

# A Lost Dit of Vibroplex History

*How a small town in Georgia became part of Amateur Radio history.*

Brian R. Page, N4TRB

**T**he early history of the Vibroplex semiautomatic key (also known as a “bug.”) has a glaring incongruity. Horace G. Martin invented the Autoplex and the Vibroplex in New York City in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the first Vibroplex manufacturing plant was located in, of all places, the little town of Norcross, Georgia. Since I live just a few miles from Norcross, now a suburb of Atlanta, I just had to investigate this seemingly strange situation.

William R. Holly, K1GH, adds some detail on the Norcross connection in his definitive history of the Vibroplex Corporation. But there’s more and it all relates to the association between Martin and Edward F. “Buck” Buchanan (1871-1910).

## Buck Buchanan

Little is known of Buchanan’s origins. Whether he was truly an orphan or simply born of uncertain parentage, the record attests that he was adopted by Martha and Leslie Buchanan of Norcross while still very young. Norcross, then as now, is situated on a railway line. The railroad’s importance to the town was far greater in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century than it is today. Indeed, it’s fair to say that the railway line and, in particular, the commuter “Airline Belle” rail service with the city of Atlanta established the city’s reputation as a resort getaway. More to the point of our story, Norcross had a depot station with a telegraph office.

According to published reports, young Buck Buchanan learned telegraphy from a depot operator by the name of Dave Wall. By the age of 13, in 1884, Buchanan was sufficiently proficient with American Morse [a landline telegraphy code that differs in a number of ways from the International Morse

code that is commonly used on the ham bands. — Ed.] to strike out on his own. He worked for Western Union in Atlanta and then traveled to Jacksonville, Florida, westward to Texas and ultimately to San Francisco before returning to his home town around the year 1894. At that time he resumed employment with Western Union in Atlanta.

If this story sounds familiar, it’s because it mirrors the early years of Vibroplex inventor Horace G. Martin. Like Buchanan, Martin was born in a small Georgia town. In Martin’s case, the town was Adairsville. Like Buchanan, Martin learned the telegrapher’s trade by hanging around the rail depot. By age 9 he found occasional employment with the railroad. As is well known, Martin became highly proficient, a world-class operator. From his humble beginnings, Martin worked his way into employment with the Associated Press and Western Union, ultimately moving to New York City and into history.

Buck Buchanan, meanwhile, also left Atlanta for fame and fortune in New York City. The dates are uncertain, but during the

first few years of the new century, Buchanan had parlayed his expertise as a telegrapher for the Wall Street firm of A. O. Brown & Company into a position as partner and General Manager. The orphan boy from the little town of Norcross, Georgia, was living a true Horatio Alger story.

## From Dahs to Dollars

Stock speculation and leveraged investment proved more lucrative than the telegraphy trade, and by 1907 Buchanan was estimated to be worth some \$7 million. Fortunately for Norcross, Buchanan didn’t hide his humble origins. He worked to establish Norcross as a center of industry. To that end, Buchanan opened the Buchanan Plow & Implement manufacturing firm, an automobile plant (which produced a total of three motor vehicles) and the United Electrical Manufacturing Company. The latter firm, of course, renews our connection with Martin and his Vibroplex.

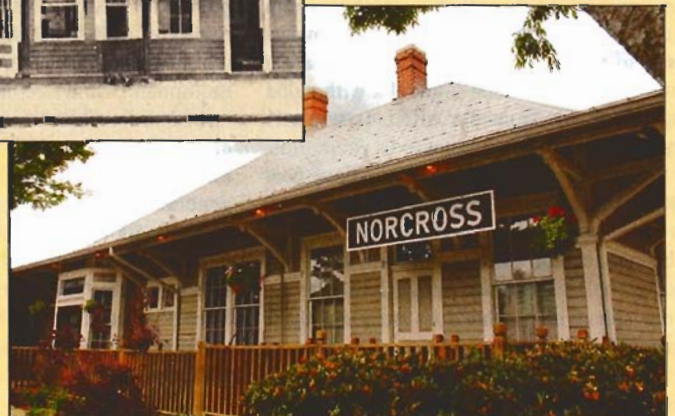
It would be tempting to speculate that Martin and Buchanan became acquainted

