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Old Huntsville Radio Parts Shops

By

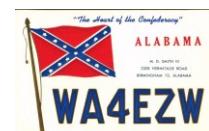
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My last article was about the 50's. Fast forward to 1961. That sounds like a modern term, but "Fast Forward" has been around since the early days of reel-to-reel tape recorders. It has not been in the vernacular to mean skipping ahead in time until much more recently. As I was saying, Judy and I were married that year and living in the University of Alabama student apartments in Riverside (demolished many years ago). I had recently gotten my Novice Amateur Radio License. It was such a thrill to talk via Morse code to people all over the U.S. and occasionally in other countries. "Ham" operators sent QSL postcards to each other confirming the contact and I built a wonderful collection from everywhere and decorated the walls with them. Judy insisted that the cards be in plastic holders that held twenty cards each, and not taped or stapled to the walls. I was willing to compromise on that issue.



My QSL card was very simple and I picked an atomic background for this stock card.

My father got his license shortly after me and he customized his. We saved a lot of long distance talking to each other from Birmingham to either Tuscaloosa or later Huntsville. I doubt we ever "paid" for our equipment from the long distance phone call savings.



I longed to talk on AM with real speech, but you had to have a "General" license to do that. I studied and got my code speed up to 13 words per minute, and I was ready to take the test. I was told that "Bull" Durham in Huntsville at Curle Radio Store, on a small street just off Meridian (near the Furniture Factory restaurant and behind Sound Cell 601) on Cleveland Avenue, would give me the test.



I had already been there a number of times to buy electronic parts, tubes and other items. Charlie E. Curle owned Curle Radio, amateur call AD4F, and he was licensed in 1951 in Tennessee. Charlie owned stores in Nashville, Chattanooga and Huntsville. Charlie is still doing well at 75 and active in "Ham" radio in Ooltewah, TN.

Well, I got my test and passed it with flying colors, but "Bull" was most imposing in stature and manner and scared me so much, I had a very hard time concentrating on the Morse code that he was sending to me. I had to copy it correctly with only 5 errors to pass. Shortly after passing the code test, WN4DXP became WA4DXP and I was no longer a novice.

A short side note about Morse code: Wives usually didn't like the beep-de-beep-beep sounds and hams knew if you could get the wives to join them with an amateur license, it was much smoother operating around the house. Judy and I had recently gotten a washer for our apartment, but she still had to hang the clothes on a line outside. I promised her if she would learn the Morse code and pass the Novice written and code test, then I'd buy her a new (used) dryer. She learned the code in a bit over a week, took the test and to my amazement had the new dryer. I still won because now WN4KUO and later WA4KUO would understand about my antennas, bigger and more powerful radios and all that stuff in the cars. It sure was worth the \$50 I spent for the dryer.

I already had a "FCC First Phone Radiotelephone" license to be able to be a disk jockey at WAAZ Radio during times at night that it was using a directional antenna pattern and had started building my own electronic sets from scratch and parts. As a teenager, I had built hi-fi amplifiers from EICO, Knight-Kit, Dyna-Kit and Heath-Kit. I still have a pair of huge Acrosound Ultra Linear power amplifiers that used the "sexy" (well they are to a ham radio person) EL34 output tubes in the finals. I frequented the electronic stores like Curle Radio, Wallace & Webb, EW and Mock Electronics during these years for all kinds of parts, boxes, knobs, labels and much more. Mock Electronics is still open today. Electronic Wholesalers or EW for short, came to town a bit later, but also closed after a few years. They were located on Bob Wallace next to the drainage creek. It later was a paint store and I don't know what the building is used for today. One of the other stores that was around for a long time was Wallace & Webb and later just Webb Electronics in the plaza near Mock and Service Merchandise.



