



“The Rag Chew”

The official newsletter of the Straight Key Century Club

Volume 1 Issue 1

August, 2012

Welcome to the new SKCC newsletter! I hope this will be the first of many fine newsletters which will be coming your way quarterly. The intent of this “Rag Chew” will be a newsletter where members can tell in detail some of their great adventures in SKCC and in amateur radio in general. It will be more like a collection of short stories as we have a very fine reflector for quick and easy comments.

But to make this “rag chew” a success input is needed from you! Pictures of your projects, shack, keys, antennas, field adventures and general operating will make the “Rag Chew” more interesting. No special English or journalism skills are required for articles; that’s what “editors” are for! Get an idea in and it can be worked. Pictures can be submitted as jpg and just about any word processing or Notepad writing will work including pdf files.

As you’ll read in this issue, articles from “everywhere” are included and some very interesting stories and adventures. I am sure you have some great adventures in SKCC and amateur radio you want to share with the club. Send them along; the next issue will be coming out in early December.

73,

Ted K8AQM 1629T email: k8aqm1629t@comcast.net

“Non-electronic Manipulators”

I borrowed this title from a phrase used by Bernard F5DE, it’s great! The “non-electronic manipulators” shown here are my collection of keys and bugs. I enjoy refurbishing keys and bugs. Do I use them all? Well sort of, I have my shack set up for multiple stations

and often I have SKCC friends over and we all operate making QSOs, especially during the K3Y events! Can you name all the types of straight keys and the different bugs?
de K8AQM



BOTSWANA

A New Country for SKCC

Bob K5ZOL/A25BI 3945T



Botswana is a country of 1.8 million people that doesn't seem to have any resident hams. So, when I had the chance to join Frosty (K5LBU) on a Dxpedition to Botswana for the October 2010 CQ SSB WW DX Contest (yes I do get on SSB occasionally). Going to Africa and going on a Dxpedition were two items on my "bucket list." This trip would accomplish both and I thought it would be a good opportunity to also give some SKCC contacts from a "new one."

Getting there only takes about 34 hours of travel. Dallas, London, Johannesburg, Gaborone and then by van to Stevens Ford Game Reserve, the radio site, about 3.5 hours north of Gaborone, the capitol city

of Botswana. Much of the equipment: beams, towers, rotators, verticals, and associated items had been shipped to StevensFord over the 3 months leading up to the event. The rest, coax, connectors, amps, test equipment, and such were brought in as baggage by all 8 participants.

Arriving at 10 PM on the night of Oct 20 we went to bed immediately and the next day started erecting antennas. The 160 meter vertical got stuck in Italy and never made it, so we were limited to 80 thru 6 meters including WARC bands. We were also minus one linear and had to get by with only two Expert 1KW solid state amps. We had one 20-15-10 three element beam, one T6 log periodic, a Butternut HF2X for 80 and 40 and an R7 for all bands 80 thru 10.

On Oct 22nd with the antennas up, we left for Chobe Game Park on the Chobe River about 9 hours north. We spent 2 and ½ days in the park and on the river getting close up shots of all the animals you usually see on African Safari shows. The last day we crossed the Zambezi River into Zimbabwe to see Victoria Falls, one of the 7 wonders of the world and it surely is. The next morning, it was a 9 hour drive back to the dxpedition site and time to get on the air.

We ran 3 and some times 4 rigs mostly 24 hours a day from then until the time we had to pack up and leave. I made 25 SSB QSOs to make sure the computer logging program was working with the rig and then switched to my trusty OLD J-38 army surplus straight key I had bought in 1958 for 50 cents.

For my part, it was all cw. The bands were up and down and I hung out mostly on 20 thru 12. It was interesting to hear a lively 12 meter band and at the same time have 15 meters totally dead. 30 meters was never very good for us. For one 20 hour stretch 10 meters was hot. The SSB guys were logging 3 to 4 QSOs a minute on 10 and I couldn't operate on the same band with them so I stayed on 12.

