

THE KAW VALLEY AMATEUR RADIO CLUB

1926 - 1986

The First Sixty Years

A celebration of 60 years of amateur radio in Topeka, the Capital City of Kansas, and the public service provided by amateur radio ("ham") operators to the citizens of Kansas.

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

In 1984 when I approached Lee Gordy WD0COV with the idea of documenting a history of the Kaw Valley Amateur Radio Club for its sixtieth year, he warned me there would be problems. Aside from the fact that all charter members are deceased, he told me there were few records in the Club's possession dating beyond the 1970s, since the Club had not really had a central location until 1965, and that many earlier records were destroyed in the fire at the former Red Cross building in the early 1970s. Nonetheless, he went to work, and work he did!

To Lee Gordy, who spent hundreds of hours on letters seeking information, or in interview sessions with individuals and then had the difficult task of determining just what to say and how to say it; to

Lee who kept trying, even when there was a snag where no more information would be forthcoming, a simple "Thanks" just doesn't seem to be enough! It was his determination to give to the Kaw Valley Amateur Radio Club an understanding of its past that made this possible" Lee, the KVARC owes you a great debt!

A big, special thanks to those who took the time and effort to either talk with Lee or to write or tape information for his use. Without your efforts, this publication would not have been possible! Sources include: the American Radio Relay League (ARRL), Newington, CT; Bill Davidson W0JLY from Bella Vista, Arkansas; Frank Taylor W0LJL; August McCollom W0HS; John Whiffen W0FMR; Gene Godsey D0BXJ; Howard Davis W0KOL and his wife, Anita; Steve Carriger WA0VRS; Dave Ljungdahl WB0RZO; and Major General Ralph Tice, Adjutant General of Kansas, all Topeka residents. In addition to these, many contributed through photos or other informative items left in Club files, and through casual conversations at various times, sometimes with information, other times with some encouragement when it seemed an impossible task!

Any history is incomplete: that is, it is impossible to get all details exactly as it happened, but we have done our best to make this as accurate as possible. We hope you find this to be an enlightening and enjoyable story. After all, it is our story - a story each of us has added to at one time or another! There is no way that all who have contributed to the club could be mentioned; suffice it to say that without the efforts of the many individuals who have been involved with the KVARC in its sixty years, there would be little story to tell.

A part of the rich history of amateur radio awaits you in the following pages. We are proud to be a part of this effort to preserved the days of "early" amateur radio in Topeka for our future generations, and to have the opportunity to have this publication added to the archives of the Kansas State Historical Society.

Darlene "Dolly" Reece N0CBG
KVARC History Project Coordinator

NOTE OF CLARIFICATION

In the interest of accuracy, callsigns that appear for individuals are those by which they were known at the time. Callsigns issued by the Federal Communications Commission to amateur operators in this area prior to 1928 consisted of the digit "9" followed by two or three letters. In 1928, the prefix letter "W" was added, and in 1946, another change was made when amateurs in several Midwestern states returned to the airways with the "0" digit in their prefix, upon creation of the tenth call district.

THE EARLY YEARS

Folks in Topeka thought 1926 was a good year: Calvin ("Silent Cal") was in the White House, the stock market was starting to climb, flappers had bobbed their hair and shortened their skirts as well, and a local car dealer was offering the new fully-equipped Chevrolet coupe for only \$640. Surely things had gone about as far as they could go. But fortunately for many, things could go a bit further.

Unnoticed by the general public, a few tinkerers in local workshops had been assembling bits of wire, crystals, tubes, and coils. Soon their dits and dahs and their wavering voices were heard on the airways, using callsigns like "9NL" -- no "W" prefixes were assigned before 1928. To supplement their knowledge they visited one another's shacks for "eyeball QSOs". It was from these contacts that our own organization, the Kaw Valley Radio Club, was formed.

