



Episode 94 - Ellen White - W1YL

Funded in honor of Ellen White, W1YL, by Elwood Downey, WB0OEW

Welcome to the QSO Today Podcast. I'm Eric Guth, 4Z1UG, your host. If we could apply the term grand dame to amateur radio, then the grand dame of amateur radio must be Ellen White, W1YL.

Ellen began her amateur radio career as a love story just as World War 2 ended. Her ham radio career spans over 70 years and today, as Ellen enters her 90s, she is still on active ham operating on 40 meter CW. I am so grateful that Ellen is a listener to the QSO Today Podcast and is my QSO Today.

The audio for the first few minutes is a little muffled. However, between us, Ellen and I fixed the problem. The audio quality for the rest of the interview is excellent.

W1YL, this is Eric, 4Z1UG. Are you there Ellen?

Ellen W1YL:

QSO, good morning and happy Samuel Finlay Breese Morse's 225th birthday.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Ellen, thanks so much for joining me on the QSO Today Podcast. I am so grateful that you've agreed to come on. Can we start at the very beginning of your ham radio story? When and how did it start for you?

Ellen W1YL:

It's rare to be able to pinpoint a moment in time, but I can with this one. On Christmas night of 1942, the height of World War 2, I went roller skating with cousins in New York City. This was a popular winter pastime during that era. A young sailor was persistent in his attention. He was the then, Bob White, W6QEZ on shore leave before he continued his LCI voyage through the Panama Canal, across the Pacific, and entered his South Pacific theater of operations.

He insisted to see me home to ensure a future visit. We saw each other regularly on the night before his sailing and we talked about Morse Code and ham radio. It didn't leave

much of an impression on me at that time, a 16-year-old, but that was the true beginning of ham radio for me.

Eric 4Z1UG:

What happened after that?

Ellen W1YL:

We corresponded for 3 years. I think it's interesting and a bit of history lost during my last year in high school in New York City. Students were required to take what was called a war course to enable graduates to have a certain skills should the war continue. Now one of the offerings was Morse Code. It must have been destiny after all. because I wound up several years later just after the war ended becoming licensed. That was my real beginning. The first hint I'd ever heard of anything called ham radio.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I think you ended up with more than a license, isn't that right?

Ellen W1YL:

I ended up with a lifetime, a marriage, and a world, and a hobby, and a career. I couldn't even envision it at the time. 70 wonderful years for me thanks to ham radio.

Eric 4Z1UG:

After the war, Bob came back. What happened?

Ellen W1YL:

He was discharged in early October of 1945. As a result, this was a very poor time by the way. No one had any money and thus we eloped. I received the ARRL License Manual and Terman's Principles of Engineering.

Of course I was a willing young person and no one ever told me this was hard, so I just did it.

Eric 4Z1UG:

What was the wedding gift that Bob gave you?

Ellen W1YL:

This is the truth. The ARRL License Manual and Terman's Principles of Engineering. I didn't know whether you read them front to back or back to front. I was that green.

Eric 4Z1UG:

How did you read them?

Ellen W1YL:

I read them every day and every night. It was extremely important to Bob that I become involved in ham radio. I was young, impressionable and no one told me this was hard, so I just did it. Within a year, I became a Class B ham taking my exam in front of an FCC examiner in New York City and that had a funny side light.

In those days, you went down to the FCC office. In this case, it was in New York City. The examiner was right there, one of the FCC radio engineers. You copied and sent Morse Code on a straight key. You physically drew diagrams for your Class B exam. If I recall, I was the only one taking the exam at the time and Bob was allowed in the room with me.

The FCC examiner started to mark down one of my schematics, and he practically had to have a fist fight with Bob because Bob proved he was wrong and I was right with my schematic. I can't imagine something like that happening today.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Nowadays we do everything by multiple choice, so having to hand draw a schematic ... Do you remember what that schematic was? Was it an oscillator or something like that?

Ellen W1YL:

I can't remember. We're going back close to 70 years and there's a lot I don't remember.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I asked you before we started that one of the questions I had because here you are with a new license, did Bob ever recall to you, or the hams that you met after the war, just how World War 2 impacted ham radio? What happened to ham radio operators during World War 2 and their amateur radio service?

Ellen W1YL:

Amateur radio licenses the Station license.... At the time, it's interesting. There were 2 phases of the licensing. There was the station license and there was the operator license. You could retain the operator license, but all transmission, all was suspended during World War 2. Literally there was no operable ham radio during World War 2, but those hams who had been licensed just prior to had extraordinary skills as operators and so many of them wound up in the service as CW operators. That too happened with Bob.