Mock Radio & Electronics has quite a history. The Mocks first store was in Decatur in 1946. The first Huntsville store was originally located on Pratt Avenue, somewhere between Church and Washington in the mid fifties. In 1961 Mr. Mock and Arnold



Hornbuckle built the current strip of stores on the Parkway at Mock Road. Hornbuckle owned all the buildings and his record shop, but the Mocks owned their store. Mrs. Mock took over running the new



store after she and her husband divorced in 1961. She continued to drive over from her home in Decatur every single day until she turned over the management of the store to her daughter, Barbara, around 1996. Mrs. Mock's health continued to

decline and she died in May 2000. Now her daughter runs the store, but Mr. Mock is still living and continues to own the store. Barbara makes the same drive from Decatur every day that her mother made for so many years. The short little road that runs in front of the store off the Parkway is Mock Road. Barbara said the store looks, operates and customers say it smells the same as it did 40 years ago. For small electronic parts, wires, resistors, capacitors, volume controls, and more, this is still the best place to come for those electronic needs.



A lot of the original reasons to visit the radio stores were to buy replacement tubes for your TV, Radio or music amplifier. Originally only the big radio stores had a tube tester, and often you'd take many or all of the tubes out of your radio or TV, put them in a bag and take them down to the radio store to test and buy the tube(s) that was bad. In later years, you could find tube testers and limited replacement tubes in convenience stores. Most of the chassis in the TV's had the number of the tube etched on the metal so you knew where each tube went, or it had a printed label on the back cover of the enclosure that showed which tubes went where. This made it possible for the average person to test their own tubes and get them all back in the right place, which was important if you ever wanted your set to work again.



Mock Electronics certainly did their share of the tube selling in those years and today they are open just as they always have been and you can still take your old tubes in to be tested on one of the testers in the store and buy new replacement tubes for the ones that are bad. Mock Electronics still stocks not only the tubes that work in TV, Radio and stereos of years gone by, but also tubes for the old tube car radios where many antique car restorers want to make the original equipment AM radio work again. The have come to the right place with Mock.

The alternative to doing it yourself was for the TV service man to come pick up your set, fix it and return it in a week or two. This was fairly expensive, if it was only a single tube that needed replacing. But if replacing tubes didn't solve the problem, it was likely a bad component such as a capacitor, resistor, flyback transformer or other part that had to be unsoldered and replaced. A picture tube needing replacement was sometimes a death sentence for a small table set, but not a console. Some sets cost several hundred dollars to the big consoles that might be almost a thousand dollars, and you sure didn't discard it when it stopped working. The mahogany cases themselves were fine pieces of furniture and an attractive part of your home furnishing, which lasted for many years. Can you imagine it being like today when a stereo stops working; you find it cheaper to buy a new one than to get it fixed?



Barbara Mock said there are still a few antique electronic repair businesses that someone can take a tube set to have repaired. These people buy most of their tubes from Mock. Barbara said that recently a man came in and was in awe and wonder that the store he had not been inside for over 30 years, still looked the same,

smelled the same and stocked many of the same parts he came in with his father to get so long ago. He said it was like a trip back in time. It is that for certain. Barbara said not only that, but they still do business the same old way, pretty much by hand. They handwrite out your receipt when you pay for parts and don't have to rely on any kind of computer to do business. They do take charge cards, as it was a necessary part of continuing to do business in these days and times. "But," Barbara said, "When the power goes out, we just bring out our flashlights and battery lanterns and keep on doing business when other stores have to lock the doors." That's one of the benefits of doing business the way you did 40 years ago.

That was the early sixties in Huntsville for radio parts shops, which certainly have changed over the years. Most of these stores are gone, replaced by the Radio Shacks, Walmart and Circuit City centers. Even the small Radio Shack stores are decreasing in numbers. Some of the old TVs, radios and stereos are still with us, and it's good to know there are still a few places to go when they need tubes. Sometimes I feel like an old tube type TV set, still working but parts are hard to find and repair is more difficult.

Times were certainly different forty-five years ago, weren't they?