

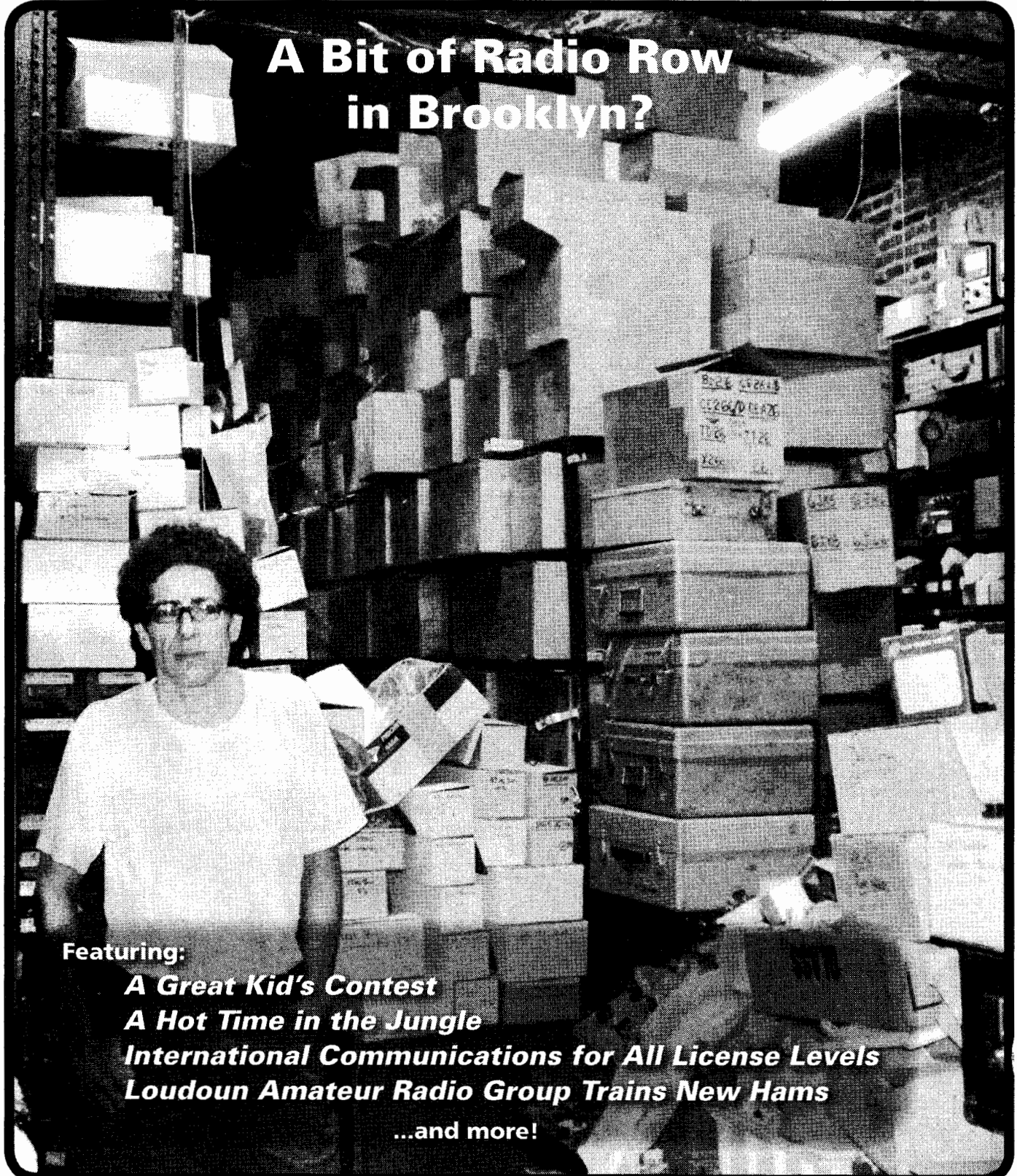
# WorldRadio

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## A Bit of Radio Row in Brooklyn?



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An illustration from Hugo Gernsback's *Radio-Craft* magazine from September, 1933, showing a typical store front from New York City's Radio Row.

## A Bit of Radio Row in Brooklyn?

Brian R. Page, N4TRB

New York City's famed Radio Row wasn't exactly before my time; I was just in the wrong place by 1,000 miles when I stumbled into the electronics hobby as a kid growing up in Florida in the early 1960s.