Eric 4Z1UG:

The amateur radio equipment, do you recall was it packed away or taken off the air?
Obviously it was taken off the air.

Ellen W1YL:

That I don't really recall because, again, my real time exposure to ham radio in a physical sense happened just after the war, just after we were married. During the war, everything was in suspension and I have to assume either the hams packed it away or it sat on their operating desk until some future hoped for time came back.

Eric 4Z1UG:

You got your Class B ham radio license. That was in 1946. What was your call sign?

Ellen W1YL:

I was W2RBU. I had that until I became a KH6, and then a W6, and then a W1, and a strange combination of events.

Eric 4Z1UG:

During those times, unlike now, if you lived in a specific geographical region, you had to have a ham radio license that matched the region.

Ellen W1YL:

That was the way it worked and now it's really hard to tell without the real absolute requirements to sign the portable indicator. You can work a W4 who's not only in Florida, but maybe in California or Minnesota. I still take pride when I operate to have the portable indicator reveal the area I'm transmitting from. This is the old-time ham in me.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I think it's a courtesy. It's really hard nowadays especially now with the vanity licenses that when you hear a W6, a 1 by 2 call or something like this, you don't know that you're not talking to somebody who was licensed recently within a year. It's hard to tell now whether you're talking to an old-timer or somebody new.

Ellen W1YL:

Let alone where they're transmitting from.

Eric 4Z1UG:

That's right.

Ellen W1YL:

A W4 who's in California. Again, I take pride in indicating by my signing the area the signal is emanating from. I don't know if it's old-fashioned of me, but I think it's helpful on the other end if the guy is using a rotary. At least you know where to turn the beam.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Do you remember your first rig?

Ellen W1YL:

Yes. At that time, it was the tradition in ham radio to build your first rig. There were a number of reasons. No one had any money. There was almost no commercial equipment on the market. Bob insisted I had a metal chassis and I remember the first time using a hole punch. I think it was 6L6 to an HY75 and it required neutralization. I remember we neutralized. Bob did most of this showing me how. It was neutralized with a penny. I wish I had that piece of equipment now, a little CW rig for 40 meters.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I hear that, that it was neutralized with a penny. What does that mean?

Ellen W1YL:

It's really complex to explain, but a lot of self-oscillation took place and you had to neutralize to cure that. It is so archaic in terms of today's terminology that I can barely express it. It just amazed me, the things I had to do in every phase of that operation not knowing very much what I was doing. I have a vivid recollection of running a quarter inch drill through my thumb and I still bear the scars of that.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Like every good ham operator, we have blood in every project, don't you think?

Ellen W1YL:

I think so, blood and tears.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Blood and tears, exactly. You had a 6L6 transmitter that you built, neutralized with a penny. I'm going to do some research and see if I can put that on the show notes page exactly what that means. What kind of receiver were you using then?

Ellen W1YL:

I don't really recall. One of the earlier receivers I remember is an RME and we had HRO. That was from a dream, so many of those early decades was to have Collins gear. That was the hallmark of having arrived. Again, in the early years following World War 2, it was very

little commercial equipment and it was a lean time financially for almost everyone, and there wasn't the money to purchase something.

I do remember an early, a very early VFO we purchased. These are the days you did crystal operation and a VFO was unheard of. I remember it was called Millen variarm. It had a little vertical lever that you adjusted frequency with, but it also adjusted frequency every time you walked across the floor.

Eric 4Z1UG:
It wasn't very stable.

Ellen W1YL:
That's putting it kindly, Eric.

Eric 4Z1UG:
You had some licensed upgrades after that and perhaps some rig upgrades within the next couple of years.

Ellen W1YL:
Yes. I think in our early years before we left California for New England, we got our first dream rig. It was a Collins 32V2. It was a hundred watt transmitter built in an impossible configuration to handle in size and weight. You could break your back lifting it and it was just, I presume, about 100 watts.

I remember clearly it was the 32V2 and it was just the start of problems with TVI. It generated a lot of TVI and I remember a whole summer Bob spent screening the entire inside of the cabinet of this 32V2. On the top of it was a little hole you depressed to lift up the lid and ... I think this is funny. He soldered a penny into that hole to fully seal up this cabinet.

Eric 4Z1UG:
The copper penny had a lot of uses for ham radio-

Ellen W1YL:
Really.

