

K9YA Telegraph

Robert F. Heytow Memorial Radio Club

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Let Us Praise Novices

Ham Radio's Darlings

Philip Cala-Lazar, K9PL

I've read that when the Novice class license was first introduced in 1951 it was decried by some as the "beginning of the end" of Ham Radio, remembering of course that there have been and continue to be many other "beginning of the end"

The Novice bands were places where errors could be made without chastisement, and skills and protocols developed. These subbands were "nurseries" where beginners matured and had to solo after one year and later, two years. Experienced operators frequently visited these learners' reserves to provide QSOs, lend advice and nurture a new generation of Hams.

prognostications for our service. However, that forecast could not have been more off the mark as this RF boot camp quickly earned its stripes and soon became the darling of Amateur Radio.

The Novice class engendered its own contest, the Novice Roundup; spawned transmitters and receivers ("...perfect for Novice and experienced CW operators..."); magazines spun off columns, shack photographs, construction articles and features (including the classic, "Your Novice Accent"); it became the entry point to Amateur Radio for legions of Boy Scouts and other young operators; and whole books detailed the building and operation of Novice stations.

The Novice license conferred HF privileges to a hands-on generation still enamored of faraway places; the allure of vernier, D'Arsonval and bandspread; QSL samples arriving in the mail before the license; speaking in a distinctive language using special terminology and protocols; earning pride of place in a group admired for its skills and knowledge; turning piles of components and wire into instruments capable of worldwide communication; *magick* Gotham verticals; and the simple wonder of it all.

Novice Alley

Raising my right arm: I am not now, nor have I ever been, a Novice class operator. However, I have frequently in the past, and currently, plied our "Novice Alleys."

When I was first licensed these beginners' sanctuaries made great training grounds for improving my Morse mettle and earning my operational wings (see: *K9YA Telegraph*, June 2004, "Shared Traditions," pg. 1). In the mid- to late-1970s there were scads of Novices plying the subbands in search of a QSO, any QSO. By that time, Novices were no longer restricted to 75 watts and crystal control, but could use full-blown HF rigs like the rest of us.

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*"...the allure
of vernier..."*

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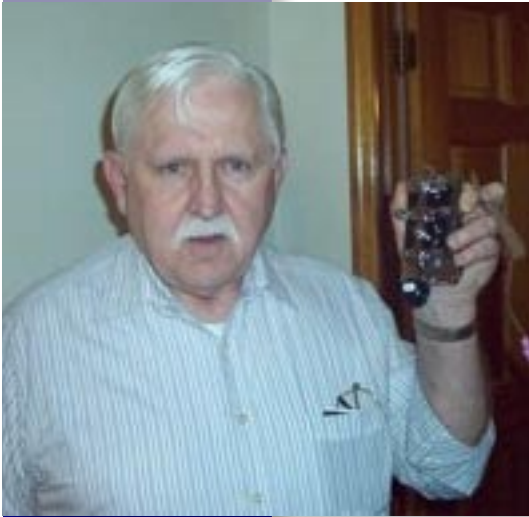


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Guide to Collecting Keys on eBay

Dennis P. Skea, KC2CCZ



Dennis, KC2CCZ,
With his Favorite Key

Collecting telegraph keys and other telegraph items is an enjoyable pastime. The search for new keys can take you to many interesting places: Hamfests, antique stores and shows, garage sales, your Aunt Sally's attic, and lately, the Internet and eBay. However, eBay is a unique situation, since photographs and written descriptions are the only information available to ascertain the condition of a key. You do not have the luxury of physically touching

and evaluating the key. You rely on the integrity of strangers, in most cases that reliance is justified, and occasionally it is not.

I have been collecting telegraph keys for over five years, and have acquired a significant number from eBay transactions. I have never been "burned" in any of my transactions, but that is because I have used common sense and a few rules. I want to share these ideas with you, so you can acquire a nice collection of keys, in relatively good condition, for a reasonable price. If you sell keys, these ideas will get you positive feedback from your customers.

On the Buying Side

Whenever you begin a hobby, you want to learn about your interest. In key collecting, the same rule applies. Before you buy your first key, go online, do a search for "telegraph keys," and read the wealth of information available on the Internet. Learn about the manufacturers, the types of keys, where they were used, the monetary values of different keys and their historical value.