On cw, I did not make as many SKCC contacts and I would have liked. I asked someone to post on K3UK webpage that I would listen 7 kc up from where ever I was operating to give SKCCers a frequency to call on that wasn't inundated with dx chasers but I never heard anyone there. Bert, F6HKA did get through the pile ups on several bands and he always had a good signal and a great fist. Since A25HQ was our club station, I was also able to give



Bert a second SKCC dx contact like ZL2BLQ does for us from New Zealand. I called K0LUW, Russ, on 40 meters when he signed off with a station I couldn't hear, but he never heard me. Then I called KC0RSX, Len, got a QRZ from him and then we made a SKCC QSO. He was a bit surprised to be called by a cw station from Botswana. Other SKCC QSOs were, N8DE, KE1AF, AB7KT, W9COX, AC2C, K5EWJ, W2DEC, KL7GLL, and W4TMW. It would have been easier to work more SKCC stations if the place we were staying had internet available. They did try to provide it. They ordered all of the necessary equipment and installed it per the vendor's instructions, but the vendor did not sell them a modem. So our plan to have high speed internet in the shack was thwarted.



Being on the other end of a pile up is a humbling learning experience. I didn't work as many stations as I could have. My plan was to work as many 100 watt and dipole stations as I could. So, every time I sent QRZ, I'd log the last QSO and let the cacophony die down a bit and listen for the weakest signal I could pick out. I only worked one QRP station that I know of; UA0CDV. With a RST of 239 it took lots of repeats to get him appropriately in the log. Getting folks to stand by while I worked weak stations I had picked out was a bit frustrating. US, UK, French and German stations were the most courteous. There were only two countries whose hams consistently called regardless of my plea to standby. My fellow dxpeditioners laughed at me for giving accurate signal reports. I did it anyway. In the spirit of ham radio, I felt the calling station benefited from knowing the readability and strength of their signal. I appreciated those RSTs given to me that I thought were accurate. I never sent more than 18 WPM and many times as slow as 10wpm. Regardless of what speed I sent, some stations stayed with their automated 35 wpm calls.

Most of the time I worked the US on 20 thru 12 from about 1900 local to 0300 local. We had plenty of coffee, so the only real inconvenience was all of the critters attracted to the light in the shack at night. Huge termites, 6 inch millipedes, scorpion spiders, Gabon spiders (they are frighteningly ugly and can move faster than any spider I ever saw), frogs, snakes, and anything that flys. So we had to watch our feet for creepy crawlies and swat at flying things – all the while operating.

We did lose about 24 hours of operating time. We were there at the end of the dry season and the beginning of the rainy season. The thunderstorms and rain that came through were awesome. The power was out for 18 hours the first time. Lightening hit the power distribution station on the border with South Africa to the south of us. The second time we were off for 6 hours and missed the last 2 hours of the SSB DX contest. We had to secure the station for lightening. The wind was about 70 mph but all the antennas held.

The QSL's were a generous gift from Gold Print Service-www.LZ3HI.com and started being mailed early in December 2010. We did receive a few donations from individuals and clubs, but as is usual for this kind of dx-adventure it was mostly self-funded by the participants. I am still receiving cards in May of 2012. It was good to get home and on the air from a more comfortable location. Having worked hundreds of cw stations around the world from A25BI, I can say with authority that the SKCC members are among the most professional, courteous, and patient operators in Hamdom! If it were not 30+ hours of travel one way, I'd do it again.

73 and C U on the air,

Bob K5ZOL/A25BI 3945T

The "Straight Key Century Club" or "SKCC"

Bernard DELAGE, F5DE SKCC # 6247T

It all started around mid-December, 2009 when I was reading the latest issue of "Radio-REF" (our French Amateur-Radio magazine). By consulting the classified section, which I rarely do, my attention is attracted by an advertisement for sale of a Vibroplex bug-key model "Champion", year 1976.

