

The Great Harvey Wells Caper

Part 2

By Ron Litt, K5HM

I stared at her for a long time. A pristine beauty with big black eyes and creamy white face. She looked back at me from the magazine. A salty trail of perspiration formed on my upper lip. Six months earlier, I discovered her buried in the back pages of QST. Each month as a new issue arrived, I grabbed it, turned quickly to the ad to be sure she was still there; the Harvey Wells Band Master Z-Match Antenna Coupler. I had to have it.

For the last two years I had one single band antenna for 20 meters. It was great, but I was getting close to my WAS and I needed practically all the New England states. Connecticut and New Jersey were almost impossible from New York City without a 40 or 80 meter antenna. I was desperate.

As a 17-year-old kid with no car and no money, I had next to no social life. You might convince a chick to take the subway ride to night court in lower Manhattan to see the evening folk routinely scooped up by the cops get arraigned. Or take the Staten Island Ferry for a nickel moonlight cruise across the harbor. After that, your options for a second date were badly limited without personal mobility.

My life was like a fully charged electrolytic capacitor; ham radio was my only way to bleed off the stored energy. The informal Saturday Night Nerd net was regularly attended by the guys from high school that couldn't get a date. I was a regular member. We lasted until one or two in the morning talking about antennas and Q-multipliers and Collins gear we could never afford. It was my only relief from the teen age hormones running amok.

In those days the \$70 price for the coupler was beyond astronomical. It cost more than a senior prom date! Day after day, I sunk deeper into depression. The kind only pubescent teenagers know when they are rejected by the head of the cheerleading squad. Little did I suspect salvation was at hand. The very next Saturday, fate struck a blow right out of left field, KAPOW!

I had gone to Saturday breakfast with the Queens County Bagel, Bowling and Spark Club (QCBB&SC). For about the twentieth time, I bent my old buddy Ralph's ear about the Harvey Wells Coupler. Ralph, the greatest Elmer of all time, listened patiently while preparing his bagel. I whined on for five full minutes. He was quiet but nodded appropriately and grunted in assent when I paused for a breath.

Precision was Ralph's key to fame as a ham. He could lay down 25 turns on a coil form without a gap or an overlap; as if it had come from a machine. So too, Ralph had a system for preparing a bagel with cream cheese and lox. Like brain surgeon, he spread the cream cheese evenly, carefully leaving no space uncovered; trimming any excess cheese that drooped over the edges. Then he layered the lox on top, using a fork to mash down the smoked fish so it was buried into the cream cheese.

Finally, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "Listen kid." Everybody was a kid to Ralph. "Whyncha go home and work the South Dakota QSO Party? There's only two hams in the whole state. You might get lucky."

Lucky? I hadn't gotten that lucky, since I got to second base with Wanda Louise Schwartzberg on the ferry ride a month ago, but I needed South Dakota for WAS. This might be the day. I threw down a couple bucks for my share of the bill and took off for the bus stop.

I had just bounded up the front steps and into the house when the old man hit me with the letter. The mail had arrived early this day and clutched in his trembling hand was the dreaded pink ticket. "You better take care of this", he said. The old man didn't get the enormity of transgression that a pink ticket represented. But he knew that anything that came in an envelope with no stamps and "Official Business" printed on it was trouble. As far as he was concerned, I was as good as being carted off to Leavenworth.

Without uttering a word, I snatched the letter from his hand, turned and fled down the basement stairs. I had to figure out what to do. I sat for a long time; thinking. The U.S. phone band ended at 14200 KC. Most of the good DX was always just below that great divide. We worked split back then, running full carrier double sideband AM, pushing as close to the band edge as we dared, calling for that DX station we needed on the other side.

Late at night, my stubby little fingers would be numb as I gripped the band spread knob and tuned my receiver into the low end of 20 meters. Across the electronic wall at 14200 KC between the U.S. phone and CW bands. You could hear them calling CQ; siren's voices from places like Australia, Tahiti, Japan and Pitcairn. It was a drug. The call signs and those strange accented voices from exotic places drew me in. I had to make the contact.

From 14205 and down the QRM was like shock and awe in the Iraq war. Screaming heterodynes beating against one another. Guys over-modulating their rigs and the infamous Kalifornia Kilowatts tuning up. Kaah-Chunk! Hello Test . . .Hello TEST...HEELLLO Test...1,2,3,4...4,3,2,1! Okay, okay, I know you can count already. Night after winter's night I spent in my chilly basement shack looking for that rare one on 20 meters. The only warmth came from the glow of the parallel 6146's in the final and the 807 modulator tubes.

Finally, I snapped out of my reverie and mustered the courage to call my old buddy Ralph on the land line. I laid it all out about the pink ticket. In one breath, I unloaded on Ralph non-stop. There was silence for an eternity. "Listen kid", he began; his voice had a way of piercing through the QRM in my head. "You just need an accurate marker for the band edge. A crystal calibrator. You can pick one up at Harrison Radio for about ten bucks."

"Hey Ralph", I said. "What about the letter I have to write? What should I say?" Ralph started in again, "Just tell them the truth kid, you'll be fine. See you later kid." And then there was a click. That's it? Tell them the truth? Somewhere from the dark reptilian part of my desperate brain, the thread of a diabolical plan began to form. A way to solve my FCC problem and snag the Z-Match in the bargain.