Before you make your first bid, the more knowledge you have, the more correct your bid will be. I

would suggest reviewing many completed auctions, to determine an "eBay" value, and follow open auctions WITHOUT BIDDING to learn the "players." You will soon begin to recognize the eBay ID's of "the usual suspects," both buyers and sellers, and learn the habits they follow.

When you make a bid, decide on the maximum price you want to pay (checking the shipping charges) and bid that amount. Then wait till the auction is over. Don't get into any kind of bidding war. If you do, it shows that you have not determined the value of that key to you. If you consider increasing your bid, you will pay too much.

What constitutes a "good" key? There are many answers to this question. The main reason is that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," and therefore, any points I make regarding a "good" key are obviously from my perspective. But keep in mind

I have (1) read and accumulated an extensive collection of research and reference material on keys and collecting, (2) regularly correspond with an international group of key collectors, (3) have developed an understanding of the "market" and (4) developed a much better appreciation for keys over the last five years.

"What constitutes a 'good' key?"

What Determines "The Good Key"

First, you want a key that is complete, has all its parts. Obviously, your first question, if you are new to the hobby, is: "How do I know if all the parts are there?" A picture would help, so I suggest you go to www.w1tp.com. This site has plenty of pictures of keys you can use for comparison. The site owner, Tom Perera, also sells a Telegraph Collector's Guide, a pocket-size book that will become a basic reference for you.

Second, you want a key for a reasonable price. Your second question, then, is: "How do I know what constitutes a "reasonable" price?" Again, I refer to the Telegraph Collector's Guide. Each key has a



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1999 price listed in the back of the book. The Web site has an updated price list (currently for 2004) that will give you an idea of a key's value, but ONLY an idea.

Third, any key has been around for a while, and it is up to the collector to find out WHERE it has been. A key that has "history" has life. It is no longer just a key. It becomes something more, taking on a life of its own. When you can tell the story of that key, it becomes more than simply a piece of metal. It means more to you, has more value to you, than just the price. So, when you acquire a key, ask the seller where he got it, who had it before, where was it used and any other questions that strike you as useful. The writer's credo: "Who, What, Where, When, Why and How" is as good as anything to use as a guide to formulating your questions. You may not get much information, BUT unless you ask, you will not have ANY information.

Why Polishing Keys Destroys Value

Other important questions to ask the seller: has he polished the key, and if so, what methods did he use? Certain polishing methods are abrasive, and can remove identifying markings. The best method of cleaning is the "minimalist" method. Soap and warm water is the least damaging way to clean a key.

Ask the seller if he has wire-brushed the key. If he says yes, AVOID THE KEY LIKE THE PLAGUE. Any seller who takes a wire brush to a key is a butcher, not a collector. A wire-brushed key has no value.

On the Selling Side

After you have been in the hobby for a while, and have "accumulated" an interesting but eclectic group of keys, you may realize that certain of your keys are more interesting to you, so you may decide to cull your collection of those keys that now have less interest to you. There are several ways to do this. If you have developed friendships with other key collectors, use those keys as trading material with them for keys holding more interest. You could also put them on eBay for other collectors to view, and even buy.

If you go this route, though, you have a responsibility to yourself and to your customers. Your descrip-

tion has to be accurate, providing the good points of the key and any history you may have found. You should also show the imperfections, such as missing parts, scratches and the like. I would also include any cleaning procedures you utilized. REMEMBER, the minimalist approach is best, but even better is not doing anything to the key. If you did nothing to your key, the buyer has the chance to be the "minimalist." Most quality key collectors think in this way. NEVER think bringing a key back to its "new in the box" shininess is a good thing. It isn't, and it never will be. A 50-year-old key will not have the "new in the box" look, unless you are lucky enough to get one actually "new in the box." Any seller who does that has no consideration of history, no respect for the collecting community and disdain for the buyer.



A Small Part of Dennis' Key Collection

A Few Random Comments

Document your collection, and include at the minimum, the following information (if available):

Type of key, price paid, serial number, condition, markings on key, any history you may have discovered, seller's name and address, where purchased and any other comments you may wish to include. All of this can be done

on a spreadsheet, file cards, or any other reasonable recording method.

Read everything you can find about keys and key collecting. I will provide a partial listing of Internet sources, book, and other sources at the end of the article. (Note: many published materials are out of print. Check eBay, the library and used book outlets.) Two good sources of key reference books are Tom French's Artifax Books site (www.artifaxbooks.com) and Marshall Emm's Morse Express (www.morsex.com).