We believe the KVRC was organized sometime in 1926, though we do not know the month and day of the first meeting they held, nor the exact number present, since all the original members have become silent keys. Frank Taylor, W9LJL, who joined the club in 1932, believes that the charter group consisted of about six to eight members. Auggie McCollom W9HS, who arrived on the scene about four years later (1936), believes the figure was closer to ten members. Through their combined recollections we did learn that Joe Deines 9CV, John Amis 9CET, Earl Johnson 9ICV, and Bill Beasley 9FRC, were among the founders of the Club. It was in November 1926, the the Kaw Valley Radio Club received confirmation from the ARRL that they were an affiliated Club, thus beginning a long association, now entering its sixth decade.

For much of its first forty years, the Club was forced to drift from one meeting place to another, meeting in various public-use facilities. When Frank W9LJL joined in 1932 the meetings were being held at the Topeka Chamber of Commerce Hall located at the northwest corner of 7th and Jackson. Later sites during the 1930s included the downtown Fire Department building and the Police Department headquarters at 5th and Jackson. John Whiffen W9FMR joined the club in 1938, and recalls of these early times:

We would gather outside of the Police building on the south steps for a ragchewing session and then move inside to a vacant courtroom for our meeting. Afterwards we usually adjourned to a nearby 'watering hole' to hoist a mug of suds.

Throughout the 1930's the Club remained quite small, by most estimates about twenty to thirty members. But small or not, the KVRC was active in amateur radio affairs. Auggie W9HS, who moved to Topeka from Dodge City, Kansas in 1936, remembers attending an amateur radio convention in Topeka in 1928. The Club also sponsored three other Midwest Division Conventions in the 1930s. Speaking of the latter, Frank W9LJL recalled:

These were rather small affairs and were held in the Topeka Chamber of Commerce Hall at 7th and Jackson. About one hundred hams attended each of these gatherings. They offered a good chance to get acquainted with other Midwest operators.

Until the mid-1930s most local hams built their own rigs. Towards the end of the decade, however, some good quality receivers by National and Hallicrafters had come on the market. When it came to antennae, however, local hams were rugged individualists and some strange contraptions were hung on poles and house tops. Probably the most common antenna was a center-fed wire dipole, although Auggie W9HS fondly recalls when he got his first beam in 1939.

By the latter part of the 1930s, Field Day had become an established event for the Kaw Valley Radio Club. The sites that were used included Lake Shawnee and Billard Ranch to the northeast of town. Initially, field stations were battery powered, but in 1939 a portable gasoline-powered generator was purchased from the Santa Fe Railroad "for a song". This durable unit has proven its worth over the years and is still in use by the Club.

During the late 1930s a second radio group formed locally, operating under various names including Topeka Radio Amateurs Association (TRAA) and Topeka Amateur Radio Association (TARA), before changing the name to Topeka Amateur Radio Operators (TARO) in 1939. This group of amateurs was fairly active, not only as operators but socially as well, and also affiliated with the American Radio Relay League. This organization, whose book of minutes from 1939 to 1946 was acquired in the 1980s, includes the names of many who were active in the KVRC as well and shows a group of amateur operators who met "every other Wednesday" and continued to try to learn more each time about operating and equipment. These operators maintained a working relationship with KVRC, apparently even appointing a Liaison to the KVRC and the two groups offered invitations back and forth to one another's meetings, and to shared Field Days. After World War II, when amateurs were once again allowed to operate, this society moved to offer its tangible assets to the KVRC, dissolving its organization (1946).

THE FORTIES

In 1940, the KVRC played a major role in helping the Topeka Fire Department to become the first such organization in this country to have two-way radio equipment for all of its fire-fighting apparatus. John Whiffen W9FMR worked with Earl Johnson W9ICV to develop and test a 10-meter mobile unit. The completed rig was demonstrated to Fire Chief William Cawker. Chief Cawker was so impressed that he recommended its adoption to the city commission. Necessary monies were approved and the communications network became fully operational the following year.

With the start of World War II on December 7, 1941, the FCC imposed a "black out" on all amateur radio operation in this country. Many KVRC members, along with millions of their countrymen marched off to war. >From the records of the Topeka Amateur Radio Operators (TARO), some attempts between the two organizations were made to get the FCC to allow hams to continue to operate locally on the "2-and-one-half-meter-band". However, two weeks later, it was reported that the FCC had "refused to authorize a list of stations submitted for authorization in Civilian Defense", despite the fact that the list was signed by Topeka's Mayor, a Mayor Warren. It appears that, after attempts to keep some frequencies for amateur use had failed, both organizations virtually closed down "for the duration".

