

K9CT Craig Outstanding Contest operator and DXpeditioner



Here we are in 2013...and how did I become who I am today? I just completed building a M/2 contest station and in the past few years have been on several successful DXpeditions. So why and what caused this?

Over the past few years, it was wise to look forward and see what I wanted to do when I did not work every day. I knew it should not be too physical but be fun and challenging for the mind. So I reached into my past fun and investigated the current state of ham radio. It was competing against golf, running, travel, snowmobiling and a host of other interesting things to do.

My first team ham radio fun was when I attended Bradley University in the early 70's. It was almost an accident that I discovered they had an amateur radio club, W9JWC. Other interests such as girls, parties and dorm discussions were probably more important when I first started school but my studies in electrical engineering technology superseded having too much fun....and besides there were ham radio operators in my classes!

I had started in ham radio in 1967 almost on my own...my Dad (not a ham) had given me some ARRL books to read. Why, I don't know...but he knew that I was really into electronics because I was reading technical books, listening to the shortwave radio in the basement and tearing apart televisions. How did I possibly learn Morse code from a book? Well there I was reading the ARRL code book and memorizing the code by saying dah and dit.

My mother found a lady in a neighboring town that was a ham, Lucy, W9USR. She called Lucy and asked if I could meet her and see how I was doing in preparation for taking a novice test. I remember going to her house and staring in amazement at her Collins S Line and the big HyTower next to the house. I knew this was for me. She asked me to send some CW and then try to copy some code she sent to me. Looking back, I knew I needed more work because she asked me to practice more and come back in two weeks. Needless to say, I was ready for next time.

My early days in ham radio were probably laughable. I built a Knight T-60 and R-55A. A wire was strung from our house peak to a light pole 100 feet away and a zip cord was stuffed into the SO239 socket of the radio...dummy load was a light bulb, of course. You called CQ and listened to the entire band on the R55A without moving the knob. My first QSL was from the FCC in Allergan, MI. Seems like my second harmonic from my 3727 crystal was good copy up there!! My Mom was concerned the Feds were coming soon.

My license for WN9TXL had arrived in January 1967 and one weekend of February my parents had left for a long weekend. I was left to entertain myself and listened to CQ NR CQ NR for many hours trying to figure out what was going on. A phone call to Lucy clued me in and I was into my first contest at age of 14.

My high school years were filled with mostly studies, running, playing in a rock band and girls. So back to college where my studies lead me back to ham radio.

My introduction to Andy Bachler, WA9LOT aka N9AB, a year older and wiser, showed me the way to DXing and better operating techniques. He was already an accomplished DXer and had many entities worked and confirmed. He would give me tips on pileups and how to work stations more effectively. The Bradley club members enjoyed jumping into contests. We would take turns filling the logs for every contest that we heard...except when we were supposed to be studying. Some of the best times in my ham radio career were the hours late at night hanging out with that crew. One of the younger hams in the club is in charge of my engineering department for my company today!

Before graduating, I thought it might be a good idea to see if I really liked what I was studying as a job...so I became a technician at a local electronics company about 6 blocks from campus. This was great fun and I soon gave up my position in the Bradley band to have more time for working. Music has always been a part of my life but then CW is music to my ears too. So this job turned into a real career changer for me. I was asked to become the operations manager for the company after I got my degree. This was a real challenge for me because everyone was older than I. I quickly found out what I did not know and went back to school to get my MBA.

After several years, I was actually running the entire company and became a stockholder as part of my compensation. I got married and soon had other responsibilities. They always say the best employees are married and have house payments!

I soon had enough money to put up a tower and build a station in my basement. The tower was a Rohn 45 70 foot foldover. My contesting and DXing advanced to a whole new level. The later 70s were much fun and I really remember doing many SS and DX contests. We had a small group of guys that met to discuss such important things and we called the club CIDXCC...Central Illinois DX and Contest Club. Some of the members were K9ZO, N9LR and K9RX.

The first station was a HeathKit SB303, 401 and 220 which was replaced with the Drake C line and then the TS930S and Alpha 76CA. My antennas were changed from year to year...thus the foldover tower. I think the best set up was the TH7DXX, 402BA and slopers for 80M. My call was changed from WA9TXL to K9CT in 1976. My 1978 SS IL and Central Division phone record held up for many years. My voice keyer was an 8-track tape player/recorder with a loop for CQ! I laugh to think of the huge dupe sheets we used at the time. How did we do that?

Things got quite interesting for me in 1980. The owner of the company wanted me to buy him out...well the economy in Peoria was not so good and Caterpillar UAW local had just voted to go on strike. So I passed on the opportunity, quit the company and started my own company in direct competition. This actually turned out well but what a poor time to start a business!

Hours and hours were spent building and bootstrapping the business. My first engineer hired was a local ham that became my operations manager for many years. I knew that hams were capable of fixing and designing most anything so I was always biased. My contesting took a backseat but I still kept track of DXpeditions and finally arrived on the Honor Roll in the 80's. My wife and I had children and now we had all of their activities to attend. I became involved in the school district and was elected to the school board.

My business was an early system integration contractor and I got involved in the management of an industry organization. My firm and the NSCA were both formed in 1980. It was important to me that our industry was recognized and I was on the board and served as president for a few years. My interpersonal and speaking skills improved and I became more involved in other boards, such as the Peoria Chamber of Commerce and Bradley University alumni organization.

We built a new house in 1991 and moved taking down my ham radio station. The new house was only a couple miles away and I had built in a ham radio station in the basement. The TS930 and Alpha 76CA were carefully placed but never used. I was just too busy.

