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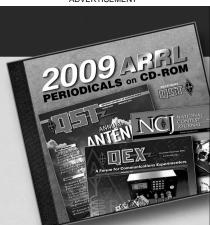
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By Lee Bergren, WOAR

The First Field Day

As W9AIW/W9NFV, the author was present at the outset—the first ARRL Field Day, held nearly seven decades ago.

Sixty-nine years ago in the June 1933 issue of QST, there was a single column announcement of an International Field Day to be held June 10 and 11. It was for all hams with portable station licenses. Only portable stations in the field away from the home address were eligible to submit Field Day scores.

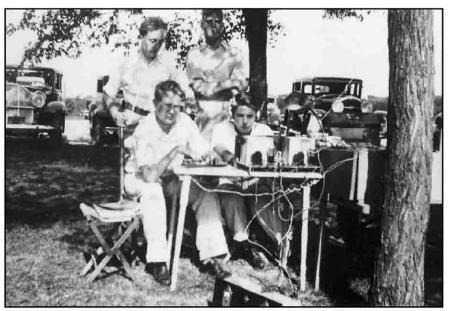
Four high school students who had received their ham licenses just the year before jumped at the opportunity to set up a station away from home and to participate in this new event. Their calls were W9AIW, W9KGX, W9LPZ and W9LXG.

W9NFV/Portable Takes Shape

In those days amateurs had to have two licenses. An operator's license issued by the Department of Commerce and a station license issued by the Federal Radio Commission. It was not until the following year that the Federal Communications Commission was created by the Communications Act of 1934. If requested, the Federal Radio Commission would issue a special station license and call letters for portable use only. W9NFV was issued to W9AIW as a portable call shortly before the first Field Day event. It was decided that the Field Day contest would be just the ticket to set up a Field Day operation and use the portable call W9NFV. The F.R.C. also required notification by letter of the time and place of the portable operation.

Where to set up for portable operation? Fortunately, W9KGX's father was a member of a country club in south Kansas City and he obtained permission for the station to be set up on the grounds of the country club. So, the station was set up along the side of the 18th fairway. A beautiful location at the top of a gentle slope and beside an 80-foot water tower. An easy climb and perfect to secure one end of the antenna. A prime location to operate the Field Day contest.

Kansas City, by the way, was in the ninth call district. In that era, the ninth call district included states from Indiana west to Colorado and the Canadian border to Arkansas. It was the largest and most populated call district and it remained that



At the Hillcrest Country Club—standing, from the left: W9LPZ, W9LXG; seated from the left: W9AIW/W9NFV and W9KGX.

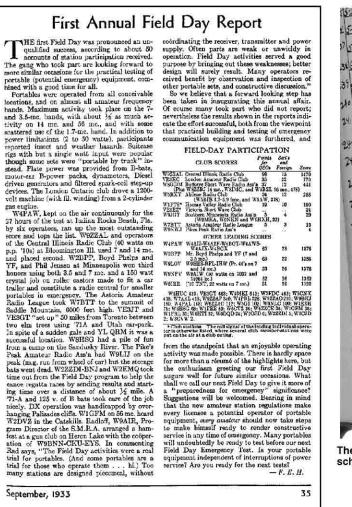
way until shortly after WW II when the F.C.C. in their infinite wisdom declared that only Illinois and Indiana would be in the ninth call district. The remaining eight states were then in the new zero district and not well received. Some of the kinder comments were: "This is the nothing district," "This is the goose egg district," "It takes a long time to send five dashes," "The zero has two syllables."

The Intrepid Four Set Up Their Station

The equipment was far less than modest by today's standards. Ham gear in those days was usually home brew since there was very little commercial built equipment for the ham market. Actually it made little difference because high school kids never had much money. In 1933 the country was in the throes of the great depression of the 20th century. Imagine—25 cents would buy 6 hamburgers at the White Castle, and gasoline was 12 cents a gallon.