Being, a small collector of manipulators with four other models of this kind of key nicknamed "bug" that causes a particular manipulation after much grip, I tell myself that it must have already been sold because uncommon to find in France and having stopped manufacturing since 1979. Today, only one semi-automatic model, the "Original" is still manufactured by Vibroplex, now based in Knoxville, Tennessee and owned by Scott Robbin W4PA. (www.vibroplex.com).

A phone call to the vendor gives me a positive reply. The matter is concluded and the manipulator arrived in perfect condition at my home two days before Christmas. My wife decided this will be my present because I have been a very good boy throughout the year !

At the same time, this winter I just began to have a look at my collection of about sixty items to put some order and make an update of my displays, following the models unearthed in recent years at some amateur-radio flee-markets, or given to me at radio meetings by friends knowing not only my interest in this collection, but also my regular use "on air" of these old keys.

Having resumed my research on the Internet to better target each model, or to know its history and more accurate dating, visiting several sites gave me many further responses to all the information collected over many years.

During my visit to some of these sites, I discovered the existence of a North-American club called the SKCC, aka : "Straight-Key Century Club." (www.skccgroup.com)

My curiosity made me go to the website of this club and I discovered its goals, the main one being to meet telegraph operators who use non-electronic manipulators, that is to say straight-key, side-swiper (Cootie in the U.S.A.) or mechanical semi-automatic key (bug).

In recent years, apart from the contest activity, I gradually abandoned HF bands in favour of 50 MHz and other VHF bands. So there I found the opportunity to try my new baby with other OM adepts in using the old Morse keys, causing a renewed interest in HF.

At this time of year-end, listening frequencies recommended by the club, I am quickly discovering that there are many active OM, and from my first call, very nice QSO allowed me to improve my fist with this "Champion" model which is used in a very pleasant manner with a possibility to slow its speed more than my other bug models (Original, Blue Racer, Vibro-Mors or Speed-X).

I then decided to register for the club. Registration is free and the assigned number is "for life". Following an exchange of e-mails with the manager Jeff K9JP, I became rapidly holder of the number 6247, and January 6th I started the SKCC contacts with a minimum of exchanged information as follows : report, name, QTH, and membership number with many other members of this club. Moreover, chance is that throughout the month of January, a special call "K3Y" is allocated and used in the U.S.A. on a rotational basis by many OM in all states of the country to commemorate the fourth anniversary of SKCC. My radio station is not very powerful (50 watts into an old multiband Ground Plane antenna) but good enough to have fun in the use of different keys with friendly SKCC members.

A peculiarity of this club is an upgrade change in the membership number. Indeed, after having contacted 100 members of SKCC, it is possible to seek accession to the level "Centurion", the number is then followed by the letter C. For the pleasure I take in the game and get my number 6247C on February 24.

The next step is to contact 50 members having already achieved a level C or T, in order to claim the attainment level "Tribune", the letter T is contiguous to the membership number in place of the letter C. Once again I am pleased to find 50 of these specific numbers and on May 10, my number became

6247T.

QSOs are very often in the evening or at night (French time), the majority of active members are located in the U.S.A. but also in several other countries including France. Contacts are not simply the exchange of a quick "hello-599-good-bye", but are much more comprehensive and signal reports are given based on reality, it is not unusual to share the 329, 439 or other reports of this kind. Many stations are doing their traffic on QRP, which sometimes causes very difficult contacts to achieve (at the time of this writing we are at the beginning of solar cycle 24), but providing additional satisfaction to the using of our old manipulators.

Andy K3UK prepared a page dedicated to SKCC (www.obriensweb.com/sked/), where many members meet to have exchanges of information or to take "skeds" on any particular band, thereby causing increased friendly exchanges. Morse code is next to the Internet for the greatest happiness of the participants !

Every second Sunday of each month, from 00:00 h to 23:59 h (UTC), a day of activity occurs (WES for "Week-End Sprint"). This is not really a competition, but is nevertheless has a ranking published on the website of SKCC, with commentaries and photos of participants (110 to 200 per month in 2010).

