

Saturday's at Busacker's and the TO Keyer

I lived for Saturday mornings. This was my weekly outing with my dad to Busacker's, THE ham radio store in Houston in the late fifties and early sixties. Downstairs, Busacker's was pretty much like any other industrial electronics parts house then and now - a long counter tended by learned men (precious few women in those days) who possessed the special knowledge to convert cryptic lists seemingly of another language into little brown bags full of colorful electronic parts. In front of the counter were aisle after aisle of "stuff", a lot of it surplus, to browse until your turn at the counter.

The real magic, however, was out the front door and up the stairs to Busacker's ham department. As a snot-nosed new General of thirteen this place was Mecca, walls of open shelves with new and used gear just calling out to have their knobs twiddled! There was a table with the "featured" radio of the day connected to a tri-bander on the roof. And there was THE KEYER. Among Busacker's lines of new gear was Hallicrafters, and there on the table was the brand spanking new HA-1 TO Keyer, which was to become the first real commercially built electronic keyer, and arguably the best ever built. I sat down to take my turn at it with a shiny new Vibro-Keyer single-lever paddle and fell hopelessly in love. I had, to that point, never seen, let alone sent with, a fully automatic keyer. I had quickly graduated from a J-38 to a bug (a chrome-plated Johnson that just showed up one day), and worked hard to send perfect CW using that bug. Much of my operating in those early days was with ops on the evening NTS traffic nets, NTX (later TEX) and RN5, and occasionally filling in on CAN (big time!). Traffic handlers were mostly really good ops. Their CW skills ranged from decent to amazing. Mostly these guys sent with bugs, but a privileged few were switching to electronic keyers. I strove to be that guy they'd hear and wonder if I were sending with a bug or a keyer. Marv K5ABV (now N5AW) had that kind of bug fist, and I wanted to be like Marv. (Hell, I still do!)

Back to Busacker's, I could sit indefinitely at that table caressing that paddle and turning the speed knob ever more clockwise showing off my skills to anyone who might be passing by. Never mind that when I went home to my bug I was like a cripple trying to relearn how to walk until my brain and fingers reset to semi-automatic mode. I was hooked. I had to have a TO Keyer.

That's a bold statement for an unemployed pre-pubescent when the ticket for an HA-1 was \$79.95 (not including the paddle) and my allowance was on the order of a buck a week. The numbers just didn't work. I'd have to resort to incessant begging.

My old man wasn't a CW guy, and he damn sure didn't respond well to nagging. Hell, he got plenty of that at home without having to put up with it from his kid at the ham store. That, of course, didn't slow me down. Over the course of a month or more of Saturday Busacker's visits, I tried to wear him down. It wasn't working. Damn. I was getting better and better at sending with this amazing machine - surely he could see that we were meant for each other - yet he remained unmoved. Desperation setting in, I proposed a "compromise" (as if I had a negotiating position), a cleverly crafted diversion tactic for which I was sure he'd take the bait. "If you won't buy (me) this TO Keyer I'll just build one!"

This was about as likely as my building my own Formula 1 racing car, of course, but it seemed like the best expression of my passion for having and holding such a precious device, and just the manipulation required for him to cave and buy (us) a new keyer . . . and (don't forget) paddle. I underestimated the old man. He called my bluff. "You're on", he said, "build it".

I'm sure Dad thought this would be a good lesson for me, but he would live to regret it. He promised to help me financially buying the parts, but I was on my own to build it. There was no turning back. I sat down and copied the Hallicrafters schematic in pencil, wire-by-wire, part-by-part, to a piece of paper, followed by the parts list one Saturday. Remember, copy machines were rare as hens' teeth in 1960.

My dad's dental office was in an old house on Caroline Street not very far south of downtown Houston. Next door in another converted house was Hawkins Electronics, a one man custom electronics shop owned by Don W5JHW, who in retrospect was the first Renaissance man I'd ever met. Why I don't know, but Don let me rummage through piles of old chassis pieces and panels to rescue the foundations I needed for my new keyer. Don's place was a treasure trove (some would say rat's nest) of all things electronic and sheet metal, as well as a decently equipped shop, including a drill press, metal break, chassis punches and all kinds of goodies required for a project such as mine. Looking back it's hard to imagine, but I never managed to overstay my welcome.