With the end of hostilities in 1945, the ban on amateur radio was lifted and the KVRC was reactivated. The end to this long period of imposed silence also marked a change for amateur radio operators in the Midwestern United States. In 1945, the tenth radio district was created by the FCC and all of the Kansas stations' callsigns were changed to "0" digit. (At that time, it was required of operators moving to a new call district to change their call; therefore, anyone

living in the area was assigned a "0" callsign, often simply replacing the former "9" digit.)

John Amis, W0CET, a charter member and probably the first Secretary of the Club, died during the early 1940's. John must have been an instrumental member of the club; he was Club Secretary at the time the Club completed the ARRL-affiliation process, and was an ARRL Field Appointed Official in at least the early 1930s. As the Club reactivated in 1946, Earl Johnson W0ICV, was instrumental in getting John's callsign reassigned to the KVRC as a memorial call. This callsign gives to the KVRC the distinctive privilege of possessing a "Memorial Station" callsign, an honor no longer possible under current FCC regulations.

THE FIFTIES

According to Bill Davidson, W0JLY, when he joined the Club in 1952, a group of about twenty members had resumed meeting at the Police Station at Fifth and Jackson, through the efforts of Earl Johnson, W0ICV. The Club still did not have a permanent home or station location, and during the 1950s the KVRC continued to drift from place to place. At one time or another, the KVRC called "home" other sites such as the National Guard Armory and the basement of the old hotel on the Security Benefit Assurance site on the west side of Topeka (now the Menninger Foundation West Campus).

Lack of a permanent club station location did not deter this group from continuing to plan and carry out many exciting events. In 1952 the KVRC played host to the Midwest Division ARRL Convention. The Kansas Hotel (now the Kansas Towers) was the site of the gathering for approximately four hundred amateur radio operators. Thanks in no small measure to Auggie's W0HS effectiveness as chairman of the prize committee, the convention was a grand success and went a long way towards putting our Club on the map. The KVRC regularly held hamfests and conventions in Topeka for area amateurs throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with many hams in attendance.

In 1954, the KVRC filed Articles of Incorporation with the State of Kansas for not-for-profit status. This would have included a set of By-Laws as well.

About this time a statewide movement got underway to push for legislation to authorize the use of callsigns on Kansas automobile license tags. Bill W0JLY recalls:

Our Club wined and dined a lot of legislators and played a substantial role in the bill's ultimate successful passage.

By the mid-1950s, an increasing array of quality commercial radio gear had come on the market, but some local hams continued to home-brew and modify their own rigs. Bill W0JLY went on to say:

In the early and mid-50s, ten meters was often used like we use two meters now. A number of Club members had mobile rigs and we used to have transmitter hunts on Friday nights.

Toward the end of the 1950s, two-meter equipment began to come on the market in increasing quantities. Repeaters were still many years off. Gene Godsey, K0BXJ, who joined the Club in 1955, recalls:

There were no hand-held sets initially and most of the base and mobile units put out about ten to twenty watts. They were crystal controlled and usually equipped for the national emergency frequency 147.32 MHz. These rigs operated on a simplex basis with two or more stations alternately using the same frequency.

THE SIXTIES

The 1960s were a period of great growth in amateur radio with the number of hams nationally increasing by about eighty thousand. Locally the KVRC reflected this trend by doubling its membership during the decade to about sixty.

It was during this period that the KVRC, after nearly forty years of wandering from one meeting place to another, finally found a permanent home. In 1965 an arrangement was concluded with the American Red Cross whereby, in exchange for emergency communications services, the KVRC was allocated quarters in the American Red Cross building at 9th and Western. This mutually beneficial arrangement has continued to date, although a new building was constructed following the devastating fire that destroyed the older building (along with the Club's early records) in the mid-1970s.

Although some informal weather spotting had been carried out by the Club earlier, it was not until the 1960s that observation locations were formalized and a two-meter base unit for net control was located at the U.S. Weather Bureau in Topeka. Ralph Tice, who was the Supervisor in Charge of Weather Observations at this time, recalls:

The Club spotters were well organized and answered our calls during many emergencies including the terrible tornado that struck Topeka the evening of June 8, 1966.

