

K9YA Telegraph

Robert F. Heytow Memorial Radio Club

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The Simpsons *Cultural Icons or Crypto-Hams?*

Philip Cala-Lazar, K9PL

Since their debut on the Fox network in 1989, the impact upon the American psyche fostered by the family Simpson has been impressive. The series was at first denounced by self-appointed custodians of “good taste” for Bart Simpson’s outrageous sass-

ing a Vail-type, Correspondent, telegraph key. Unfortunately, the other end of the telegraph line terminates in a museum where the telegraph display featuring a Samuel Morse mannequin is no help at all.

Homer, serving as a missionary in “Microatia, 12,000 miles away,” maintains contact with his family via Ham Radio. We see him chatting with Marge, 59 signals—never mind they’re both using rig-mounted whip antennas. Must have been great propagation that day.

ing of school principal Seymour Skinner with catchphrases like, “Don’t have a cow, man,” “Eat my shorts” and “Down with homework.” The Simpsons: father, Homer; mother, Marge, son, Bart; and daughters Lisa and Maggie are now embraced for their askew, but loving portrayal of a middle-class, middle-American family.

In the nearly sixteen years of its run, The Simpsons has earned much praise for its consistently high-quality, multi-layered story structure. A real plus for Hams viewing the series is that Amateur Radio features as one of many recurring themes on this longest running of animated television series.

Here are some conspicuous, and a couple of arcane, Simpsons’ references to radio communications:

Homer’s sister-in-law, Selma, is a Ham. In one episode we hear, issuing from her transceiver’s speaker, a DX station state in thickly accented English, “I have a Ham radio.”

One of Bart’s schoolmates is a character named “Ham,” his introduction? “I am called ‘Ham’ since I enjoy Ham radio.”

Stranded by an avalanche in a cabin in the mountains, Homer’s boss, Mr. Burns, signals for help via telegraph

“Don’t have a cow, man.”

In a Halloween parody of Stephen King’s horror novel, *The Shining*, Marge attempts to get help from Police Chief Clancy Wiggums on a CB radio.

A handie-talkie figures in a hoax when Bart places it at the bottom of an abandoned well to scam townsfolk into believing “Little Timmy’s down the well.”

Apu Nahasapeemepetilon, local convenience store operator, and Calcutta, India native, accepts an offer to place his recently born octuplets on public view (ala the Dionne quintuplets) in a specially built nursery at the local zoo. When he enters their nursery we see a group of oversize

CONTINUED - SIMPSONS ON [PAGE 7](#)

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Inside This Issue...

<i>The Simpsons</i>	Page 1
<i>A Bug with a Tale</i>	Page 2
<i>Morse Code on the Cheap...</i>	Page 4
<i>Cartoon Contest Winner</i>	Page 6

A Bug with a Tale

Harcourt "Bud" Quick, W8BHK



I'm sure many of you have old telegraph keys and bugs you have collected over the years and would love to know their history if only they could speak. Questions like: Did it play a part in history? Was it used on a ship, an airplane, or, maybe, a railroad telegraph circuit? Perhaps used during wartime by some brave military operator?

It is too bad that most of the stories will never be told and are forever lost. Anytime I purchase a key or bug I ask if the seller has any background documentation, but in most cases the answer is,

"No."

A few years ago, Rick, WA8YLZ, called and told me of a friend by the name of Ed Benjamin, who was a WW II Merchant Marine radio operator who had an old Vibroplex bug he used during the war and wanted to go to a good home. Rick knew I liked CW and collected keys from time to time when I happened across one, so Rick gave me Ed's e-mail address. I sent him a note stating I was interested in his bug, if he cared to sell it. This is where the real story begins when Ed returned my e-mail.

E-Mail from Ed Benjamin, February 24, 2000

Hello Bud,

Well, the bug isn't exactly for sale. I carried it almost around the world with me during WW II on three Liberty ships and one Victory ship. I was chief operator. Travels took me to the Middle East, England, the Normandy Invasion, a couple of north Russia trips (Murmansk run), a trip as far as Okinawa at war's end and a couple of early post-war trips to Europe before I retired to finish the rest of my college and then find a job.

