Every editor and writer left their marks on the magazine along the way, and it has changed with the times. I hope to take good care of *NCJ*, and I need your help to do it. Please send me your ideas, comments, suggestions and criticisms. *NCJ* would be nothing without its contributors, and I am grateful for the ace team of regular columnists already in place. I look forward to working with you all to create a useful voice for the contest-

ing community. AI, KØAD, left some big shoes for me to fill. Thanks for all of your work AI, and for giving me the opportunity to give something back to the contesting community.

In This Issue

To kick off the new year, we have scores from the fall series of *NCJ* contests, including the CW and SSB North American QSO parties and the CW, SSB and RTTY Sprints. *NCJ* contests are alive and well, and I am sure looking forward to the January events. Also in this edition, AA4YL and KA4PBK tell their tale of operating the NAQP RTTY from North Dakota, N6EE describes his remote contest station configuration, and VE1RGB provides a new view of the bands through the eyes of his panadapter. Also, K6MM introduces us to one of contesting’s living legends, W2GD. Our regular columnists have collected some great information and tips for operator and station designer alike. We hope that you’ll enjoy it. On behalf of the *NCJ* team, I wish all testers worldwide a happy new year and even better propagation in 2012.

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