Display your collection. I guarantee if you stick with this for even a short time, you will accumulate a large number of keys. Display them! If you

"...the minimalist approach is best..."

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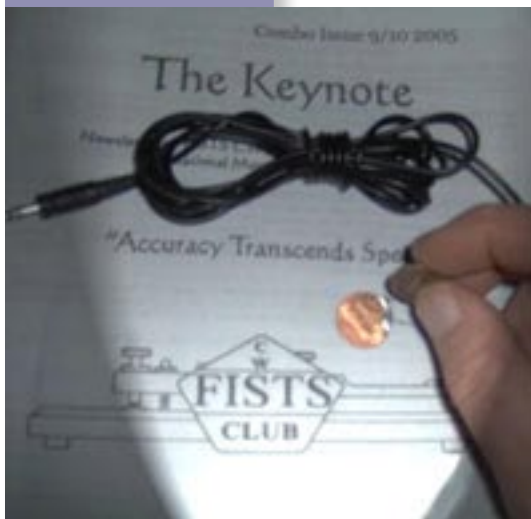


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Two Cents Worth of Fun—SKN 2006

Robert Underwood, W8YRB



SKN 2006 is here and I wanted to participate once again. I've participated in SKN (Straight Key Night) in previous years and always enjoyed the wonderful sounding old time rigs, keys and great QSOs. However, this year, I wanted to key with something totally off the wall, different you might say. This would provide for a few laughs and become a wonderful conversation piece to boot. After dinner, my wife and I begin talking about our New Year Eve nights of the

past; our children are grown now and are going out on the town for the evening while the XYL and I do the babysitting. Knowing my YL, she's going to bed soon as the grandkids are asleep and, of course, I'm going to be on the radio after that.

I begin to explain to my wife how I wanted to use something different (an explanation of SKN, with some detail was required, I admit) for sending code tonight, however, she caught onto what I was trying to come up with. I mention how a pair of spoons would be fun and would work great, but obviously that was out of the question. After thinking and talking over many different ideas I still wasn't settled on anything in particular yet. She's getting tired and I'm getting anxious to get on the air. She says to me, "Whatever you come up with, I'm sure you'll get your two cents worth in."

The light bulb came on: How about two pennies? [*ed. Don't try this with a tube transmitter!*] Taking two pennies, I polished them up a little with steel wool (for better striking contact), and found an old pair of computer headphones that had the perfect 1/8" phone plug on it for my rig—I was all set. I cut the headphone cord off and stripped back the outer jacket of insulation only to totally freak out. Wow! Those wires are tiny! Now I'm no young chicken here, and I had

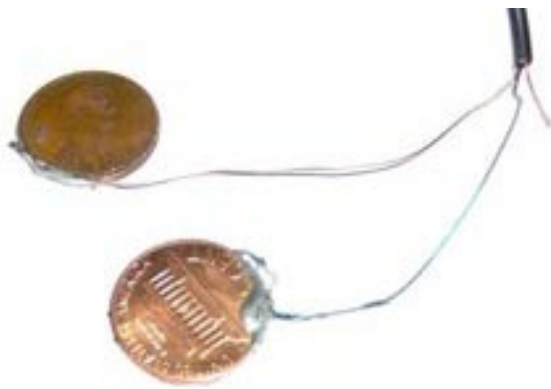
left my bifocals at the office, and I have no idea how I'm going to see well enough to get those tiny little wires onto the edge of these pennies. Well, through trial and error I finally got them connected and they worked great.

I'm really glad I did use the tiny wire, as it made keying a lot easier; it felt as though nothing was attached to the pennies as I was keying. I had a ball, this was the most interesting key I've ever used over the years, and considering it was only two cents, and a junk cable, it was also the cheapest key I've ever used over the years as well. I had some wonderful QSOs with many great friends like Paul, WA9PWP, who I've met over the years and we had a lot of laughs over the key. Many operators were surprised to hear what I was using, and most thought it the most unusual key they heard that night.

I was up till 4:30 a.m. and had a two-hour roundtable QSO with Tom, NJ8D, and Gary, W8IVJ, before finally calling it a night. That was the longest QSO I've ever had with a straight key in 35 years of being a Ham and it was great—thanks, guys. I operated SKN for approximately 10 hours straight and have to say my arms were definitely getting tired. While it was a challenge to get the key up and running, it was all worth it. Thanks to

everyone who worked me and took the time to allow me to get my two cents worth in. ■

"...the most unusual key they heard..."