Collectively the intrepid four had one 80-meter crystal and enough receiving tubes to build a breadboard transmitter. Used tubes could easily be scrounged at the local radio repair shops, either free or for just a few cents. The transmitter was quickly constructed and it consisted of a crystal oscillator, frequency doubler and a UX210 final amplifier. Meters were expensive and hard to come by, so transmitter tuning was done by holding a neon bulb near the plate tank circuit and tuned for maximum brilliance. Proper loading was achieved when the plate of the UX210 had a slight cherry colored glow. This tuning procedure was not conducive to safety since the plate tank circuits were hot with plate voltage. As a guess, the output power was probably 25 W.

Fortunately, W9AIW had an old Pilot D.C. Super Wasp receiver. It had four tubes, a tuned R.F. stage, a regenerative detector and two stages of audio. The popular use of superheterodyne receivers was several years away. The Super Wasp used plug-in coils and was designed for general coverage of the short waves. Consequently, the amateur bands covered about ¹/₈ inch on the dials. To solve the band spread problem, plates were removed from the vari-



The September 1933 issue of *QST* reported the results of the first Field Day. The article begins: "The first Field Day was pronounced an unqualified success, according to about 50 accounts of station participation received." Communications Manager F. E. Handy's report including this prophecy: "... the enthusiasm greeting our first Field Day augurs well for future similar occasions."

able tuning condensers and with the proper padding the ham bands were spread over most of the dial. A 6-V auto battery powered the tube filaments and two 45-V "B" batteries supplied the plate voltage.

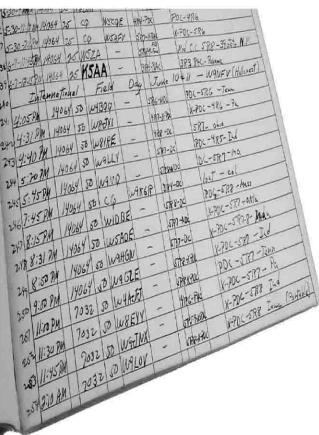
A popular antenna of the day was a so-called off center fed hertz and this half wave flat top was fed with a single wire soldered off the center of the antenna by 14% of the dipole length. This single wire feed was then simply tapped to the plate tank coil of the UX210 for proper loading. Again, not too safe since the plate voltage of the UX210 was on the antenna. This off center fed hertz worked quite well on both 20 and 40 meters.

Operating procedures were far different in the early '30s than present-day operating procedures. Today two stations in QSO are usually on the same frequency, unless split frequency is requested. In those olden times the transmitters were either MOPA (master oscillator power amplifier) or crystal controlled, which meant that the transmitted frequency was fixed and not readily movable. To establish a QSO, for instance, a station calling CQ would look for a response by tuning from band edge into the band until the operator heard a station calling. So, two stations in QSO were almost never on the same frequency. This was a slow and cumbersome way to establish a QSO. The latter-day VFO control of the transmitter has certainly been a great improvement in operating procedure.

How'd We Do? Where'd We Go?

How did the shade tree Field Day setup work? W9NFV scored 5th in the country. Four kids were happy.

The first Field Day contest was pronounced a success, and has been one of the most popular ham contests throughout the years. For the last several years an average of 2075 logs have been submitted



The W9AIW/W9NFV log shows the stations the four high schoolers contacted 69 Field Days ago.

and a total of 30,000 persons have participated at Field Day sites. What a far cry from the first Field Day event 69 years ago.

And what has happened to the four high schoolers after that first Field Day in 1933. W9LXG, now a silent key, graduated with degrees in Journalism and Law from the University of Kansas and worked for the City of Toledo, Ohio. W9LPZ attended Purdue and his working career was in sales. He is now retired and living in the Dominican Republic and active on the air as HI3/W4DT. W9KGX, now a silent key, earned a degree in electrical engineering at MIT. His working career was with the James Millen Co and was one of Millen Company's first employees. As Chief Engineer he was responsible for many of the Millen Company's products. He was active as W1KRD and KA1UP and almost exclusively on CW with a straight key. W9AIW/W9NFV earned a degree in electrical engineering at the University of Kansas. Employment included stints at General Electric, Chief Engineer at Aireon Mfg Co, Manager of Research and Development at Great Lakes Pipe Line Co, and finally founder of Radio Industries, Inc. He is retired and active as WOAR on most bands.

I wonder how many operators of that first Field Day contest are still pounding brass.