Just one year ago, on May 2011, UK member Thomas, M0TRN launched a new two-hour monthly sprint called SKSE (Straight Key Sprint Europe). It is modelled on the ordinary SKS but with adjustments to make it more accessible to other European members.

As in many other clubs, an interesting award program exists, and the website is quite well supplied with information on the subject. A "Yahoo-group" and a forum are allowing many exchanges possibilities.

Members who wish may register on a list designed to inform CW beginners or novices their availability to help them gain confidence on the occasion of a QSO at the speed desired by those beginners. These available OM that are called "Elmer" in the USA (a sort of mentor) can be reached by email to make appointments for some QSO which can last more than half an hour and eventually assimilate a great improvement on the air.

The suggested frequencies (at / - 10 kHz) to find members of SKCC are :

1820, 3530, 3550, 7055, 7120, 10120, 14050, 18080, 21050, 24910, 28050, 50090 kHz and the frequency 7114 kHz is used in the U.S.A. for slow or very slow traffic (QRS) with CW beginners (Elmer frequency).

Finally, I would say that this very captivating activity does not prevent the use of modern CW tools, as well as the phone or other modes of transmission, and I do not deny, especially in contests !



Three types of keys used almost daily for

my "SKCC" activity, left to right :a French side-swiper model "Maniflex" from "Dyna", ca 1955, a German "Junker" WW-II straight-key, and the 1976 model "Champion" from Vibroplex, three very different ways to generate Morse code, three styles of fist handling well recognizable by the correspondents.

73 to all readers and I hope to meet you one day on the nearby SKCC frequencies !



Dits and Dat...

...W1PNS, Pete, "was" thinking about a Sable Island DXpedition but then read about the "sharks" there.
...KA8VIT, Bill was QRV straight key from the USS Cod for Museum Ships Event.
...Albert, W9COX runs the QRS straight key traffic net, check it out on the SKCC homepage.
..."Blue Magic" is great for restoring shine to straight keys, bugs and side swipers.
...KO6R, Peter would rather have a new Icom than go to Kauai.
...N4EES, Jim is closing in on his QRP DXCC. Way cool!
..."Dits and Dat" was KK7YJ, Jim's idea. Good one too!
...WD9DWE, Dennis works them the hard way, broken coax so only 25' of coax, no antenna! WOW!
...Home Depot has free samples of flooring suitable for mounting keys.
...You have got to check out this bug built by G3YUH, the Coffee bug (may be the first bug ever made)
http://www.ronayling.dsl.pipex.com/keys9/key204/_key204.html
...watch out getting anything with "deet" on your radio gear that has plastic, "bad things" happen! de
VE8RT Ron.
...Garth, KF7ATL enjoyed FD operating with an "experienced" Elmer.
...Terry, K5TEB had a "Narnia" experience on Field Day! And that my friends, is a great experience!
...Did you know Dick, K2RFP lives on "Radio Avenue"...seriously!
...Wes, W1LIC says N1BUG also lives in Maine but doesn't use a "bug"....but northern ME does have
lots of bugs!
...Art, KA5DWI is known as the "Professional Novice" ...aka, the dipole guru!
...Dave, K9AAA is now the SKCC QSL bureau manager, info on the SKCC homepage.
...Wow! Urb, W2DEC is now W1UL! Nice call Urb. Urb was W2DEC since 1950.
...Steve, N8CPA says, "Now Urb, anyone you get in your log will be UL listed. " Cool!
..."Armor All" is great for cleaning up rig cases and restores a finish.

SKSE, Strange Keys

The June SKSE event was really interesting. The idea of using different keys and very strange keys sure caught the interest of PA1FOX Alex. Checkout Alex's You Tube video below for a live QSO of Alex using his "hose clamps key" and side-swiper!