Naturally, I'm attached to that old bug; price isn't the object. As I said, it's not really for sale. I want the old bug in the hands of someone who will really use it and appreciate it. You come, sort of half-way recommended by Rick, and that's a good start. I'm a soft touch, but I need just a little convincing that you're the right guy for

the bug. After all, that's the bug that once sent out the first notice to the world that there was a new hurricane in the Bermuda area, and we were in the middle of it. Bermuda wouldn't believe the XXX urgent message I'd sent them, I had to repeat it for them. Storm reporting has come a long way since then! There were no satellites looking down on us then.

I understand that new keys like the old Vibroplex sell for \$200 and up (Wow!). Tell me a bit more, Bud, about you, your family, other hobbies. Oh yes, about condition. I'd have to say, "excellent" and ready to go to work as soon as it's adjusted to your touch. I haven't had it hooked up to any sort of a practice oscillator for decades, but I did give it a bath two days ago and was happy with its much brighter appearance. It comes complete with friction tape wrapping of the left side of the base. I put that on, I think, during my Pacific (tropics) trip, when there would be sweat everywhere. Seems to me there was just enough voltage on the keying circuit that it was uncomfortable without the tape. Darned if I'll take it off, it's a bit of history. Now if you wind up with it, I wouldn't dare hold you to that.

"...most of the stories will never be told..."

Sure don't know how I ever got along without e-mail. Beats spending money on postage! If you ever get to Grand Rapids, give me a call, I'd be happy to have you drop in.

Cordially,

Ed Benjamin,
The WW II Merchant Marine
Radio Operator

I was beginning to think that maybe I wasn't good enough for this wonderful old bug and all the places it had been. I just hoped Ed thought I would be worthy to own his piece of history and could do it honor.

Needless to say, I gave Ed my life story and if he decided to sell his old Vibroplex to me I wanted as much background info as he could remember. His next e-mail made me jump with joy!

E-Mail From Ed Benjamin, March 28, 2000

Good morning , Bud

Congratulations! It's good to hear that the old bug is

Ed Benjamin's Bug with Friction Tape Still in Place



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really going to be put to work! It's good to know that it's really in good hands.

My wartime career started with the SS Ignatius Donnelly. It was built by Kaiser in Portland. I even still have a launching pass for her, though I didn't get to Portland in time for the big event. I even missed her first move, except for her trial run which took place before I came aboard.

Her first move was from Portland, down the Willamette to its junction with the Columbia, then upstream to Vancouver, Washington for loading. Instead of going with the ship, the skipper asked me to drive his car to Vancouver for him. Funny, I arrived at the dock with the car, but no ship! Waited. Waited some more. Finally, someone found me and brought the word that the ship was hard aground. It hadn't quite made the turn from the Willamette into the Columbia! They wanted me on board so they'd have communications with shore. So I got a special "yacht" trip to my ship. Didn't even get to put anything on the air that time, though.

You should have seen the tugboat that was working to pull us loose! Believe it, or not, it was a sternwheeler! I was really impressed by its beauty. Every bit as pretty as the Delta Queen! It took a couple days to get us free and finally upstream to Vancouver to load.

The Donnelly was named after the first fatality of the Revolutionary War, a free black man, Ignatius Donnelly. I made three trips on her, first, around the world via Tasmania, Australia, the Red Sea, and discharged cargo at Alexandria, Egypt, after which we became part of a westbound convoy through the Mediterranean, then via Gibraltar, across the Atlantic to New York City; quite a trip! Second trip took us with a load of 6,000 TONS of TNT across the Atlantic, through the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, to the Persian Gulf, up the Euphrates River to Khorramshah, Iran where we off-loaded our cargo for rail shipment north into Russia. Return trip, same route, during which our convoy was attacked by a submarine in the Mediterranean (on my 21st birthday!). Third trip on the Donnelly took us to England in the spring of 1944.

We wound up in Tilbury (on the east coast), where, after unloading, a crew of carpenters came on board and proceeded to equip us as a troop carrier! We'd been chartered by the British Ministry of War Transport to carry troops for the coming invasion!