Eric 4Z1UG:
... in those days. You tell a story in the biography that you sent me, that you did a stint in Hawaii after getting the first-class radio telephone. I guess both you and Bob got the first-class radio telephone, the second-class radio telegraphy license, isn't that right?

Ellen W1YL:

That's right. Actually we got those while we were still in the U.S. When we decided to try for a year in Hawaii, Bob was working for the CAA which was the predecessor of the FAA. I was listening to a broadcast radio one day in beautiful Hawaii and I heard a desperate plea that the station KPOA was looking for someone who held a first-class radio telephone. Those were rare to find, let alone in Hawaii. I thought, why not?

I had my first phone. I applied and I think the interesting thing ... The reason really why I was accepted for the job was not just because of the first phone, but because the chief engineer discovered that I was a Class A ham radio licensee and ham radio operators were held in very high regard those days. Technically, hams had the ability to be innovative and troubleshoot.

I got the job and that was a year of history, that it was a great deal of fun, a great learning opportunity for me.

Eric 4Z1UG:

What was your biggest challenge in that job?

Ellen W1YL:

I guess figuring out what I was doing. Everything was a challenge because I had the license, but I did not really know how to do this. It was a learn on the job which included operating the board for audio stations, being an audio engineer, running my first radio program, being a disc jockey, going on remotes from the station and ...

Even at that time it's interesting. The cruise ship, the Lurline, would come to Hawaii regularly and it was a big deal for some of our station personnel to go down and meet the incoming passengers and record them. Going to Hawaii was such a really big deal and then this recording would be brought back to me in my spare time. I would cut disks for souvenirs for these people and a far cry from what we do today with our handheld iPhones and other means that ... A very interesting year.

Eric 4Z1UG:

At that time, Hawaii wasn't yet a state, right? It was a territory, so it made it even more exotic.

Ellen W1YL:

It was a big deal destination. Hawaii was pretty wonderful and we would have stayed there probably our entire lives except the way you were rewarded instead of a decent salary. You were repaid in sunshine which I expect holds true today.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I wanted to touch on the role of women in technical professions. It's my understanding that during World War 2, women, due to the lack of men state side, carried on in jobs and professions that were usually jobs held by men. I remember as a kid reading about Rosie the Riveter.

I think there is a documentary about women pilots that would deliver airplanes for the Air Force from manufacturers in California. Do you think that's a post-war job market open to women in technical fields that were originally closed to women as a result of this experience with women in the workforce during World War 2?

Ellen W1YL:

Absolutely. Women proved they could do just about every job if given the opportunity. It was much less anti woman bias following the war, but it was a rough period to go through because there was still innate hostility toward women in technical professions. As you say, Rosie the Riveter opened the door on that.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Even at the league some years later, didn't you have some challenges?

Ellen W1YL:

My first technical article in QST so many years ago, and what I had to go through to have it published because of the anathema to women in ham radio even at the league headquarters' staff. In retrospect, I look back now. Almost everyone up at the league holds a call. They're not hams as perhaps you and I know it, but they have calls.

In my day, I was the first licensed woman on the staff and it was a hard thing for some of them to swallow during that period of time.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Even after World War 2 and with the opening roles of women, those roles were still being challenged. Obviously, I guess, the feminist revolution didn't strike until the late 60s.

Ellen W1YL:

Oh, really. One thing, they were slow to get going and ... It was an effort, but I was given the opportunity to prove what I could do and I proved it, and I got over it.

Eric 4Z1UG:

How did ham radio, now that you have these commercial licenses and stuff, how did it play a part in the choices that you made for maybe your extended education and later your career?

Ellen W1YL:

Looking back, I did not really realize that ham radio was a shoehorn into a new world for me. Because of it, I was able to do things and apply for things that I would never have dreamed of. In fact, just before I left for Hawaii awaiting the time to rejoin Bob there, I returned to New York City to spend some time with my family and needed to work as everyone did in those times.

I think it's amazing looking back. I wound up working for the IRE, the Institute of Radio Engineers, the predecessor of the current IEEE. Because I was a licensed ham and a commercially licensed person, I was able to do technical editing for the then Clint DeSoto, W1CBD. Little did I know, he was editor of the famous 200 meters and down, the definitive work verily ham radio.

I did not really grasp the privilege of meeting meant for me, and meeting the league president at the time, George Bailey, W2KH. All of this would have a great bearing on my future, my future of 25 years at league headquarters.

Eric 4Z1UG:

All right, we'll talk about that. Just kind of stay in the time line, how long did you work there at the IRE?