Major General Tice retired from the Weather Bureau after more than three decades on the job and is now Adjutant General for the Kansas National Guard located in Topeka.

In 1968, Topekans were privileged to have their first FM repeater to experiment with when Gary Hoffsommer W0QJC and Doug Flair K0JOS built a two-meter repeater. The base unit and receive antenna were located in the 3500 block of Croco Road. The repeater used a two-site location with the transmitter and its antenna mounted on the city water tower at 11th and Quincy. The equipment was all tube gear and put out about sixty watts using the 146.34/94 MHz. frequencies. About a year or two later, the original builders plus Gene Godsey K0BXJ, rebuilt the initial repeater and the frequencies were changed to 146.22/82 MHz.

THE SEVENTIES

The decade of the 1970s saw unparalleled growth in amateur radio. nationally the number of operators increased by more than 110,000; locally the KVRC topped the century mark in membership before the end of the decade. It was during this period the Club underwent a name

change and became officially known thereafter as the Kaw Valley Amateur Radio Club (1979). It was also during this decade that the official KVARC publication previously known as the BULLETIN, received a new title: THE TRANSCEIVER.

In 1970, the Club built its first two-meter repeater. It operated on 146.34/94 MHz. and was located at the old American Red Cross building at 9th and Western. The original installation was all hand built and had a (sultry!) voice I.D. Working on it at Friday evening meetings and during their Sunday coffees, many Club members gained "hands-on" experience with this Club project. It appears several operators were involved in this project at different times and levels, with many unusual ideas tried, giving local amateurs a quite distinctive repeater! The receive and transmit antennae were located on the forty-foot tower at the same site. When the present American Red Cross building at 17th and Lincoln was completed a short time later, the KVARC moved its Club station to its present location and its 146.34/94 MHz. repeater was moved to Stormont-Vail Hospital.

Throughout the years the Club had continued to grow and develop along with Amateur Radio itself; so it was that in 1976, The Club decided to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary by holding an Open House for the public. Setting up several stations and displays for the visitors throughout the basement of the American Red Cross building, it was an opportunity to make the public more aware of the many facets of amateur radio, as well as the activities of the local operators. A staff writer for the Topeka Daily Capital who attended the event capsulized what he learned of amateur radio by reporting from the exhibits thus:

>From crystal set radios to television and computers, the Kaw Valley Amateur Radio Club has been in Topeka a long time.

By the mid-70s the Club was holding Field Day at the Omar Jones' (K0BAU) farm located just west of the Rees Fruit Farm. On a high site (known to participants as "Goat Hill") the stations would be set up, the crank-up tower erected and the portable generator fired up. Lee Gordy WD0COV clearly remembers swatting mosquitoes, scratching chiggers, and swapping yarns with other Club members when not engaged in operating or keeping the log sheets.

By the latter part of the 1970s, it had become increasingly apparent that the Club needed some type of communications vehicle to meet its role of providing assistance during local disasters. After some investigations, Bob Grochowshy K0QLC and Dave Ljungdahl WB0RZO were offered a venerable Chevy step van by Ken Burgett, Topeka-Shawnee County Civil Defense Director. The van was moved to James McBee's KC0RH back yard and restoration work was begun late in 1979. During the next year the van was sanded, primed, and repainted, and an extensive mechanical overhaul was carried out. Following this the interior was completely refurnished and communications equipment was installed. The completed vehicle, named AMCOM 1 (AMateur COMMunications Unit number 1) is recognized by name to nearly all public service agencies in Shawnee County.

Organizationally, the Club as far as we know, operated for most of its first thirty years with much the same Bylaws as when it started. In 1954, the Club filed Articles of Incorporation with the Kansas

Secretary of State. In 1978 the KVRC Board of Directors appointed the committee to update the bylaws. After many hours of work and discussion, the newly-written Bylaws were adopted by the Club the following year (1979), and are still in effect today.