That kept us busy during the summer of 1944! As radio operator, I attended the convoy conference on June 6, where I picked up the communications equipment we'd be using all summer for the invasion shuttle. It was a modified car radio, complete with 6-volt car battery! They changed the coils so that it must have operated somewhere around 2 or 3 Mhz. Once underway on

the Thames, they gave us a radio test to be sure that everything worked and got exactly NOTHING out of my receiver. Test after test. NOTHING. The escort ship came right alongside us, totally exasperated! Finally, I found the signal! It was hundreds of kHz off from where it was supposed to be! Our car radio had been totally miscalibrated!

Whew! We saw it all from a "grandstand seat" as we shuttled load after load: British, Free Poles (we loved them) and finally, a load of Canadians—that was almost like old home week.

After that trip, I signed off and took a couple weeks vacation back home. Next ship was the William Tyler Page. I've forgotten who she was named after. We had a wonderful crew on her, and needed a good gang for the two trips we took to northern Russia, the infamous Murmansk Run! First trip, it was over six weeks without seeing the sun. We arrived in Murmansk on December 7, 1944—quite an anniversary!

Our second trip took us to Molotovsk, the actual seaport for Archangel, which is located too far upriver for seagoing freighters to reach. That trip we had daylight almost 24 hours a day. The highlight of that trip was a train ride to Archangel on a passenger train pulled by a black and brass, high-stacked, wood burning locomotive! Every ten to 15 miles we had to stop to take on another load of wood! In Archangel, among other things, we rode the northern-most trolley line in the world to the end of the line to visit a Russian church. We couldn't get in. It was obviously forbidden to let anyone in the church unless the government OK'd it.

My third Liberty ship was one best forgotten, and darned if I can remember her name now! She was a "southern" ship, operated by Lykes Brothers out of Houston, Texas. After another break, for fishing, at home and it was back to New York City, where the union found a Victory ship, loaded and anchored in the Hudson waiting for me!

The SS Attleboro, named after the city in Massachusetts, headed through the Panama Canal, across the Pacific via Eniwetok to Okinawa, Japan. From Eniwetok to Okinawa, we'd been running just a day or two behind one of the worst typhoons of the century. When we finally got there, we found them unable to handle unloading



Ed Benjamin's Bug at
ARS W8BHK

*"...always have a
place of honor in
my Ham shack..."*



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CONTINUED BUG TALE ON PAGE 7

Morse Code on the Cheap, Not Chirp

David Flake, N5RLJ



David Flake, N5RLJ

I love fishing the White River. Specifically, I love fishing the White River just below Bull Shoals Lake dam at Bull Shoals State Park near Lake View, in northern Arkansas. The park offers excellent camping facilities, and the White River, one of our nation's best trout streams, is a fly fisher's paradise. The Red River near Heber Springs, Arkansas, is also a premier trout stream. After all, it was in the Red where the world record brown trout, over 40 pounds,

was taken in 1992. But the White has a special appeal to me as it has Bull Shoals State Park on its banks.

And, as the Human Resources Director for the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism, I can get all the free camping I can stomach. Twenty-eight of Arkansas's 51 state parks offer camping. It's one of the perks of being employed by the agency.

I began fly fishing about the same time I became interested in Ham Radio. My first real operating experience as a budding Ham was during the 1990 Field Day event. My friend and elmer, Paul Wynne, AF5M, encouraged me to pound out several Novice band CW contacts. I was addicted after that. My fist hasn't gotten much better since then, but I was addicted nonetheless.

It wouldn't take much for me to hook all these experiences together and start on camping/fishing excursions with Ham gear in tow. Now, once I reach a campsite, I throw a simple dipole or delta loop up into the trees and prepare to operate Field Day style when the mood strikes me. This is typically after a long day of fishing and recreation in the park, just as I settle in after a nice open-air dinner.

On one such weekend excursion, in early evening with the cool breeze caressing the banks of the White, I sat back

tucked away in my campsite and tuned around 20-meters for a few contacts. I had brought along my Vibroplex EK-1 Brass Racer to use in case I wanted to work some CW. I set it out within easy reach should I have decided to switch from sideband to CW. I spent the remaining hours of the evening on the radio making a few sideband contacts here and there, then turned in for the night.