COURTESY OF VANISHING GEORGIA, GEORGIA DIVISION OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY



Above, the railroad depot in Norcross, Georgia, around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here Edward F. “Buck” Buchanan got his start in telegraphy learning the trade from Dave Wall. Many years later, telegrapher Wall received 25 acres of land bequeathed by Buchanan’s foster mother in appreciation for launching young Buck’s career.

Below, the Norcross terminal as it exists today. The rail line remains but the train no longer stops in Norcross. Instead, the depot is a restaurant where you can take lunch in the same office where depot operator Tom Rochester tested Martin’s Norcross bugs on the long lines.



BRIAN PAGE, N4TRB

# The Extension Arm Vibroplex

EASILY ADJUSTED—EASILY LEARNED—EASILY MANIPULATED

Attention is called to our new light base VIBROPLEX with extension arm, which closes under the base when not in use. This device gives the instrument a firmer footing on the desk, and removes the objectionable weight that was necessary in the former base.

MARTIN'S FAMOUS  
VIBROPLEX



THE PERFECT  
TRANSMITTER

The Vibroplex holds all Speed Records as well as all Long Distance Records  
SEND FOR DESCRIPTIVE CIRCULARS

**United Electrical Manufacturing Co.**  
Norcross, Georgia

P. S.—Note our new address, where we have established an extensive factory for the manufacture of Mechanical and Electrical Apparatus

An advertisement for a Norcross Vibroplex showing the notably thin base plate and the extension arm for "firmer footing." In addition to bugs, Buchanan's United Electrical Manufacturing facility also produced the first automobiles assembled in the South.

when both worked as telegraphers in 1904 in New York City. The facts are that both of these Georgia boys worked in the Atlanta office of Western Union in the 1890s. The chronology is sketchy around this period, but their paths undoubtedly crossed before either struck out for New York City. In any event, Buchanan's wealth plus his desire to transform his home town into an industrial hub made it natural for the financier and the inventor to join forces.

Aside from the commercial operations, Buchanan built an enormously expensive granite mansion, still standing, for his foster mother. He also constructed a water works and electricity generation plant, both of which he donated to the city, gave seed money for a public library and was generous in several other causes.

Buchanan's three Norcross companies were all located in a single building, probably at the corner of Thrasher and Hunter streets in what is now a parking lot for the Rock-Tenn Company. This is just a few blocks from the rail depot where Buchanan had gotten his start many years earlier. Today that Norcross rail terminal is a restaurant; you can chow down on a "Nor-croissant" sandwich in the same spot where freshly made Norcross bugs were tested on the long-distance lines by Tom Rochester, the depot telegrapher.

And that's how the Vibroplex came to be manufactured in Norcross, Georgia. Unfortunately for Buchanan, the story doesn't end there.