<http://youtu.be/lHysr5N3bYE>

Of course several thoughts popped into my mind after viewing this interesting key:

- Is there a "right finger" clamp; is there a "left finger" clamp?
- Did his finger/thumb go numb after a time?
- Could this be done equally as well with the "opposite hand? (An idea for another SKS?)
- Did you notice Alex kept his thumb stationary and "tapped" with his finger?
- How did he get his paddle to work as a side-swiper?
- How many Qs did Alex make?

Alex appeared to have a great time using his "hose clamp key" and paddle-side-swiper.

Clearly the SKSE "Keys, Keys, Keys" was enjoyed by many and there are sure to be some great pictures and stories out there for this event. If you have some photos and stories for this event please send them along for further publication.

Food for thought:

If you had the two clamps wired in parallel and a board with a nail (or something suitable) wired to the other terminal as a post, could you make a side-swiper(Cootie)?



A Ham's Visit to the US Open Golf Tournament – June 2012

There I was, surrounded by some of the best male golfers on the planet, in a beautiful setting at the Olympic Club, overlooking the Pacific Ocean in San Francisco. Marveling at the postage-stamp size of the greens, touching the fairways which are smoother than the greens at my home club, watching the lithe young men effortlessly sweep that frustratingly small round object hundreds of yards off the tee, looking up at the temporary structures which house the TV cameras which get those great shots; this had to be a golfer's heaven.

But wait, that structure has guy wires. Off I go for a good five minutes: inspecting the thick steel wires anchored to ground stakes and tied off with some brand-new, heavy duty hardware. My mind moved from wishing I had the effortless sweep off the tee I had just witnessed to wishing I had a tower that tall and with those sturdy guy wires.

Back to following a group of pros; down the fairway we go, outside the ropes with the rest of the gallery. People everywhere, looking intently at the pros, wondering what are they thinking, wearing? What club will he use from this lie? What is the caddy doing to help the pro? Oops, got to walk around a camouflaged crane. Looking up – Wow! There are antennas at the top of that extending crane arm. Now that would be nice to have to get our antennas up over the trees at our Field Day site.... a tug on my sleeve gets me back moving down the fairway.

The pros all landed their golf balls rather close to the hole, and with such smooth greens, even the undulations prove pretty easy, well, for them at least. The pros take fewer putts all together than I sometimes take just to hole out. A slight shake of my head in wonderment, and off we go to the next tee box.

The crowd is directed around a big enclosure, being the US Open, the course vistas are protected from such ugliness as groupings of portable toilets and the like. But what's that sound? I just glance over, still walking towards the next tee box. Suddenly I stop -- this enclosure has a big trailer in it, and there are some really quiet generators. What kind of generators are they? I need to get one for my emergency power setup. Peering through the mesh camouflage, I can see it is a Honda generator, but not which model. Disappointed, I move along to the next tee.

On the shuttle bus ride back to our car, I have plenty of time to reflect on my day at the US Open, since the bus driver misses the exit off the freeway to take us back to Candlestick Park where we've all parked. A few more lessons, I'm thinking, and I'll make my occasional slice into an intentional draw. Maybe I'll have fewer putts per round too. But oh, I sure wish I'd seen what model of generator that was...

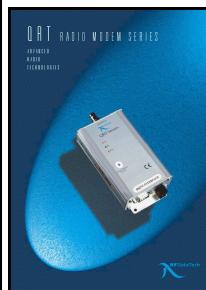
Donna Hinshaw

AG6V

SKCC #6933T, CWops #911, YLRL

ARRL Life Member

*(post note; Donna has listed a chance for SKCC members
to purchase one of those "quiet" Honda generators, contact her..ed)*



Do Amateurs Work Here?

Got this neat ad from John, VK4TJ. It is an ad for a data radio from a UK company. There are several models available in the series known as "QRT". Somehow the idea of a radio needed for data collection in business just doesn't instill a lot of confidence when it is in the "QRT" series. John was wondering if perhaps some amateurs might be working for this company and this may be an attempt at "ham" humor?