Close-up of W8YRB's Two Cent Key

**Rob, W8YRB,
Demonstrates Sending
with His Two Cent Key**



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Your Shack

Greg Harris, WB9MII/WDX9KHY

I started SWLing in 1970 with a tiny GE portable that covered the AM/FM broadcast bands and from 4 to 12 MHz on shortwave all crammed into three inches of dial. I listened to the international powerhouse stations.

One Sunday afternoon I tuned into 40-meters, I didn't know it was 40-meters then, and in came W8RKW ragchewing via AM with W8HP. I was hooked. I wandered up a local street and saw a house with a 20-meter dipole over it and a car with callsign plates displaying W9GOG. I knocked on Bob's door and he explained what it took to get a Ham ticket. A 14th birthday present was a receiver that actually had a BFO. I had a blast SWLing the Ham bands and picking up my CW speed. I sent SWL cards to the Hams I heard, and as I recall, had about an 85 percent return rate. I earned my Novice ticket in 1973.

One night I worked W9JMG on 40-meter CW. "Slim" was a 100 percent CW man, top-notch A-1 op and good guy, and he became my elmer. At age 17 I enlisted in the U.S. Navy as a radio striker and

this led to a 20-year career aboard five ships and ashore twice at NPO and NDT. Retired from the USN in February 1996, and for the past 9 1/2 years have been working in Chicago's loop.

I pound brass with either a Lionel J-38 or a beautiful all-brass Signal Electric straight key with a Navy knob. Rig is either an FT-817 or an IC-703. I am a "Condo Ham" and experiment with building and using various antennas in search of the "perfect condo antenna"—I'm still looking for it.

I still SWL and AM BCB DX. Married for 21 years now, and have two daughters. One daughter is in nursing school, and the other is a first class midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy. I pound some brass every day and hope for better conditions. ■



Greg, WB9MII / WDX9KHY

Ham Quips



Why Mona Lisa is Smiling

Share Your Shack

Eyeball QSO with Hams in More than 90 Countries

Remember *Popular Electronics* and *Electronics Illustrated* magazines? Remember the photographs of shacks that were a part of every issue? How about those SWL and Novice shacks that included a few small household appliances to bloat the viewing experience?

The *K9YA Telegraph* requests descriptions and photographs of you and your shack: today's shack or yesteryear's shack—toasters, Osterizers and steam irons optional.



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don't have much room, display a few at a time and rotate the display. A file card with some descriptive information for each displayed key will add to the display. Play "museum curator," start a Web page and post your collection on the Web and you will be

surprised at the new friends you will make. Be proud of your collection; show it off, others will also appreciate what you have

Correspond with other collectors. Most quality key collectors are willing to help a rookie with information, direction and suggestions. DO NOT ask any quality collector to value a key you have or one you are contemplating purchasing. The only way to determine value is to ask yourself this question:

"What do I want to spend for this key?" Value, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, so the determination of "value" is a purely personal one. (Two possibilities I mentioned earlier: the price list in the Telegraph Key Guide and prices paid on closed eBay auctions for similar keys.)

Enjoy your collection: don't just "buy stuff" and stick it on a shelf. Acquiring the key is only the beginning of a long association between you and it. Once you have a key, find out who made it, research the manufacturer, search patent records to see if a specific patent exists, try to find out where and when the particular, or a similar, key was used, and try to find advertisements for the particular, or similar, key,

Share your collection: a way I have fun with my collection is making presentations to a local Cub Scout pack. I have an approximately 10 minute long presentation, then a "show and tell" with the kids, and I set up a couple of "Keys on Board" (which is a combination of a sounder and telegraph key on a single board, called KOBs) and let the kids hear how their names sound. I have a poster with the code on it, hand out file cards and pencils and have each kid write his first name in code so he can play with the KOBs.

Research various manufacturers of telegraph keys. One excellent place to find many of the current key manufacturers is at Marshall Emm's Morse Express. While this is a commercial site, it is also a great research resource and Marshall is always willing to respond to any questions you may have. Another source is the Sparks Telegraph Key review (<http://www.zianet.com/sparks/>). The "Spark Key Project" lists a great number of early manufacturers of spark keys.

Specialize in a certain type (or types) of keys. While this occurs later in your collecting career, it is something to consider even in the early stages. As you accumulate a collection, certain keys will appeal to you more than others. This is for no particular reason, necessarily, just a personal thing. You will be more interested in researching these keys—the more you learn, the more "expert" you will become. Check Scott Hill's site (<http://k6ix.net/J38Keys.html>) for an excellent example of specialization.