Anyone who has ever gotten a pink ticket will tell you it is a serious matter. In my kid mind it was like getting called to Mr. Murphy's office. Mr. Murphy was the Vice Principal at Millard Fillmore High School. Like the FCC, he knew everything. He was the most feared man at school. It was rumored that he had some medieval torture mechanism in his office. A relic from the Spanish Inquisition that would make the toughest kid confess. Just like the FCC, when you went to see the Vice Principal, you had to confess your transgression, explain why and then describe how it was never, ever going to happen again.

I spent the rest of the day composing the response to the FCC notice. I pulled out my No.2 Dixon Ticonderoga, the same pencil I use in my logbook. The same pencil that was an accomplice to my crime. Its penance would be to help me contrive this document of contrition. I began writing and correcting phrases; adding more verbiage where it was needed.

I skipped lunch and supper. Skipping meals did not sit well with Mom who believed that food was the solution to every problem. I was hungry but I didn't want to stem the creative juices while they were flowing. Mostly, I wanted to avoid the old man until I was ready.

It was a work of classic prose worthy of the Pulitzer Prize. In the first part, I acknowledged my crime; pled guilty and promised not to do it again. I said, I'm sorry three times in the first paragraph. In the second part, I described what I was going to do. Purchasing a crystal calibrator, using it to mark the band edge and NEVER operate any closer than three kc from the marker. Then I really poured it on. I swore to check my receiver monthly against WWV, recalibrate my VFO and receiver every 90 days. I even promised to buy a crystal for 14.203 in the event my VFO became unstable.

Then, in the midst of my epistle of contrition, I slipped in a tiny little paragraph about adding an antenna impedance matcher, like the Harvey Wells Band Master Z-Match Coupler. I went on for a couple of sentences about how it would eliminate spurious emissions and reduce any TVI.

There it was! My secret was out. I was betting on the TVI thing because the old man hated most of the neighbors and he didn't want any of them complaining to the cops, let alone the FCC! I finished the letter with a recap of the whole incident and how it would never happen again . . . ever. Finally, it was ready for typing.

As a southpaw, my handwriting was beyond bad. I was the only kid in Mrs. Shapiro's fourth grade class to flunk Penmanship. When you got to be thirteen, most guys I knew got a fancy fountain pen for their birthday. Instead, the old man had wisely decided on a typewriter for me. Carefully, I typed each word on the Smith-Corona. To avoid any erasures or mistakes; I redid whole pages until it was perfect and pristine. I wanted to make a good impression on the FCC about the sincerity of my penance. Finally I signed it and typed the envelope too.

By the time I was done, it was after eight in the evening. I could hear the TV in the living room. The old man was watching Sid Caesar; his favorite show. He was laughing; a good sign. At least for the moment he wasn't thinking about the FCC or Leavenworth. I slipped out of the basement, up the stairs to my bedroom without notice and turned out the light. I'd decided to wait till Sunday morning to launch my plan. By now, I was drained.

Saturday night, I hardly slept. The adrenalin was relining my blood pressure. I pictured the neighbors standing outside my house as the squadron of FCC men swooped down. They'd all be wearing the official FCC uniform; black pants, long sleeved white shirts, rolled up to the elbows; pocket protectors full of pencils and those little slide rules. No nonsense and grim faced, they summarily clapped me in handcuffs and collected me to pay for my crime. Or so the nightmare went; repeated each time I nodded off, with different endings. None of them good.

Now it was Sunday morning. Time for the final act.

I came down to breakfast with the letter in my hand. The old man was eating an onion roll with smoked whitefish; his favorite. He had a copy of the *Sunday New York Times* on the table. Even though he was a blood sworn Democrat he read the *Times*, a Republican bastion from cover to cover each Sunday. Mom was cooking eggs and my kid sister was nowhere in sight.

Nervously, I proffered the letter with the pink ticket on top. The old man looked up from the *Times*. He was reading the financial section and mumbling about the Republicans. He took the letter and started reading.

I'd worked up my simple letter into a literary masterpiece. I mentioned the purchase of additional equipment a couple times in the letter to include the crystal calibrator. In addition to the letter itself, I added a diagram of the shack, descriptions of my equipment, including the Z-Match and my ARRL membership certificate.

I tried to maintain an air of calm detachment but inside I was shaking like a nervous cat as the old man looked it over. As usual, he got right to the heart of the matter. "How much is this all going to cost?"

The old man was a depression era high school dropout. What I didn't know at the time was how committed he was to seeing his kids get the education he had to forgo. He would never understand the ins and outs of amateur radio. He inherently believed that there were only four acceptable career paths for young male children; Medicine, Dentistry, Accounting or Engineering. As long as my interests fit into one of those niches, he was willing to do anything to help it along.

I mumbled something about eighty dollars. "What? How Much? Eighty?", he raised his voice raised to the fight or flight level. I am sweating through my eyeballs. "You better make sure this fixes it!" Then in one single motion, he reached into his wallet and dropped four brand new twenty dollar bills on the kitchen table.

I grabbed the money and the letter and dashed from the kitchen. Took the basement stairs two at a time and called Ralph on the phone. Once again, I unloaded on him about the letter, the crystal calibrator and the Z-Match. Through the signature wheeze of his breath, I could swear he was smiling on the other end of the phone. He was of course, the greatest Elmer of all time, so he probably knew how it was going to come out.

"I know kid. That's great.", he said. He knew? How could he know? I took the cash out of my pocket and stared at the four crisp, sequentially numbered bills. I wondered for a second if Ralph and the old man had worked it out in advance.

Ralph's raspy voice broke into my thoughts, "Make sure you mail the letter, kid. I'll meet you down at Harrison Radio Tuesday afternoon." "And go work that W0 from South Dakota on 14235." Click went the phone in my ear.

The End for Now