Ellen W1YL:

It was just 3 or 4 months until I joined Bob, but it was the acceptance that I was technically capable of doing that and there was some interesting, a sign of the times jealousy from the other women on the staff doing different jobs at IRE because I was technically qualified to do what was then considered a man's job.

Eric 4Z1UG:

You went back to Hawaii and joined Bob and you worked as a broadcast engineer. Did you do any other schooling after that?

Ellen W1YL:

Yes. After the year and decision to return to the mainland and trying to figure out how to structure our lives together, we became very involved in league volunteer activities. Bob

took one look at me, insisted ... I'll never forget that he said, "You're smart. You should go to college."

Now as a young girl growing up in New York in a very, very financially depressed time, there was no thought of going to college. What you did when you grew up is you went to work, earn money to help the family. I did enter San Diego State College and studied math and physics, and really was involved in a major way with ham radio throughout.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Did you get a degree from San Diego State in electronics?

Ellen W1YL:

No. I did not complete the degree because, again, ham radio entered the picture. I vividly remember one day sitting and reading QST. It had just arrived and ... You couldn't wait to get your hands on the new issue of QST in the smaller format that we had for years. It was a large box and it was a job opportunity. The Communications Department of the league was headed by Ed Handy, W1BDI, who to all of us was Mr. Ham Radio. They were advertising for 2 hams to fill 2 positions in the Communications Department.

If ever there was a call meant just for us, this was it. We applied and within several months we were accepted, and made a great QSY to the Northeast, to Connecticut at the league at that time, 38 LaSalle Road in West Hartford, Connecticut.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Wow. The 2 of you are now at the league. What did you do at the league? What year was this by the way?

Ellen W1YL:

This was 1952. I think September was beautiful time to be introduced to New England. Wonderful weather, wonderful scenery, and no hint of the Winters to come.

Eric 4Z1UG:

That's how it usually starts. Here you are. You and your husband are at the league. What did you do there?

Ellen W1YL:

After a number of years of doing just about everything at the league relating to operating, I took over the job of contest management. Now this meant really hands on with every aspect from opening the envelopes with incoming logs, so it was incoming logs to typing

the final awards. I checked the logs. I prepared the results for QST, did the physical page layouts, suggested cartoon topics for the inimitable cartoonist Gil, W1CJD.

I really enjoyed this immensely as well as chasing DX, always my preferred mode of CW earning DXCC and WAS. I was honored to be invited to join FOC, the First Class CW Operator's Club. This UK organization became a highlight of my life. Meanwhile, Bob became Mr. DXCC and the work he did added the immeasurable prestige to that award.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I think at that time you were entering a sun spot cycle too, right, that made working DX quite amazing. There was a period of growth, I think, in amateur radio then. Do you recall how that went?

Ellen W1YL:

I remember vividly that part of the sun spot cycle. It seemed you put a wet shoe string out the window and you could work everything. It was an astounding, exciting period. I was really hooked on CW DXing and could hardly want to get up in the morning, get some time on the air before I went to work, and go in with my little list of what I worked. On our lunch hours, all the hams there would talk about DX and it was very, very exciting.

On my recent return to operating, it astounds me how poor current conditions are.

Eric 4Z1UG:

We could talk about that for just a second. You're right now operating remotely, isn't that right? Do you want to talk about, a little bit, what kind of station you're operating now?

Ellen W1YL:

An amazing turn of events. I am one of the founders and an active member of the Florida Contest Group, a wonderful club started by our son, K4OJ. About six months ago, a group of ten got together and realized how really much I missed ham radio being an active part of it. Unbeknownst to me, they managed to acquire an Elecraft K30 plus all of the hardware I needed to get me on remote.

Remember by now, I had to downsize our huge station, big antenna farm, after both Bob, W1CW, and our son, K4OJ, became "silent keys" within a 2-year period downsizing this enormous station. It took quite a bit of doing, but in a certain time of life this is a physicality involvement. I could not do this anymore and finally got it all pruned down, and made a dramatic move to an apartment close to the things I needed on a daily basis, but mightily missed ham radio.

My club members realized this and set me up with a remote. I get up in the morning. I like early morning CW DXing and I sit there in the guest room with my remote station set up. In an absolute amazement realizing where this all started for me. Here I am almost at a state of the art configuration with a PC in front of me and the K3, and my key. I am remote controlling the W7RN and superstation in Nevada. Now who could have dreamed this?

Eric 4Z1UG:

What kind of user experience is that Ellen? How does it feel? Does it feel like the real thing?

