



The Antique Wireless Association has an advantage over most other radio clubs sponsoring conventions—its own museum. Here's a section of the museum arranged to look like a late 1920s radio store. Other exhibits include a couple of working spark-gap transmitters all the way up to early cellular telephones and the first amateur transmitter to use a transistor. The museum is located in Bloomfield, NY, a short drive from the convention site at the Rochester Institute of Technology. (Photos courtesy of the author)

With attendance declining at many hamfests, N4TRB suggests it may be time to rethink the flea-market model for local ham radio gatherings.

Back to the Future with the AWA

BY BRIAN R. PAGE,* N4TRB

Could the annual conference of the Antique Wireless Association (AWA) be a model for saving our hamfests? It's no secret that over the past couple of decades our hamfests have taken a double-whammy, resulting, in many cases, in a slow but steady decline in attendance together with a growing scarcity of *really good radio stuff* in the flea markets.

The first hit came as computers infiltrated the flea-market tables. I've seen some hamfests that were more computer-fests than radio meets. Computers are here to stay, and now they're an integral part of our hobby, but there's no denying they took the focus off radio. The second whammy is more serious. Online auction sites on the World Wide

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You won't find any computers in the flea market at the annual AWA Conference, and you might be hard-pressed to find any gear using those new-fangled transistor devices. However, you will find lots of vintage radios along with the components you'll need to reproduce, say, a 1929 Hartley transmitter to use on the air in the annual Bruce Kelly QSO Party.



What old-time radio meet would be complete without at least one vendor offering for sale the cult classic Ameco AC-1 transmitter? Joseph Long, WA2EJT, had this one up for sale. \$250 would get you 6 watts on 80 meters or 3.5 watts on 40 meters, or simply let you relive your Novice days.

Web have captured much of the old equipment trade. If you're a seller, why tempt a few hundred hams with your goodies when you can dangle them before thousands of potential buyers on an auction website? I can't blame the sellers; after all, they deserve the best prices they can get. That's capitalism! Unfortunately, the net result is that what often ends up on hamfest sale tables are just the bits and pieces of our hobby that are difficult to sell online.

All is not lost, however. The situation seems dire only if we continue to think of hamfests primarily as flea markets. A little rethinking may be in order, and one solution may be to migrate back to a convention model that was the rule rather than the exception in the "golden age" of ham radio—and the AWA might just show the way.



Competition is a big part of the AWA Conference and this 1922 Cutting & Washington (C&W) receiver captured a blue ribbon for John Terrey in a special category focused on the Sylvania company and its antecedents. What we now know as Sylvania began with C&W.

The AWA is focused on old radios, of course, and not just or even primarily ham radio. Indeed, the majority of the members aren't amateur operators at all. The AWA is a common ground for a diverse membership, and the common ground is simply old-time radio. Some collectors specialize in pre-Audion crystal sets. Others concentrate on cathedral radios of the 1920s, spark-gap transmitters, military radios from the two world wars, rare and exotic tubes, early television receivers, portable broadcast receivers, horn speakers, homebrew ham equipment from the 1950s, and so on. The key point is that AWA members are as diverse a bunch as the ham community, yet they all seem to thrive in a common organization. There has to be a lesson here somewhere...

A Three (Four?)-Ring Circus

Now on to the convention! Each summer in upstate New York, the AWA holds a *four-day conference*, of which a flea market is just a tiny part. It's fortunate that the flea market isn't the center-stage attraction, because even the AWA flea market has felt the impact of eBay®. Since the flea market isn't the main event, what is? That's hard to say, because the whole convention is more like a three-ring circus, maybe even four rings. Aside from the flea-market sideshow, the conference features a competition in which members submit their classic radio restorations. For the 2010 conference, the categories were passive receivers; 1920s superhet receivers; 1920s tuned RF receivers; 1920s regenerative and reflex receivers; cathedrals, tombstones, and consoles of the 1930s and 1940s; military radios; horn speakers; cone speakers; test equipment; vacuum tubes; mechanical television; and electronic television. Each year competition for the blue ribbon in each category is keen.