Early the following morning has me waist deep in the river for a few more good casts. By mid-morning I know I need to go in and start my packing for the trek back home to North Little Rock, three hours away. Once packed, I headed out of the park and started the drive home. I'm usually pretty good about packing and stowing my gear, but apparently something was amiss that day. About 12 miles down Highway 178 it hits me—I left my Vibroplex behind! I stopped to check my gear. Sure enough, the Vibroplex is missing. I returned to the campsite to find the EK-1 exactly where I had placed it the night before.

Relieved to have retrieved it, but frustrated with the lost driving time, I thought to myself, "I wish I had some cheaper gear that would not upset me if it were lost, left behind or stolen."

You know, I'm a firm believer in the old adage, "What the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve." In other words, once we put an idea into our head our mind

*"Sure enough,
the Vibroplex
is missing."*



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goes to work achieving it. It wasn't long before I started trying to come up with a disposable telegraph key. I read articles here and there about telegraph keys fashioned from microprocessors, discarded PC mouse units, aluminum can tabs and PC game joysticks. I think I recall someone even coming up with some sort of slipshod device made from popsicle sticks and aluminum foil!

One afternoon, I was enjoying a Snapple drink and playing with the bottle cap. As it turns out, these safety caps were designed to pop in the middle after opening the drink. The center is flexible. It struck me that it had a good feel to it and might make a good straight key. Now, I will be the first to say my technical prowess is on the level of a third-grader, but the more I thought about it, the closer I got to a workable design. I was able to make this little cheapo straight key out of common items you normally would have in your junk drawer such as wire terminals, brass screws, speaker cable, film containers or even throw-away items like a bottle cap off your Snapple. The end result is the N5RLJ "Pop Top" key. It's quite an uncomplicated design—one wire connected to the pop top cap, one wire connected to a brass screw held in place by a film container cap. The action of the top just closes the loop when you press down.

The N5RLJ "Pop Top" key is a simple yet responsive straight key that can be used with practically any HF rig for CW. It gets its name from the most obvious piece, a bottle cap off a Snapple or similar drink. These caps have a unique play suitable for CW purposes. I can send about 10-13 wpm on my Pop Top key. They are small, very light weight and inexpensive. The idea of course was to make something that could be used for field day or QRP or while camping or backpacking that would not be a big deal to lose or leave behind.

"Building" the key is a fun, inexpensive and easy project for any Ham. I had fun doing it, and thought others might also like to do it, so I put a few kits together and gave them to a couple of Ham buddies to complete. They enjoyed it and encouraged me to sell them at Hamfests. So, I put another 30 of these kits together and took them to a couple of Hamfests where the kit was bought as a novelty. I have seven kits left right now, and have listed a few for sale on eBay.

I found the "Pop Top" key to be great for use on Field Day, on Straight Key Night, while backpacking, camping,

mobile, or doing QRP work. It only takes one finger to operate, so there is little, if any, fatigue. I hold mine down between my thumb and middle finger and use my first finger to send dits and dahs.

In preparing the kits, I pre-drilled the holes so the only tools needed are a small soldering iron, standard solder, scissors, needle-nose pliers and a wire stripper. The kit comes with all parts except two—you only need to supply the wire and a phono plug to fit your rig. It can be assembled in as little as 20 to 30 minutes. There is only one small soldering joint to make (one conductor to the pop top), and it doesn't matter if it is made sloppily. There is a small step-by-step instruction sheet included. All parts are easily obtainable items (pop tops, film caps, tap screws, machine screws and nuts, wire terminals, speaker wire, etc.), so if you mess something up you will likely be able to find a replacement part in your junk drawer at home.



Pop Top Key

*"It only takes
one finger to
operate..."*

I've used my "Pop Top" key with both a Kenwood TS-50S and a Kenwood TS-830S, barefoot, with no problems whatsoever. However, I would not use this with any significant power, and, as with using any amateur radio equipment, you should use special caution around any items connected to an electrical source.