With the chassis and front panel drilled and punched more or less to print, I merged all my little brown bags and assorted hardware scrounged from jars and scrap hardware, and headed home to embark on a month long quest to build my very own TO keyer. Who needs you, Mr. Hallicrafter?! True to his word, Dad was nowhere in sight. I was left to figure out which were the primary and secondary windings of the power transformer, how to read schematics so I could wire up terminal strips and tube sockets, how to tell a 47K from a 4.7K resistor, and on and on. How was I to know that I should use anything but red hookup wire? After all, I'd bought just one roll of wire, and it *was* my favorite color. It just seemed natural. Not a thought to a future which could include tracing wiring errors in a sea of red. Who knew I might make a mistake?

Incredibly, my TO keyer with its complement of six tubes and a very sexy mercury-wetted relay didn't play the first time. Though I'd never built anything from scratch, and mind you, this was a pretty aggressive undertaking by any measure, strangely it never occurred to me that the thing might not work. In fact, the reality that it might *never* spew so much as a dot or dash was beginning to sink in when Dad stepped in to save the day. The cavalry had arrived! His swagger was short-lived, however. I'll never forget watching the color drain from his face as he turned the chassis upside down to survey my handiwork and discovered my penchant for red wires. Troubleshooting my keyer would not be the piece of cake he'd signed up for.

Dad was neither a patient man nor one to suppress his feelings. He could turn the air blue at the slightest provocation. He'd sit at that card table for hours poring over my hand-drawn schematic and poking around in the red wires looking through his dental loops for misconnections like Easter eggs in tall grass. Expletives filled the air as he did battle with my gremlins. I have an indelible image of him, that ever-present lit cigarette hanging from his lips, his eyes squinting through wisps of smoke, banging away at my TO keyer. My old man turned smoking while concentrating into an art form. He would be so focused that he'd completely forget the cigarette was still in his lips, the ash portion growing ever longer, sagging, but seemingly never yielding to gravity. To his credit, he eventually prevailed, successfully tracking down a multitude of red miscues, essentially beating them to death with brute force. With Dad's help, my TO keyer was making beautiful music, as it would continue to do for years to come.

I eventually built a newfangled solid state keyer from a *QST* article. It ran off a pair of D cells and travelled the world with me. Sadly, the original red wired colossus was relegated to a place in the

garage, and even more sadly, in an uncharacteristic fit of garage cleaning in the '80s I threw it in the trash. I hate that I did that.

Back to Busacker's, Garth Johnson, W5DDJ, was the ham store manager, and could easily have been Walter Mathau's model for "Grumpy Old Men". Garth tolerated me only because he thought my dad probably had the means to actually buy something. I, on the other hand, was a young fool not to be suffered lightly. This, of course, was from the perspective of a kid, and twenty-some years later when I reconnected with Garth in his retirement I found him to be a sweet, though still curmudgeonly, guy.

Garth's assistant manager was Bob Tracy K5KDN, a personable young guy recently discharged from the military. Everybody liked Bob. He was smart, friendly, knowledgeable, and a terrific salesman. As an aspiring DXer I was especially in awe of Bob's having operated from Ethiopia (ET2US) during his last overseas assignment. Could there be a more exotic DX location? Bob put up with me those Saturday mornings, but never hesitated to put me in my place when I got in the way. He and I were to become good friends in later years when we came back together as adults (at least Bob was one) while working at Tracor. He now lives in Driftwood, retired and writing SDR software for FlexRadio as a result of an introduction I made to Gerald K5SDR.

My fondest memories of Saturday mornings at Busacker's were those of watching the elder statesmen of Houston DXing hold court and tell war stories. Bradfield Beard W5ADZ was the king, and always sat in the same spot in the L-shaped lounge furniture. Braddie was also the Fifth Area QSL manager, and often carried "Christmas presents" for distribution those Saturday mornings. Sitting next to Braddie was J.B. Callahan, W5NN, for whom I had special respect as a high speed CW op extraordinaire. There was another gentleman whose call escapes me, but his first name was Ralph and he drove a Caddie. This will sound ugly and discriminatory, but I probably don't remember much about Ralph because he wasn't a CW op – at all. A totally different category for a young kid bitten by the CW virus. The smells of the day were those of fresh donuts, coffee, and Braddie's cigar smoke. There was a pecking order for seats at those two sofas. I wasn't a candidate, instead sitting on a cold metal folding chair watching the lies fly and wishing I could be like those guys.

- W5ZL (December, 2009)