THE EIGHTIES

As the 1980s dawned, it became apparent that the Club needed to improve its two-meter repeater facilities. The aging 146.34/.94 repeater was retired and Steve Carriger WA0VRS, with the assistance of other Club members, built the two replacements: 144.85/145.45 MHz. and the 144.67/145.27 MHz. The repeaters were built at an out-of-pocket cost of about \$150 each, with some material furnished by the Topeka-Shawnee County Civil Defense. The 145.45 repeater antenna is located on the Northern Hills water tower at 62nd and Rochester Road, while the 145.27 repeater replaced the old 146.94 repeater, atop Stormont-Vail Regional Medical Center.

In 1981 the Club also constructed a portable 146.34/.94 repeater for emergency and disaster site use, which was mounted on the Club tower trailer. It is a solid-state unit except for the final and drive tubes and runs about ten watts out.

The 1980s found the KVARC holding Field Day each year at a site on the east side of Lake Shawnee. Usually we have operated at least two field stations plus the HF equipment in AMCOM 1. The highlight of each outing has been the Saturday evening picnic for all amateurs and their families. Also in the 1980s, the practice of the fifties, the "Fox-hunts" has been revived. Using VHF (two-meter) and sometimes ten meters, operators could be seen around Topeka on Sunday afternoons, waving antennas and scratching their heads! To encourage the lost, picnics were often held at the end of the hunt, where sometimes antennas that did not perform as well as expected were used to roast hot dogs!

with increasing technology has come an increasing diversity of interests. An amateur radio operator in the eighties has many areas of activity to explore, and the KVARC has continued to try to be that general interest Club it started out to be so many years ago. When the Space Shuttle flight of W5LFL offered amateurs the opportunity to work his space shuttle station, the KVARC was there, attempting to work him from AMCOM 1 in the parking lot of Washburn University, as were thousands of Midwest operators at the same time! Though he was unable to recognize any area calls made to his station, many area operators were elated to have even heard his two-watt two-meter signal from so many miles above!

Interest in amateur television has rekindled in the Topeka area as well. In 1984 and 1985, facilities and equipment were secured to be able to re-transmit the weather radar for use at the Emergency Operating Center in the basement of the Shawnee County Courthouse. With the possibility of being able to received the radar at a moment's notice, many amateurs have become interested in ATV as well. Currently, two different locations are on line and ready to provide the current radar picture during storm watches. With the additions of ATV stations and packet radio (digital) stations in the area, the amateur

community continues to offer new experiences and challenges to all its participants.

The 1980s have brought many opportunities for area amateurs to provide communications for the various public service events annually held in the area. From the renowned Topeka Tinman Triathlon and the Washburn University Boat Regatta to the American Lung Association's Breathe Easy-Run Easy, the KVARC has many requests each year for their assistance, and the Club seldom has trouble getting volunteers. With these opportunities to practice our readiness skill, it is no small wonder that Topeka amateurs were highly praised for their responsiveness and abilities at the time of the 1983 Topeka tornado, which destroyed several hundred homes in southeast Topeka. With storm spotters already in the field, AMCOM 1 was requested by the Sheriff's Office and in place at the most sizeable disaster site within minutes. Amateurs were asked to aid in damage assessment survey the following day, and with our aid, a job expected to take seventy-two hours was completed in less than twenty-four hours.

The KVARC sponsored several Novice Licensing classes throughout the 1980s. Many of these were held at the American Red Cross, but by 1984, room scheduling conflicts made this arrangement undesirable. In January 1986, following the recommendation of an Education Committee, a formal class of instruction was initiated in conjunction with the Continuing Education Division of the Topeka Public Schools. The Amateur Radio class, meeting two nights per week for ten weeks at Topeka High School, has already produced several enthusiastic operators, and introduced several others to amateur radio and the Kaw Valley Amateur Radio Club as well.

And so the search for our "roots" draws to a close for now. From its humble beginnings sixty years ago, the Kaw Valley Amateur Radio Club has grown to become an active organization of more than 130 members sharing a common bond of interest in amateur radio. With the rich and varied past this organization has experienced, we can only hope to see even greater gains in the coming decades. The hobby itself, with its various facets, must depend on each one of us, each with our own interests, skills, and knowledge that we bring with us to the hobby, to realize these gains.