In the second ring is the presentations. The AWA is not only about hardware. Radio was a social as well as a tech-

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nological revolution, and invited speakers explore this historical and social context. At the 2010 meeting, for instance, Mike Adams, a professor from San Jose State University, discussed radio pioneer Lee de Forest's contributions to sound movies. Morgan Blanchard of the University of Nevada gave a fascinating talk on his industrial archeology in Alaska which involved excavating two very early wireless stations that were part of the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS). John Dilks, K2TQN, the Vintage Radio columnist for *QST*, presented the tale of Don Mix and the first radio-equipped Arctic expedition. There were many other presentations, too.

The third ring is the auction. This year, indeed, there were two separate auctions. The first was the estate auction of the late Larry Babcock, a noted collector and author. The second auction was the regular event in which members can offer up equipment for sale. These are real-life auctions with a real-life auctioneer. That in itself is a treat and something that may someday disappear just like AM modulation on the ham bands (just a joke, guys!).

Finally, the AWA conference includes a banquet that involves suits, ties, and cloth napkins. This is a high-class affair. The speaker this year was Carole Perry, WB2MGP, who talked about forging a new partnership between the AWA and the Radio Club of America to get youth excited about communications technology.

Back to the Future

Why is this "back to the future"? In the early days of organized ham radio, hamfests were, first-and-foremost, conferences. Maybe a little trading went on, but overall in those early days there was simply much that needed to be discussed and new technology to master. Spark was on the way out, CW was the new thing, crystal-control demanded new techniques and circuits; technology was changing rapidly and hams of that day couldn't learn all they needed to know from the pages of a magazine. Sound familiar?

Maybe we've allowed the tail to wag the dog. Once manufactured rigs became the norm, the swapping and selling of those rigs assumed a big part of our ham-to-ham relationships. However, even if all that commercial activity gets off-loaded to the internet, our hamfests don't have to die out. Rather, our annual assemblies can be freed, or repurposed, to use a current buzz-word,

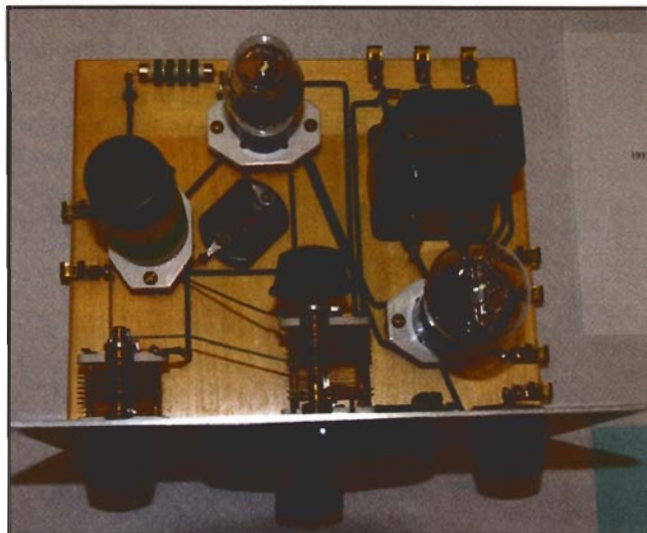


This amplifier from Joe Knight's award-winning collection of tubes is a reminder that when tubes were a hot new technology, the manufacturers wanted to show them off—and they had to look good.

and take on an entirely different role. Perhaps our hamfests can, like the AWA conference, become three-ring circuses with instruction, demonstration, presentation, competition, and plain old socializing providing the main attractions.

On the national level, we're already seeing a trend in this direction. For example, the "Four Days in May" conference by QRP Amateur Radio Club International is held each year in Dayton alongside the Hamvention®. Low-power operating must be fertile ground for this sort of activity, because similar regional QRP conferences have sprung up, with LobsterCon on the East Coast, Pacificon on the West Coast, and OzarkCon in

Branson, Missouri. Similarly, AMSAT holds its well-attended Space Symposium and Annual Meeting, as does ARRL/TAPR with the Digital Communications Conference; and the VHF folks have several, as well. The next logical step is to emulate these special-interest conferences at the local level, although perhaps not for a full four-day event and generalized beyond a specialized technology. (*One success story in this arena is the annual one-day "Ham Radio University" held on Long Island, NY—ed.*) As the AWA shows, radio enthusiasts with extraordinarily diverse interests can come together to share technology, compete, and socialize, and ham radio will be the better for it.



Not every radio in the AWA competition is old. Louis Vermont, VE3BDV, built this 2-tube, 80-meter regenerative receiver from plans in the 1933 edition of How to Become a Radio Amateur.