

R66-2-1

TRUE CONFESSIONS OF A 'BARGAIN BASEMENT' DXER

As a music loving teenager growing up in the 1960's in North Carolina, I became an avid listener of BCB radio. After reading an article on BCB DXing, I decided to try my hand at it. I quickly discovered that our table model radio, which was fine for listening to locals and strong Easterners at night, was woefully inadequate for any kind of serious DXing activity. As the article suggested, I tried loosely coupling a longwire antenna to the radio's built in loop. This only made it whistle and warble, and pick up things like the BBC, and ships at sea.

Obviously, a better receiver was needed. A real communications receiver was out of the question for our poor family, particularly since the rest liked TV better anyway and found the table radio perfectly adequate. I looked around for something we could afford, but to no avail.

One day while doing my paper route, I came upon a pile of junk that been put out for the trash man. There, right on top--an old, rusty car radio! Could this be the answer? I snatched it up and ran home.

The radio was a Delco, one of the old upright types with the speaker inside the case. I think it was a '52 Chevy. I popped it open, and to my delight, saw that all the tubes were there. The speaker also looked OK. Dare I hope that the radio still worked?

I hooked up my dad's old army surplus 6 volt battery charger, and a short piece of wire for an antenna. I held my breath as the set warmed up. I could hardly believe my ears! The radio worked!

As I tuned across the dial, I was ecstatic. With only three feet of wire for an antenna, I was easily hearing stations that were just audible on my old AC-DC set. It seemed I had the answer to my DXing problems at last!

However, I quickly learned that auto receivers have limitations. Though very sensitive, selectivity is rather poor. Old auto radios were designed with IF bandwidth to burn, for good sound reproduction. Therefore, 'slop' was inevitable when listening adjacent to strong stations. The term 'vibrator hash' became a regular part of my vocabulary. That is, until the vibrator fried, a victim of the ragged pulsating DC current the old battery charger put out. Several weeks and three vibrators later, I learned how to eliminate the vibrator entirely by shunting across two of it's terminals, thus feeding the pulsating DC directly to the low voltage winding of the set's power transformer.

I had eliminated the vibrator, and with it, the vibrator hash. Now I could enjoy previously undreamed of clear reception. The next thing to be eliminated was the battery charger itself, which went up in clouds of putrid smoke one early AM. It's old fashioned selenium rectifiers were unable to stand the higher current flow caused by shunting across the vibrator. Not only did this put an end to my DXing for a time, but caused a major panic in the household, as you no doubt can imagine.

Undaunted, I looked around, and soon found an old TV chassis. The six volt filament winding of it's power transformer powered the radio far better than the battery charger ever had.

Now I had real 60 cycle AC feeding my radio's power transformer, far more efficient than the pulsating DC delivered by the battery charger. With the higher B+ voltage being generated, my radio performed better. I now began doing a land office business in 0Z4 gas-filled rectifier tubes. The higher B+ voltage was more than they could take.

By now, I had accumulated several old car radios, most defunct and good for parts only. I had acquired several good 0Z4 tubes. In a couple of months they were all burned out.

The 0Z4 problem was solved when I found an old Philco-Ford car radio, and noted with great interest it's filament type 6X5 rectifier tube. It didn't take long for a budding genius like myself to figure out how to shift some wires on the 0Z4 socket, and hook up heater voltage.

My search for more and better radios became a fixation, which still persists. To this day, I hate to throw away or pass up a radio of any sort.

Back then in my less principled days, I frequently visited most of our town's unfenced, unguarded junkyards to carry away as many car radios as I could. I took careful note of any old autos sitting in fields, backyards, etc. These, too, were relieved of their unused supercargo. I traveled on the railroad tracks, and picked dark, rainy nights for my forays. In about 2 years, I probably lifted 50 car radios from various places. Soon, all the junkyards began to invest in fences and guard dogs - a trend that I felt partly responsible for!