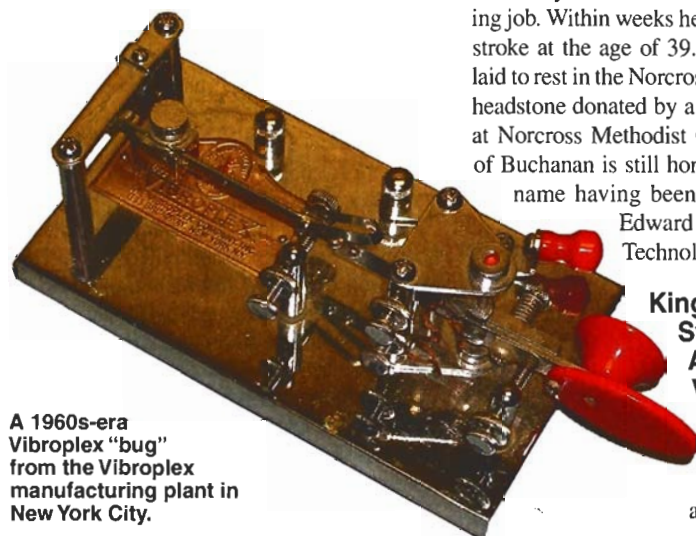
## What Goes Up

In August 1908, Buchanan's world came crashing down. The highly leveraged investments of A. O. Brown & Company unraveled, creating one of the largest brokerage firm failures in Wall Street history. Buchanan's fortune evaporated overnight. The partners of the firm, including Edward F. Buchanan, whom *The New York Times* described as "the young Napoleon whose strategy had failed to connect" even spent some time under arrest.

At the end of the ordeal, Buchanan was left with nothing but an investment in a mine located in Arizona. So he left New York City for the West to try his hand at mining. This attempt to recover his fortune failed, and on a train journey to Chicago early in 1910, Buchanan suffered a stroke. His wife borrowed money for treatment and after some months he had recovered sufficiently to return to his beloved Norcross. The Horatio Alger kid found himself back at the Atlanta Western Union office where he applied for a job saying, "Just make me a plain old op." He lasted 3 days at the key before switching to a less-demanding job. Within weeks he was dead of a second stroke at the age of 39. Buck Buchanan was laid to rest in the Norcross Cemetery beneath a headstone donated by a Sunday School Class at Norcross Methodist Church. The memory of Buchanan is still honored in Norcross, his name having been attached to the new Edward Buchanan School of Technology.

## King Plow — Last Stop for the Atlanta Vibroplex?

When I started this quest, I really hoped that I could also fill in some details



A 1960s-era Vibroplex "bug" from the Vibroplex manufacturing plant in New York City.

## Vibroplex Today

You can still buy a Vibroplex "bug" today. The Vibroplex Company was purchased in 1994 by Mitch Mitchell, W4OA, and operates from their factory in Mobile, Alabama. Mitch is the first ham to own the company and he has carried on the traditions of exceptional quality and customer service for which Vibroplex has always been known.

Vibroplex currently produces 13 different models of telegraph keys. Whether your code interest is in the simplicity of the straight key, speed of the semiautomatic bugs or the efficiency of the modern paddle the Vibroplex Company has a product for your operating style. You can see the whole Vibroplex line at <http://vibroplex.com>.

of Horace Martin's "missing years" of 1909-1911, the period between the failure of United Electrical Manufacturing and Martin's reappearance in New York City. Unfortunately, my searches through local periodicals of the time have turned up virtually no mention of Martin or Vibroplex in Norcross or the Atlanta area. I might be able to move the ball forward a few yards with one bit of new information. The assets of Buchanan's Plow & Implement Company were acquired by the Atlanta Plow Company, which later evolved into the King Plow Company. King Plow likely took possession of any jigs and manufacturing equipment associated with Norcross Vibroplex production. Any further search for Martin in Atlanta ought to focus on King Plow.

King Plow, as a plow company, is long gone (well, 1986 actually). But if you're nostalgic, you can still visit the old manufacturing plant near the campus of Georgia Tech. It's been transformed into the King Plow Arts Center. There, you can catch live theatre in a building where once, possibly, a few ATLANTA Vibroplex bugs might have been created!

*A Master's degree from Virginia Tech in the history of science led to a career in the software industry for Brian Page, N4TRB. Now employed as a Systems Engineer for Bomgar Corporation, Brian holds an Extra class license and enjoys building low power (QRP) rigs, glow in the dark radios and collecting vintage transistors. An ARRL member, he would love to someday try his hand with a Vibroplex. You can reach the author at 1717 Tidewell Trce, Lawrenceville, GA 30043, n4trb@arrl.net.* **QST**

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