

Whisky November Papa: A Tale for Halloween

Had it not been a dark and stormy night I wouldn't even have been in my ham shack. It was Halloween, after all, and ordinarily I'd have been handing out candy to the veritable parade of midget monsters and diminutive divas at my front door; but it was dark and stormy, so eventually I drifted into my radio room.



Knowing that I might have to jump up at any moment to make a run for the front door, I dared not start a rag chew with the big rig; instead I decided this was a good evening to fire up the old antique and hear our bands through the unique circuitry of a 1930-something regen. As the tubes warmed up, I settled into my chair at the vintage operating position in my shack.

Gradually the speaker came to life and weak CW signals could be discerned through a bit of low-band QRN. I confess that at first I didn't pay close attention. I simply enjoyed the lack of selectivity in this old receiver that allowed me to hear quite a few QSOs simultaneously, each with their distinctive notes.

Even with my mind wandering amongst thoughts of Halloween and glowing vacuum tubes, I half-consciously started paying attention to the call signs coming through this old radio, a radio, incidentally, that had virtually no band pass filtering. With a radio of this vintage I had to use the same skills as the ancient ones: filtration was provided by the human brain. It takes real concentration to sort out signals and follow a single QSO. Surprisingly, it is possible. After a few minutes it seemed almost natural to select one signal and concentrate solely on that conversation.

So with my attention riveted to one QSO, it was a bit surprising that I gradually became aware of another transmission, a strange wavering signal that drifted in and out of my consciousness. It was always in the background, just a dB or two above the noise floor. Sometimes it was zero beat and a few characters were readily copied. Other times the notes would waver to a higher or lower audio frequency and drift out of my mental pass band.

Suddenly I copied a fragment of code that took my breath away. For a moment the musical note was zero beat and I clearly copied, "1ANA DE WNP." My first thought was that I had missed a few characters. Surely there must have been a W or K in front of the 1ANA; and WNP couldn't be an amateur call: it was missing the numeral. But almost as soon as these thoughts formed in my mind I realized these calls were, indeed, familiar, even famous. Familiar and famous they might be; but equally impossible that I could be copying them!

Fans of early radio know these famous calls. WNP was the station aboard the *Bowdoin*, the legendary schooner that in 1923 carried the MacMillan Arctic Expedition and established the first radio contact from Arctic explorers in the frozen north. What a revolution! Prior to the *Bowdoin's* success with radio, Arctic expeditions simply disappeared from public perception for months or even years while locked in the Arctic ice.

I couldn't believe my ears. Was this a hoax? Was I dreaming? If a hoax, it was certainly elaborate. The signals sounded authentic. Now I realized why the notes were wavering and musical: they weren't crystal controlled. A transmitter from 1923 would probably be something on the order of a two-tube Hartley oscillator. Frequency was determined by tuned circuits in the output stages; and those output stages included the antenna. Under windy conditions, the frequency changed with gusts of wind.

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These signals were wandering around the band such that only my ancient receiver could have picked them up. My modern big rig, even with the filters

wide open, would have been way too selective to follow this drift. Listening to the notes, I imagined the cold howling winds that drove these musical tones.

I copied more code: “latitude 79-degrees North...all well aboard the *Bowdoin*...locked in the ice...ready for the winter lay over...received news from NAA...signals more reliable with the almost continual darkness...”

Whether hoax or not, the feeling was electric. I had goose-bumps; and the hair on my neck stood up. I didn’t question how. Whatever was happening was beyond reason. I just copied; and my heart went out to these steadfast operators who labored under such challenging conditions to advance the art of radio science and create an ethereal bridge across thousands of miles separating explorers from home and loved ones.

Suddenly, again I was startled. What! That noise? There it was again. Oh, the doorbell. I glanced at my watch: 21:30. That meant the neighborhood teens in their hastily improvised Halloween costumes had arrived to clean up the remaining candy in the bowl. I welcomed their efforts and achieved my goal of getting those sweet temptations out of the house.

Then I raced back to the shack just in time to catch the last couple of characters of this precious, musical signal, “73 OM WNP now QRT.” Then there was nothing to be heard but static crashes. The band was dead.

Post Script

Don Mix, W1TS, the intrepid op aboard the *Bowdoin* in 1923 and *QST* Assistant Technical Editor, wrote 114 articles for *QST*. His first appeared in 1920 under his callsign 1TS; his last article was published in 1968, less than a year before this story-teller joined the ARRL. Mix’s true account of the expedition appeared in the November, 1924 issue.

GARS Recurring Calendar

- Monthly club meeting is the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7 p.m. Check the [website](#) for location.
- Every Monday at 8 p.m.: GARS Want, Swap, Sell, and Information Net on the GARS 2-meter repeater.
- Every Wednesday at 9 p.m.: GARS 6-meter net on the GARS 6-meter repeater.
- Every Saturday at 7:30 a.m.: GARS Weekly Family Breakfast, Golden Corral Restaurant, Riverside Drive, Lawrenceville.

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References available upon request.