Ellen W1YL:

It does after a while. The strangest thing and amuses me, the biggest problem I have is getting the mindset that I am in Nevada, 3 hours west of me. I'm having to learn what the bands sound like in the western part of our country compared to the eastern part. No matter what, as long as I can get on, I'm fine. I do find the W7RN station is truly a super station in the mountains of Nevada near Reno, big antennas, stack 40 meter beams, and working Asians is what we call a piece of cake. I am having the time of my life.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Now you're operating W1YL portable 7?

Ellen W1YL:

Absolutely.

Eric 4Z1UG:

When you're operating your remote station, you're actually using your own call sign with your portable 7 designator.

Ellen W1YL:

I've had quite a discussion with this with several members of the club who think it's rather redundant to sign the portable 7, but I've always felt far from this, this is the old-fashioned part of my history in ham radio that the numeral indicated where you were transmitting from, so I always ... Stroke 7 ends my call.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Now we haven't talked about the Elecraft K0 on this program before, but that essentially is the front panel from a K3, right, that plugs into the internet for all intent purposes and gives you control of a K3 that's in the W7RN station.

Ellen W1YL:

Exactly. This is true remote and with the details all set-up by my group of 10, I actually can look at the station, can physically turn the beams, monitor different factors, and here I am near Tampa, Florida managing a remote in the mountains of Nevada, with a great path to Asia on 40 in the morning.

Eric 4Z1UG:

That's your favorite band is to operate 40 CW in the morning?

Ellen W1YL:

In the morning and I love 20 in the days of good propagation. Right now, 40 is great for me and I'm having a lot of fun exploring 30 meters which is about my alternate use. All the bands are great. I am just thrilled to be back on the air again. It's just wonderful for me.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I think it's amazing that the technology has created an opportunity for someone who's downsizing as you did and moving into an apartment, but still have the ability to do what you love.

Ellen W1YL:

It has enormous implications for the aging hams among us as well as those with physical difficulties. It just amazing to me. I am in a modest size apartment. I have my radio room and I am just having a wonderful time. What this can mean for others who are in physically reduced conditions and cannot maintain an antenna farm with towers, and the weight, and everything involved, it's truly ... I feel I have my toe into the opening of a new dimension in ham radio.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Now I've never spoken to anyone that's operating remotely, you know, a station that's probably shared with other operators. Do you have a sense that ... Do you have to schedule a time to operate in order to be on the air, or do you just go and you see if it's being used or not being used? How does that work over there at W7RN?

Ellen W1YL:

No. Actually having the 3-hour time difference is a great advantage. I've always, always, my whole ham radio, loved early morning CW. Now early morning CW, let's say, is a 6, 7 o'clock eastern time, but that's 3 in the morning out west. That's a great time for all the guys out there who like to operate to be asleep, so there's almost no conflict. In the group I'm in, if you are planning on some net operation or a scheduled contest, we have a site to get together to list when we would like use of the station.

To me, they've made a great courteous effort to allow me into the group and I am just so grateful. I found, if I get my CW fix as I call it in the morning, half a dozen QSOs, run some JAs, work my VK friends, my FOC buddies, I am a very happy person.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I have people that tell me all the time that the reason they like CW is because it's put them in a different state of mind. They spend their days talking on the phone or working, or whatever. When they come home, to operate CW is like Zen for them.

Ellen W1YL:

I think that is a very apt description, the Zen approach. A high speed CW is very comfortable for me and it makes me feel good. I am bilingual in a sense. My second language is Morse Code.

Eric 4Z1UG:

How fast do you operate?

Ellen W1YL:

Depending on the other operator conditions. I am comfortable at 40 or more. I'm not copying CW. It's sort of an automatic thing that takes place when you've done it long enough and are proficient. It's a very comfortable situation for me.

When my nefarious group of 10 were working on getting me set-up, one of them, my mentor could not understand why I wasn't anxious to get on the phone. I have not the slightest desire to get on the phone and yet as you've been able to tell today, talking is not difficult for me or with me. In fact, sometimes it's hard to shut me up once I get going.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Can I ask you? You just mentioned that you have a mentor. How important have mentors in ham radio been for you?

Ellen W1YL:

I have had the utmost mentor of all when Bob was alive. He helped encourage me, instructed me, and guided me, as did my son, who turned out to be marvelously proficient. Yet right now at this time in my life I'm going to be 90 this year, Eric. I do need help in some aspects and the physicality of moving equipment, setting things up, is just difficult.