Simple(st) CW Accessory de John, VK4TJ

I am no stranger to CW audio filters. I have played with op amp active filters, both homebrew and store-bought, but found that I did not like the hiss that they introduced, nor their limited dynamic range. Or maybe I just used cheap op amps :-)

I had seen W3NQN's rather elegant LC audio filters, but 88 mH toroids are a bit thin on the landscape here in VK, so my only exposure to passive filters was my venerable Canadian Aviation Electronics FL-30-M radio range filter (probably similar in function to the US AN/ARA-9). It worked well, but 600 Ohm audio systems are a bit passé these days, and the loss through it often left me starved for millivolts at the cans.

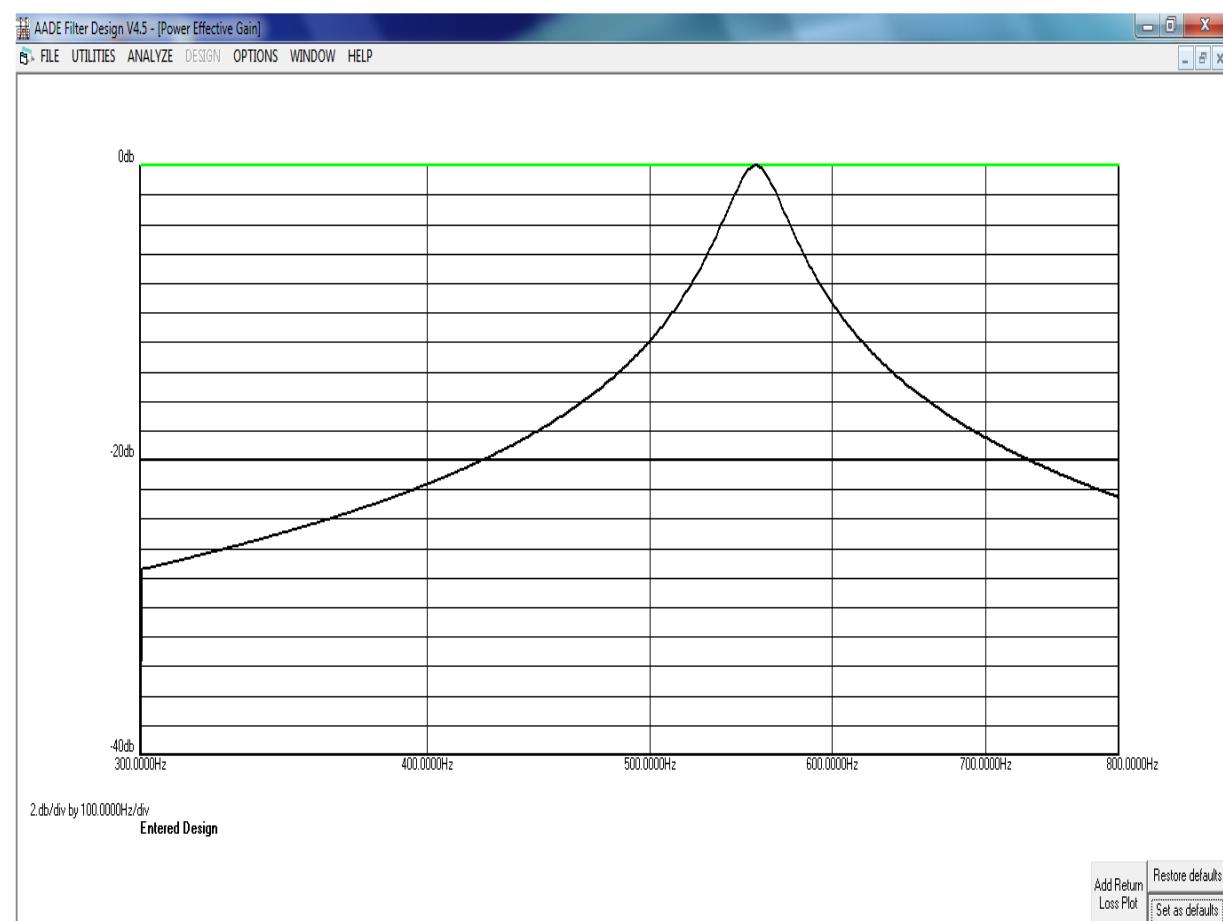
I had often wondered how well a simple series tuned resonant circuit would work in the headphone leads. I even got as far as ordering up a handful of Toko 82 mH inductors (p/n 10RB823K) after a bit of number crunching with an online resonance calculator revealed that they would resonate around 560 Hz, pretty close to my Icom's default CW offset of 600 Hz with stock-standard 1 uF capacitors. Before the inductors even arrived, I was blessed with a nearly-complete set of PDF'd back issues of Ham Radio magazine. An article in the October, 1970 issue by Eugene, W4NVK, pretty much confirmed what I had already suspected - a single tuned circuit would yield a distinctly worthwhile enhancement in signal-to-noise ratio.