Visit key collections. This is not as hard as you may think. Many "museums" are virtual—on the Web. Check <http://www.w1tp.com>, with many links to museums on the Web. There are also several "brick and mortar" museums with key collections. One example is the Antique Wireless Association's Electronic Communication Museum (<http://www.antiquewireless.org>).

Resources:

Internet

I suggest these Internet sites as a first place to start your voyage into key collecting.

<http://www.ebay.com>

<http://www.k4tjp.net/Telegraph.html>

<http://www.faradic.net/~gsraven/>

<http://www.telegraph-office.com/>

<http://www.qsl.net/n7cfo/>

<http://www.artifaxbooks.com/>

BOOKS

The Telegraph, by Lewis Coe

Keys, Keys, Keys, by Dave Ingram, K4TWJ

(Get it for the pictures)



Part of the Vibroplex Collection

"... 'show and tell' with the kids..."



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Introduction to KEY COLLECTING,
by Tom French, W1IMO (out of print)

The Story of the Key, by Louise Ramsey Moreau,
W3WRE (out of print)

Telegraph Collector's Guide, by Tom Perera

Publications

"The Vail Correspondent" (24 issues, by Tom French)

"N7CFO Keyletter" (Newsletter format, 37 issues and growing, by Lynn Burlingame)*

CDs

"AWA Telegraph Anthology" (Artifax Books)*

"Telegraph Collector's Reference"
(Morse Express & Artifax Books)*

* There are other good CDs on these sites.

Contact

Feel free to contact me to discuss keys at:
dpskea@hotmail.com

CONTINUED - NOVICES FROM PAGE 1

Checking my old station logbooks I find that of my first 100 CW QSOs, 90 were on the 15-meter Novice subband, four on 80-meters, four on 40-meters and two on 10-meters. Those data appear a bit idiosyncratic, but I went where the QSOs were and that's where I found them. Of course, 15-meters was the easy one, a piece of cake; there were no broadcasting stations and plenty of eager Novices looking for QSOs.

The 40-Meter Obstacle Course

Forty-meters. It was a proving ground, an obstacle course and a great place to learn the techniques of pulling a weak signal out from the shadow of a megawatt DX broadcast station. Vying for the operator's attention and testing the "filter between the ears" were the wavering tones of exotic music that beat with the CW note and the distraction of brash sounding announcers speaking intriguing tongues.

At least the repeating musical chimes and national anthems coming on frequency to announce the start of BC station programming gave advance notice to QSY or QRT.

"Live long and prosper," Mr. Spock's tag line, appended to many a proto-Trekkie's 73 always brought a smile—was there a Heathkit Tricorder? Then there were the straight key "punctuated acceleration" QSOs with each exchange incrementing a word or two faster until exasperation or inability reared with a curt dismissal—"I CANT CPI U"—or disappearance.

Occasionally the Novice realm was the source for breaking news: when one of Chicago's Loop elevated trains experienced a serious derailment I first heard of it from a very concerned young op.

Good-Bye to All That

April 15, 2000, marked the beginning of the end for what had become an Amateur Radio institution; the FCC would no longer issue new Novice class licenses. So began their extinction, figures from Joe Speroni's, AHØA, Web site (<http://www.speroni.com/FCC/>) indicate that as of January 1, 2006, out of a total U.S. Ham population of 658,700, only 26,398 (4 percent) were Novices. Compare this to June of 1997 where 66,551 of 678,473 or nearly 10 percent were Novices.

Nearly every day I visit the 40- and 80-meter Novice subbands to, hopefully, do a little mentoring and confidence bolstering to fledgling CW ops. And, nearly every time I can rustle up a QSO, but, time and again, they're with experienced OTs looking to do some mentoring and bolstering of their own. The last time I worked a real, dyed-in-the-wool, Novice in a Novice subband was a few years ago; he was a WWII radio op and perfectly satisfied with the privileges he enjoyed.

Today, if the number of Web sites memorializing their Novice days means anything, it's that despite their impatience to lose the "N" or "V" designators from their callsigns, many former Novices look back on their experience fondly, if not wistfully.

More than fifty years after its inception with the class now defunct, its activity moribund and its numbers steadily dropping, the call is heard for a new introductory license class, one conferring limited HF privileges. Seems it's not such a bad idea after all. ■



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