I still DXed, of course. The original Chevy radio was long gone, having been replaced by a succession of different sets. It always overloaded on strong signals, and was a victim of spurious responses. I was always trying to find one a little better than the one I had at the time. I had loads of Buicks, Chevies, Pontiacs, etc. I was partial to Delco radios. They always seemed a notch or two better than the Ford and Chrysler products I had tried.

Of the Delcos, the Buicks and Oldsmobiles seemed the best. Surprisingly, the only Cadillac radio I had was the poorest performer of all, and required pure DC for the elaborate phasing and filtering circuits related to the 'station seeking' feature, which didn't even work!

My favorite car radio of all time is a 1956 Olds. It's beautiful. (I still have it.) It's long and narrow, with a gaudy chrome front panel. The B+ supply was on a separate chassis, along with the speaker. This part was missing, so the budding young experimenter built his first high voltage power supply.

There is a difference in this radio, a slight change in the front end circuitry. This was the first car radio I had encountered that could handle a directly coupled longwire antenna without overloading. It was on this set that I made my first transcontinental logging, KFI-640, Los Angeles, on a cold, rainy night in January 1969, after the Cuban pest CMQ had left the air.

Things change, of course. I grew up, moved to California, got married. My involvement in DXing became sporadic. For many years I DXed only as the whim hit me. I kept no log, did not verie. Then, one day in 1985, I was browsing through a second-hand store, and came upon a Heath SB-310 in like new condition at an unbelievable price. I bought it on the spot.

After a month of intense shortwave listening, I realized two things: I still loved DXing, and my heart was still in the broadcast band. I dug out my '56 Olds, built a power supply and a two foot loop, and started DXing.

One fall evening, I was struggling to hear a Minnesota North Stars hockey game on WCCO. I just could not get the signal up to a listenable level. A mid-'70's Ford car radio was lying on the bench. I had given it little thought, since my prior experience was that Delco radios were superior. In sheer desperation, I hooked it up, and plugged in my loop antenna. I tuned the radio to 830 kHz. I could not believe my ears! WCCO, the station that was hard to hear on my venerable Olds radio, was blasting in!

I was shaken to the very core of my being. A Ford radio blowing my Olds out of the water? This could not be! My Olds was suffering from years of disuse, and needed an alignment job, maybe a tube or two. I did these things, and yes, they did help. But nothing I could do made my old battle ax Olds perform as well as the Ford did.

My prior experience with Fords had been with mid-'50's models. They were OK, but Delcos were better. I had owned two 1962 Ford cars, equipped with the first transistor radios Ford had made. They hadn't been as good as the older ones. Obviously, in the years since, Ford had greatly improved their car radios.

Just to be fair, I tried a few 70's Delco models. They weren't as good as my Olds. It was apparent that Ford radios were the way to go, if you were going to DX with car radios.

Well, that's the life story of a bargain basement DXer. I am still happily DXing with my 70's and 80's Ford AM car radios, of which I have dozens! (I get them legally now, of course!) My logbook is bursting at the seams, and I couldn't be more pleased. Oh, I have tried a few 'real' communications receivers, and they performed very well. Yet, my Ford radio is just as sensitive. I have since learned to chain up the IF sections of several radios in cascade, making the

R66-2-2

selectivity so good that I can tune 'dead air' between the 10 kHz channels on the AM band. This is a trick I will snare as soon as I can get the article written.

It WOULD be nice to have digital readout. Interestingly, I recently tried a Chrysler digital car radio which seemed as good as my Ford. However, the synthesizer generated RF interference that I just could not filter out. Also, it is impossible to 'split channels' with these sets. They tune in 10 kHz increments only.

To sum it all up. I guess the most satisfying thing about 'bargain basement' DXing is this: Many of you report exotic stations logged on equipment which set you back hundreds of dollars. That is fine. But, what a feeling to turn on my Ford car radio, which cost me NOTHING (a friend who installed a cassette deck in his Escort gave it to me) and tune my loop antenna, (which I built from spare parts), and hear the SAME STATIONS! Name another hobby in this day and age in which a person can get started nearly free, and enjoy similar results as the ones who spent a mint!