My Scottish heritage compels me to find honest employment for the free headphones that airlines used to hand out. While "comfy" to wear, especially over glasses, their extended bass and treble response is a distinct liability in radio world. Hacking the cable to insert my experimental filter also allowed me to mono-ize the stereo earpieces, and ensure correct phasing at the same time - bonus!

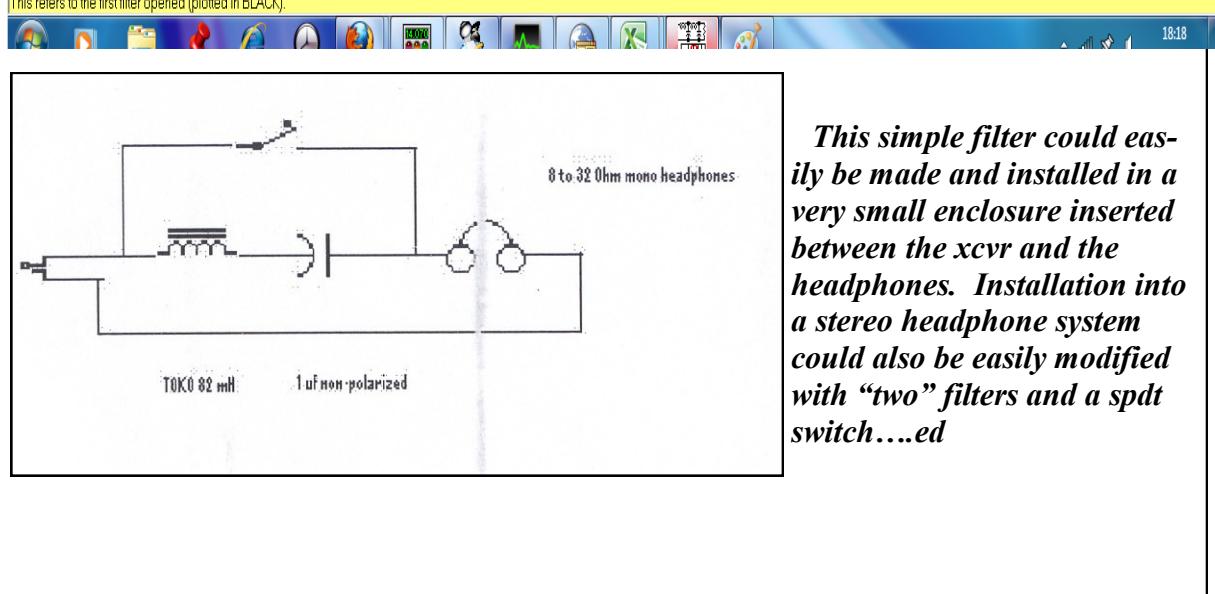
After cobbling it together "floating lead" fashion, I trialled it on a rather lackluster 20 mtr band and was STUNNED at the difference it made! Even after my ICOM FL-101 250 Hz stock CW filter, it provided an immediately noticeable improvement in signal-to-noise ratio, estimated at 8 dB or so. Out here at the edge of the planet, that is just about exactly how many of my skeds "crash-n-burn" by.

