

Second Century

Starting With A Story



“Those of you who read this column regularly may have noticed that there is a new face at the top of this page. I am Howard E. Michel, WB2ITX, and as I write this, I’m in my second day as ARRL Chief Executive Officer.”

First, let me publicly and personally thank Barry Shelley, N1VXY, for stepping up to run ARRL in January. Barry’s tenure as CEO caps 29 years of service at ARRL Headquarters. ARRL and Amateur Radio have benefited greatly from his dedication, insight, and management skills. Thanks, Barry!

Secondly, let me thank those of you who are reading this piece. Your interest shows a dedication to ARRL and our hobby that is not shared by all hams. You may be expecting me to make some pronouncement of my views on the hobby, or ARRL. I promise that I will engage you in that dialog in the future. But before I do, I’d like to establish our relationship. I believe that society is best when people communicate, and true communication comes from understanding and respect. And understanding starts with a personal story.

My story starts when I was a young teenager. My father taught me to use a hammer and saw, but he felt electricity was beyond him. We had a friend of the family, who would later be my Elmer, install the electricity in the basement that my father was finishing. I was fascinated by the magic — or logic, or something — in wiring outlets, wall switches, and ceiling lights. Shortly after that, my father and I would go every Friday evening to this friend’s workshop, where he repaired radios that were used to alert members of the local volunteer fire department. I wondered how he could understand how the radio worked, and how he knew which piece of test equipment to use. I was hooked on electronics. I wanted to understand.

I made my first major foray into electronics at my seventh-grade science fair. I built — with the help of our family friend and the schematic in the back of the RCA Receiving Tube Manual — a five-tube superheterodyne radio receiver. It was built on a 4 × 8 sheet of pegboard, with sections for the 35W4 rectifier, 50C5 power amplifier, converter, IF, and detector. I wasn’t a ham yet. I wasn’t even a shortwave listener. But I was learning how radios worked.

That family friend was a ham. I remember him calling CQ, and getting a reply from somewhere far away. I wanted to be a ham too. So our family friend became my Elmer, taking me to a local hamfest, where we bought a shortwave receiver. I’ve long since forgotten the make and model, but I remember listening, sending reports, and collecting cards from stations around the world. I built a

loop antenna, about 4 – 5 feet square, that sat on a tripod in my bedroom. It was highly directional, and with an embedded variable capacitor, highly selective. I loved the challenge of mastering the technology, and using it to do difficult things.

Eventually, when I was about 16, I became WN2ITX. At this point, I had upgraded my receiver and added a Heathkit transmitter. Back in the day, Novices had to operate using crystals to control the transmitter frequency. I bought surplus crystals at hamfests and grinded them with a little abrasive cleaner on a sheet of glass to alter the frequency. The more crystals you had, the more frequencies you could operate on. And for me, making the technology work for me was as important as making the contact. And of course, there were antennas. I had a dipole for 80 and 40 meters (that also worked on 15), squeezed onto a house lot that was too small.

Within a year, I had upgraded to General and then Advanced, and added a secondhand SSB transceiver, an old RTTY machine, a 100 W 2-meter FM base station, and a 40 – 10 meter vertical. A tri-band beam was a distant dream (I’ve never had one), but in 1969, sunspots were at their peak, and 10 meters was hot. I was a member of a local club and enjoyed participating in ARRL Field Day and public service events.

But then I went to college and, after that, into the military. Between frequent rounds of packing, moving, and unpacking, along with the difficulty of setting up antennas, and the demands of building my career, ham radio took a back seat. But when I could, I got on the air with equipment that I either built, modified, or repaired.

In the 50 or so years since then, I have not lost the kick I get from using technology that I have mastered. To me, this is the essence of my ham radio hobby. But I also recognize that RCA doesn’t make receiving tubes anymore, and not every ham had the same experience as I did. I believe that every ham has a story, and we need to embrace everyone’s unique story to move ARRL and Amateur Radio into the future. I welcome your comments at wb2itx@arrl.org.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Howard E Michel WB2ITX". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.