The real beauty of this inexpensive key is, if I leave it on the banks of the White River, I will only be out the sentimental value. Should you be interested in building your own, contact me directly to purchase a kit or look for it on Ebay! You may even hear me on the air on 17-, 20-, 30- or 40-meters in the spring and summer operating from the banks of the White River. I'm easy to spot—I'm the one with the poor fist

For more on fishing, camping, recreation and travel in Arkansas, go to www.arkansas.com. You may order a free Arkansas vacation planning kit by calling 1-800-NATURAL. Arkansas would love to have you down for a visit. ■



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Cartoon Caption Contest Winner

Tom J. Owens, WB5KHC

HAM QUIPS



"Put your pencil down, George and try to 'Head Copy.' OOPs!"

Congratulations to Tom J. Owens, WB5KHC. Tom will receive an attractive, color print of the cartoon with his caption, autographed by Dick Sylvan, W9CBT.

Honorable Mentions

"Code buddies, Dit and Dah, practice so much they let their fists go to their heads!"

Don Burman, KB9WBM

"Nice Watch."

Greg Tomerlin, K4KO

"Key for Two."

Rich Glassner, NØEAX

This was great: our thanks to all who contributed to our Cartoon Caption Contest. Watch this space for more interactive fun following a short delay as the *K9YA Telegraph* staff convalesces following fracture injuries to their funny bones, bruises from holding their sides and ringing in the ears from manic laughter.



alphabet blocks that spell out “VU OP.”

When local scientist, Professor Frink, is awarded the Nobel Prize in the “Treehouse of Horror XIV” episode, we see this sign—NØBEL—displayed at the award granting venue in Sweden.

When “Movementarian” fever grips the Simpsons’ hometown of Springfield, the following classroom discourse takes place concerning the sect’s “Leader.”

Mrs. Krabappel (Bart’s teacher): And who can tell me where thunder and lightning come from? Yes, Bart?

Bart: The Leader, ma’am.

Mrs. Krabappel: Very good, Bart! And who invented Morse code?

Bart: Oh, I should know this one. . . the. . . the Leader?

Mrs. Krabappel: Ah, correct again!

and. . .

Lisa: Dad and all these other people are obviously the product of mental conditioning.

Bart: Yeah, maybe it’ll wear off, like his interest in CB radio.

Homer: That’s a negatory, good buddy!

finally,

Homer: “We’ll search out every place a sick, twisted, solitary misfit might run to.”

Lisa: “I’ll start with Radio Shack.” ■



“The Skill of Telegraphy is an Art”

us. We sat offshore for a month, before they gave up and sent us back to Guam, where we finally unloaded our cargo. This, of course, was immediately post-war. Guam was a beautiful place to explore, though, years later, we learned there was at least one Japanese soldier still on the loose on Guam at that time!

Second trip on the Attleboro took us to Bremen, Germany, with a load of horses! Under the Marshall Plan we pitched in to help get Europe, and especially our former enemy, back on her feet. This was one of the finer steps our country has ever taken. A third trip on the Donnelly took us to Naples, Italy. What a beautiful place for a young radio operator to enjoy. I hiked all over the place, including to the top of Mount Vesuvius, all by myself!

With that trip behind, it was time to return home, pick up where I left off, and finish college.

Ed Benjamin,
The old World War II Merchant Marine
Radio Operator

P.S. Bud, You really started something when you asked for the names of my ships!

Ed, and his old Vibroplex, will always have a place of honor in my Ham shack and it’s great to be using an old bug that has seen more of the world than I can ever hope to. So, the next time you see a piece of telegraph equipment at the flea market or a Ham’s estate for sale, don’t forget to ask about the person or persons who may have used it. You might be surprised by the tale they tell! ■

Schlackertastenabend!

Adding to Michael Babineau’s, VE3WMB, article, “BUG Nite” in the November issue of the *K9YA Telegraph*, I would like to announce Semiautomatic Key Evening (German: *Schlackertastenabend*), that is sponsored by the Activity-Group CW (<http://www.agcw.de>, available in English).

It is a small, annual contest, but there is a lot of activity during that time, and only bug-users may take part. The next Semiautomatic Key Evening is February 16, 2005. It is not necessary to work a specific country because it may be difficult to work Europe on 80-meters at about 20:00 UTC from W/VE, so perhaps operators from the Americas and other parts of the world will take part as well. Contact some bug-friends on 80-meters and manager, Ulf, DK9KR, will be looking forward to your log!

73, Kai, DL1AH
Chairman of AGCW-DL



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