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By Eric P. Nichols, KL7AJ

The Smell of Radio

It's a given that stockyards, paper mills and perfume have characteristic odors. But ham radio? In the good old days, ham radio was smelly business!

I leaned back in my swivel chair and pondered the sleepy blue-green glow of the spectrum analyzer display that graced the face of my new megabucks HF rig. All that high-tech hardware, however, did nothing but rub my nose in the fact that the bands were absolutely dead. Although close, I wasn't desperate enough to give up and buy a 2-meter radio. I still held the unswerving conviction that nothing of value ever occurred above 30 MHz.

My morbid thoughts were interrupted by the unmistakable heavy-booted footsteps of Mike Nations, KL7OF, as he descended the rickety staircase into my basement shack. "Old Fart," as he was affectionately known on the air, never needed to knock; his visits were, without exception, entertaining, if not productive.

"Mind if I smoke?" were the first words out of his mouth as he invited himself into my den of iniquity, pulling a pack of generic cigarettes out of the inner sanctum of his grubby, tan overalls.

"Shucks, I don't mind if you burst into flames!" I said, turning around to behold my rough-hewn sourdough buddy.

"I can take a hint," he said, as he guiltily returned his cigarettes to his pocket and produced, instead, a can of "terbaccy," thrusting a disgusting wad of the stuff into his bearded jowl.

"I think I'd prefer the smoke," I said, searching the shack frantically for a suitable spittoon.

"You know what's wrong with these modern rigs?" he asked, glaring with transparent disapproval at my new toy.

"Dynamic range?" I ventured, repeating the current lament du jour of the modern, discriminating amateur. I knew, if nothing else, it would impress the old goat long enough to keep him thinking for a while.

Mike waved his hand in a dismissive manner, shaking his head. "No, you're missing it by a Tikchuk mile. The *smell*—it's all wrong."

I turned slowly toward Mike, as if he'd finally lost his marbles. Something told me it was going to be a long afternoon. But, because I wasn't getting a great deal of enjoyment out of the HF bands, I decided to give Mike my undivided attention.

"Regale me," I said.

Mike obliged. "Modern rigs—they just don't smell like radio," he said, reaching for another plug of chaw. "Close your eyes and take a whiff of the air in here. What do you smell?"

I dutifully complied. "An old sourdough in need of his monthly bath," was the first thought that came to mind, but with a great deal of effort, I restrained myself. I knew the man was serious. "Okay," I said at last, my eyes still clamped shut. "A little hot plastic I guess... some from my new radio... some from my old PC. A little warm dust from that baseboard heater... that's about it." I opened my eyes.

"Where's the ozone?" he said, almost demanding.

"The *ozone*?" I asked, rather baffled. "Last I checked, it was up in the stratosphere somewhere."

"I mean the *smell* of ozone, you toddler!" Mike said, throwing up his hands in disgust and resignation.

I sniffed again. "I don't smell anything... what does ozone smell like, anyway?"

Mike jumped to his feet and slapped his forehead in disbelief. "That's exactly the *point*!" he fumed. "There *is* no ozone in here! You wet-behind-the-ears whippersnappers wouldn't know ozone if you took a bath in it! Real radio makes real ozone—and lots of it!"

I backed away on my swivel chair, ever so slightly. "Ooo...kay...."

A faraway, wistful expression fell over Mike's face as he slowly



NOW, THE FCC DIDN'T SHUT ME DOWN, IT WAS THE EPA--- THEY COULD SMELL OZONE 2 BLOCKS AWAY!

lowered himself into his seat. "Have you ever heard the winsome crackle of a big electric arc and basked in its awesome blue glow?"

"Uh, no, not on purpose, anyway," I sputtered. I began to wonder if it was safe to sit too close to the man, for fear of electrocution.

"Even the solder doesn't smell the same, anymore...nope," Mike continued. "We didn't have that wimpy rosin core stuff you yuppies use nowadays. Nope, we just had a big ol' bar of solder and a vat of flux. Plunge that old soldering iron into the vat of flux and fill the room up with smoke. Get so thick you could hardly see...but *oh!* That aroma! Now that was real radio, boy."

"You *did* inhale, didn't you!" I said. It was all beginning to make sense.

"And the hot wax from a blown 'Vitamin Q' capacitor and the sweet smell of a toasted carbon resistor," Mike continued, seemingly oblivious to my presence. "Yep, you never needed test equipment in those days," he said, nodding thoughtfully. He tapped the side of his substantial proboscis. "It was all right in here."

I allowed Mike to carry on for five minutes about the olfactory delights of what he called "real radio." After he reentered the latter months of the twentieth century, he paused long enough for me to get a few words of wisdom in.

"That's all very romantic, Mike—all that smoke and sparks and stuff—but let me ask you just one little question. Did all that fireworks ever actually put a signal on the air?" At that instant, I happened to gaze up at the spectrum analyzer on my \$9000 HF radio, which showed nothing but a flat line—as flat as an EKG on a 10-day-old corpse.

Something told me it was the wrong question.

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