I was going to be 50 in 2002 and I decided I was not going to be fat and fifty...so I took up running and started running competitively. In the process of training, I learned some things. I found out that if you carefully followed a training plan for your body, you can make dramatic improvements to your speed and endurance. I set out to run marathons and break the three-hour mark. I lost many pounds and felt pretty good about myself. My health and mind were probably the best they have been from running.

This caused me to rethink my life. I was way too busy. My daughters were grown and out of the house. My wife and I were happy taking vacations together. The business was doing well and I wanted to figure out how to work less and live more. I got out of many of the obligations that were taking my time and set out to relax and enjoy life.

At about the same time, I thought I would blow the dust off the radio. I put up a simple antenna and made a few contacts every now and then. In 2004, I called Ralph, K9ZO and we talked on the phone for a while and set a dinner meeting up to discuss the state of ham radio. He advised me on radios, antennas, contests and DXing. He was a great resource to get my mind moving in the right direction.

I decided on a SteppIR on an US Tower HDX 589 as a way to get back on the air. A building permit required a zoning variance...so got introduced to that hassle. A phone call to Lee, K0LW, started the process where he would assemble and install both as he had done for SteppIR at Visalia. I found out that I had fallen off the Honor Roll and that I no longer held the SS record in our area. So it was off to the races...the antennas were up...lots of fun in the DX pileups and I was in SS just like that.

It did not take long to figure out that contesting was not something you don't practice. It was not like riding a bike...I was rusty on CW and phone skills. I just kept jumping into each every contest to practice.

Soon I discovered the Society of Midwest Contesters. Membership gave me a gateway into their reflector and connection to some very talented contesters. Initially, I was timid but soon found out if you asked a question, it would get answered. Mike, W9RE someone that was a competitor in the 70s and 80s, was still top dog. He has no secrets that he won't share. Mike has been very helpful to me. There are many other members that have been very helpful and one of the best reasons to join a contest club.

I had never been on 160 or 6 M until 2007. The ARRL 160 was such a hoot. I soon learned that the guys to beat are John, K9DX and Gary, K9AY. First of all, the CW during that contest is the finest. Wall to wall CW by some of the best operators. I was hooked. Soon I had a steady calendar of contests that I enjoyed. Each had its challenge and character.

2007 brought my first DXpedition opportunity. I let it be known that I would like to try that and started networking to find a team to join. Bernie, W3UR posted an opening on the TI9 Cocos Island DXpedition. On the team was Joe, AA4NN. I called Joe and we discussed this and he thought it would be good for a first time trip and he would help me learn the ropes. This was an eye opening experience...I was hooked. What a rush to work pileups!!



Working the pileups from NH8S, Swains Island in 2012

Joe, AA4NN gave me a tip on getting into the K4M, Midway DXpedition team. That was a great opportunity that led to many new friends in the contest and DXing world. A great friendship was developed with Joe, W8GEX. We have co-led two DXpeditions to PJ7E and NH8S since that trip.

Prior to the K4M trip, I had given thought to finding some property that would be good to build a contest station. A few emails were sent to K9HMB, K3LR and W3LPL seeking advice on property size and tower locations. They all provided very useful and helpful information as you would expect. Literally a month before the DXpedition, a property was being auctioned only 4 miles from my home and it was an ideal property. So I became a small farm owner with lots of cleanup to tackle in the future.

Building the station required much research. The tower locations were important for interference and feedline loss considerations. The antennas and stacking needed to be selected for the topographically area and performance needed to EU and AS for the “black hole” of central IL. By the way, several hams advised me to buy property in New England. But I wanted to stay close to central Illinois and my family and business.

Visits to NR5M, K3LR, WB9Z, K2DRH and K9HMB/K9NS followed. Everyone was so nice and willing to share!! I embarked on designing a M/2 station using all of the information collected. The shack was going to be simple for any operator to use. Technology and software from W2FU (Green Heron), K0XG, W3TX Super Bertha OWA Antennas, Steppir, PSTRotatorAZ, Hamation, Array Solutions, Stan, K5GO and HiZ Antennas made this happen. It was fun doing all of the research and planning for this to happen.

A great relationship with John, W2GD and Don, K4ZA helped immensely with the layout and installation of all of the towers, feedlines and antennas. They know contesting and their insight saved me from many mistakes from their years of experience. John later invited me to operate the CQ 160 contest from NJ and again I was able to meet some other testers on his M/S team.

The contest station went together very well and was a fun project to focus on for two years. Teams have been assembled from the area and we have enjoyed working out the bugs and the team building for each contest. It has been a true pleasure getting to know each person during the pitched battles of contesting. We have some steady team members and usually get a chance to add someone new to the mix. It is also fun to invite a relative newbie to sit in the chair and get some encouragement. What fun this has been!!

Almost every day I report for work at the contest station. The job is improving anything and everything. With so much mechanical hardware, there is always something to fix or tweak. Of course I might work a few dx stations or two, keeping pace in the DX Marathon or finding a new band DXCC for DXCC Marathon. Or even firing up the 2m EME station, to work a new DXCC or grid.

It is a true pleasure building and maintaining the relationship of the contest teams. I also enjoy the planning and operating on DXpeditions. I look forward to more DXpeditions, more team competitions and hold out for some future opportunity to visit a DX contest location.

Hams are very generous in the efforts to have fun in our hobby. I would encourage everyone to give tutelage to some future DXer and contesteer. This is really about the best game they can play.



Crossing the finish line in the Chicago Marathon