

UNCROWDED BANDS

by Bob Curtis

The bane of DX'ing appears to be interference from other stations. QRM, an abbreviation dating from the early days of radio, means "your transmission is being interfered with". Although its use started in the early days of wireless telegraphy, over the years QRM has continued as a common term for shipboard operators, hams, SWL's and the BCB DX'er. It just won't go away, and with well over 5000 AM stations on the broadcast band today, at least in North America; interference from other stations has become a 'way of life' for the DX'er. It wasn't always so. As I remember the early days, it was a different story.

Early one morning around the year 1930 I recall being up unusually early around 5:00 AM; and having the happy thought to turn on the radio, just to see if anything was on at that early hour. As I started tuning across the dead band (all-nighters were practically non-existent at that time), I was quite surprised to come across a station playing the dance music of that era. To this day I can remember the name of the song, as perhaps some fading gave a wistful lilt to the music. It was "Why?", new then but an oldie now. I was fascinated and continued to listen, and soon found that I was listening to WPG, the "World's Playground", Atlantic City, N.J. Actually they were on all night celebrating some anniversary, either of the city or the station. At that time if you picked up something in the 'wee hours', it was usually a test program or something special.

My earliest recollections of DX'ing go back more than fifty years to the early twenties. It was probably the year 1923, possibly 1922. Radio broadcasting was in its infancy, and everybody and his brother was getting a radio set. Tube sets were in production, and capable hobbyists were building their own. Even QRM was not completely unknown, as most of the early day sets were not selective. Loop antennas, not too different from some present day models, started to show their shiny varnished cross-pieces on living room tables. Many people became interested in DX'ing or listening to far away stations. It was such a new phenomena that it grasped people's imagination. Even the newspapers catered to it, and Radio-DX columns would appear in the local paper.

As a kid in grade school, I too was fascinated by the wonder of it all. My father, an engineer, had built a multi-tube set of the latest design. Both my brother and I became interested in DX'ing. I can recall that Friday and Saturday nights became my big night. Not being the nights before school I could stay up late and try for DX. I could even stay up till after midnight. Early in life I became aware of the time zones, and knew that after east-coast stations went off the air at 11:00 PM or midnight, we would have a good chance to hear the midwest or possibly the west-coast. With regret I must say that I cannot remember details of stations heard. Unfortunately I have retained no logs, notes or QSL cards from my earliest DX days.

Some of the early broadcast station calls are with us today, but many have changed or left the air. If memory serves me correctly, I can recall such stations as: WEAJ New York, WOR Newark, WGY Schenectady, WBZ Springfield, a station in Medford, MA, WTAM Cleveland and, of course, famed KDKA. When I stayed up late, we might log WMAQ Chicago, WJR Detroit and WOW in Omaha. Real DX was KOA Denver, which I think I logged. I can't positively recall logging the west-coast in the real early days.

Moving up a few years to the period around 1930 I can recall logging some foreign DX. In particular TGW in Guatemala, which I remember receiving late one night with excellent signal strength. I notice in the latest WRTV handbook that TGW is still on the air. Also Mexico and Cuba were logged about that time. A well known high powered Mexican station just across the border from Texas, with a huge ad campaign, was heard frequently. Incidentally The Westinghouse

WR-10-A that I DX'd with in the early thirties is still working and does a fair job on today's broadcast band.

These few recollections are just a glimpse of what it was like in the early days. With the many changes over the years I'm particularly glad that I retained my interest in BCB DX'ing. Having DX'd way back when, today's DX'ing can be a pleasurable experience, especially when an ID pops in, either from an 'old friend' or something new. And when someone reports WSAR to the Eastern DX Roundup, I remember that I first heard them way back in the twenties.