I should clarify - it was never my intent to conjure up a "brick wall" razor-sharp CW filter. That is the job of my 250 Hz crystal filter in the IF. Quite the opposite, in fact. We all know that an excessively tight audio filter cannot/will not pass the square waves that on-off CW comprises. "Ringing" is the usual term applied to the unpleasant, mushy sounding audio that results. I'd like to be able to copy those of you that reply to me off-frequency, provided that you are strong enough, of course. I'd even like to be able to copy SSB through my filter if need be. I would, however, like to attenuate the unpleasant high frequency hiss that attends when hi-fi headphones are employed with our lo-fi amateur transceivers. Attenuating the unneeded low frequency response is kind of an added bonus. Finding that a significant improvement in signal-to-noise ratio also results in these days of less-than-stellar solar conditions makes this simple add-on a deal that you simply cannot refuse :-).

John included a graph showing the headphone response and a basic circuit diagram both shown on the next page...ed



When the cursor is inside the area bounded by the graph, a red vertical bar follows the cursor. Clicking the left mouse button will replace the title of the plots window with the exact frequency and attenuation, impedance or phase at the cursor position. Clicking the right button will redraw the plot from the last left button frequency to the right button frequency. This refers to the first filter opened (plotted in BLACK).



With a Little Help From Your Friends...

SKCC WAS or WAS-C totals got a few holes in them? Short a few C's" for the next level of SKCC "DXC"? Have you considered enlisting the help of a DX cluster? "But I can't spend 24x7 in front of my screen", you say. You don't have to! The clever Swedes at SK6AW have come to your rescue, with a free service that will send you off an email (or SMS, or...) when any of your "most wanted" show up on the bands:

- 1) Navigate to <http://www.sk6aw.net/cluster/>
- 2) Establish an account. It's free! Slightly counter-intuitively, account set-up is under the "Sign In" tab. Be sure to supply an email address.
- 3) When the robot sends you an email to say you now exist, log in again and go to "Options". Scroll to nearly the bottom.
- 4) In the blank to the right of "Hilight/Watch, Push & Notification", enter your "wish list" call signs. A simple space between each one is all you need for separators. There does not appear to be any limit - I have about 50 in there right now, and I'm certainly not drowning in spam (yet!).
- 5) Set "Send E-Mail Notifications" to "Yes".
- 6) Set "pushme.to minimum interval" to 30 minutes or 1 hour - whatever you think is appropriate.
- 7) Click save.

You should start receiving emails almost right away. I have not worked out how to filter out 6 mtr spots (I wish! :-), phone or PSK spots yet, but even with that bit of spam, the traffic is quite manageable, even with 50 or so "most wanted".

Even if the spots are for times of day when you are QZZzzz, or have no path to that part of the world, at least you are learning the habits of your prey...

SK6AW works particularly well for SKCC Dxpeditions like Ted's annual junkets, where skeds are impractical or selfish. When you are sweating the last few hours of a Dxpedition, like I found myself doing with K9EL's recent activation of St. Martin, you might be tempted to sneak back to SK6AW to set your "pushme.to" to 15 minutes :-)

Have fun!

73,
John VK4TJ



From the Editor...

Well, the first issue of "The Rag Chew" is history. I can't say there will always be ten pages but there will be no more than ten pages. I want to thank all of the contributors of articles and encourage all of you to "add" to the success of the newsletter. It's not the reflector, it's a place for "more"; articles about projects, QSOs, adventures and much more. I know there are many fine operators out there with many great stories and projects that just need to be told, give it a try! Again you don't have to be an English or journalism major to write, we can work with anything. Thanks again to all of you for your support and help. Finally, as Lyle Amundson, K0LFV has said, "Amateur radio is a contact sport. Get on the air and make a contact!"

73, Ted K8AQM 1629T