Radio Row got its start very early in the 1920s as broadcast radio exploded as a consumer technology. It was centered in the blocks around Cortlandt and Greenwich Streets on the Lower West Side of Manhattan. By the 1930s, Radio Row encompassed several entire city blocks with many specialty stores, their goods spilling out onto the sidewalks in fair weather. The illustration from *Radio-Craft*, a Hugo Gernsback publication, hints at what Radio Row was like in its first heyday. It's safe to say that an entire generation of engineers were raised on Gernsback's magazines, not only *Radio-Craft*, but also the likes of *Science and Invention* and *Radio News*. Likewise, many of that same generation, the engineers who developed electronic marvels in World War II, shopped the stores of

Radio Row.

World War II meant lean years for consumer electronics and at least some of the Radio Row stores were able to stay in business only by doing repair work. War-time shortages dried up the parts market and virtually all manufacturing was centered on the war effort. Even radio amateurs donated their spare parts to Uncle Sam. However, once the war ended, Radio Row experienced its second heyday as

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war surplus equipment became available. Compounding this tidal wave of surplus equipment, the electronic advances made possible by war research brought back the consumer market together with television, FM radio, hi-fi stereo, and manufactured amateur rigs.

My favorite recollection of this second golden age of Radio Row (the one I missed by growing up on the beaches of Florida in the shadow of the early U.S. space program) was written by Walt Gezari, N2EEZ: "Imagine one city block which had Harrison Radio, Henry Radio, and 100 other Ham Radio stores, vendors, parts dealers, pushcarts filled with surplus Ham gear as big as your refrigerator, etc. as far as the eye could see. And the block was always mobbed with people buying, selling, trucks unloading boxes of new equipment. You'd have thought they were selling fresh hot bread to starving refugees, but it was all Ham gear."

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Portion of a 1951 *QST* advertisement proclaiming Leeds as "The Home of RADIO" and offering FT-243 crystals for 49¢ each.

Radio Row came to a sudden and catastrophic end in the mid-1960s. In a development that still raises tempers in some quarters, the entire area was condemned by the city and taken over for the construction of the World Trade Center. Local civic associations fought for years, but in the end the city and State prevailed. Dozens of family-owned businesses covering some 564 acres were demolished to make way for the towers. Construction started in 1966 and Radio Row was bulldozed into history. Or was it?

Planning for a recent trip to New York City, I posted a query to a radio history email group asking about any historically noteworthy sites needing a visit from someone interested in radio history. In addition to the monument

in Battery Park dedicated to the radio officers who gave their lives in the line of duty, Richard Dillman, W6AWO, suggested that I look up Leeds radio shop across the East River in Brooklyn. A little Internet sleuthing turned up a web page that led to an email address. A quick communication confirmed that the store, in business since 1923, had Saturday hours. With visions of classic boat anchor rigs swimming in my head, I laid plans to visit.

So on a warm day in June, my wife and I took time out of our 30th wedding anniversary celebration in the Big Apple to journey via subway from Manhattan to Brooklyn and, as I hoped, back in time. Getting to Leeds via subway is really pretty simple. Just take the L line east from any of the connecting stations and exit at the Bedford Avenue station, the first station in Brooklyn. Once on street level, walk along North 7th Street heading west, back toward Manhattan. Leeds is located nearly at the end of the street, almost all the way to the East River. The area is largely urban-residential, reminding me of the fictional Sesame Street, and as we walked toward the river, I began to despair, as I could see nothing that looked at all like my imagined Radio Row refugee.

I was surprised when we finally spied the storefront (Figure 3). It was a minor thrill, even a vindication, to spot the tiny "Leeds" sign over an open wooden door next to a graffiti-adorned garage.


Knocking on the door, I was greeted by Richard Matthews, proprietor. Nothing could have prepared me for what I found inside (front page). I'm sure that today's Leeds bears little resemblance to the glass-fronted retail stores of Radio Row; but inside it has no shortage of treasures. In truth, it is more a warehouse than a store; and thorough browsing amongst the floor-to-ceiling stacks of parts and components would be a herculean task. Leeds is the kind of place you go when you know exactly what you need to find.

Richard's selection is limited. It includes probably every component known to mankind that was available prior to 1980. And the focus really is on components, especially tubes, transformers, lots of miscellaneous hardware for tube rigs, and the usual supply of high-wattage resistors. Unlike



Leeds as it appears today. Look carefully to see the embossed store name above the door on the right-hand side of the photograph.

the original Radio Row stores, you won't find stacks of World War II surplus BC-348 receivers; and I doubt that you'll talk Richard out of his National 183D receiver that he won in an auc-

tion from Radio Free Europe. However, if you need a knob for your 183D, I'd wager that he has one somewhere in the labyrinth of this vestige of Radio Row. 

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