Yet, I think, thanks to ham radio, I am rather technically able to handle entertainment devices, to hook-up different things that other women or men my age are fearful of. I

really thank ham radio for all of this, not being afraid to try something, but to try something because I may succeed. Again, if I don't try, I've already failed. What's to lose?

Eric 4Z1UG:

Can we go back a little bit? You mentioned earlier the First Class CW Operator's Club. From the information that you sent to me, you were inducted into the First Class CW Operator's Club 50 years ago. Can you talk a little bit about what that club is and why it was so important to you?

Ellen W1YL:

It was a mystery to me 50 years ago. I was still at league headquarters receiving a letter inviting me to join the group. I had been nominated. Up until that point, I had never consciously heard of FOC and it turned out this was a group limited to 500 hands world-wide, a UK group. You had to have been chosen by a number of members who had worked fairly frequently on the CW bands and could comment on not only your CW ability, but your ability to multiband, to ragchew, and be friendly, and to have a good command of Morse Code.

I was truly honored and I can't believe this is now 50 years ago. It has become fantastically well-known throughout the CW world, still limited to 500 active members, and I am delighted, again, to be active multi band, and to meet members of my extended family. FOC has always been an honor, and I am truly honored.

Eric 4Z1UG:

The club is still active?

Ellen W1YL:

Very active. Perhaps more so than it has ever been.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Is it still limited to 500 members world-wide?

Ellen W1YL:

It still is and you have to ... To be on an active status, you have to be active on the bands. For a period of time, I had to become an inactive member when I was no longer able to get on. I am joyful again being an active member, being multi band, and working all these great CW operators any chance I can get.

Eric 4Z1UG:

The way that we became connected is that you subscribed to the QSO Today Podcast and I happened to notice your call sign when I was replying to your subscription. W1YL is an amazing call sign. I'm sure it's great on CW as well. You were responding to an interview that I did with the new CEO of the ARRL, NY2RF. Could you go back a little bit?

One of the things that you sent to me was that you were responsible for hiring the previous CEO. Could you talk a little bit about that experience? That was in the 60s, I think, wasn't it?

Ellen W1YL:

Oh, my. Yeah, many years ago. During that period of time, I was the contest manager at league headquarters really doing everything, in the meantime, financially. This, again, was before computerization of everything and I did everything almost single handedly.

During the summer months, I was allowed to hire 2, or 3, or 5 college hams on break who were themselves active hams to help with some of the mechanical procedures, log checking, and log preparation for the reports. One of the applicants was David Sumner, K1ZND. Dave at that time, I remarked to several people, this kid, should he wish, can someday become general manager of the league. He has everything going for him. What I said did come true, did it not?

Eric 4Z1UG:

I think you said you might have changed his life. I think he ended up spending 35 years at the league until his recent retirement.

Ellen W1YL:

He spent over 40 years at the league and just retired within the last month, K1ZZ. This little kid now has gray hair and retired from the league. That gives me some clue to the number of years that has gone by. He's a special young man, very talented, very able on CW, very thoughtful man writing anything, and really a true asset to ham radio overall.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Since I wrote a piece wishing him farewell in my last message to QSO Today's subscribers, I received some replies about the league itself asking me why I was a supporter of the league when there are so many hams who aren't members of the league and who perhaps have made a choice not to be a member of the league. Can you perhaps explain why you think it's important for American hams to be members of the American Radio Relay League?

Ellen W1YL:

In numbers, you have a show of strength. We have an organization; we own the organization representing ham radio with our government. We can affect change, we can help where we're going, and ... All the years I remember, there are always people that are against any organization. The trick is to find out what is it they are mad about instead of generally don't like it. Is there a specific grievance and if so, to pursue that to find a solution.

All the years I can remember, there are always people that are anti in establishment of some or the other. We have the organization. With the organization we have strength. We can provide the programs that our hams love, the contest operation which is immensely popular, the DXCC, anything you can imagine that hams like to do. By being a member, we support this.

I would, again, like to address anyone with a gripe. What is the problem? It's like peeling back layers of an onion to get to the center. What is the problem? What can we do about it to solve it?

Eric 4Z1UG:

I think you came onboard maybe listening to podcasts when I interviewed Tom Gallagher, NY2RF, who's now the new CEO of the league. I invite everyone who hasn't heard the podcast episode 88 with Tom, to listen to it closely about what his plans are for the league. I think one of the most important things that the league is doing and I'm going a rah-rah for the league on the podcast, so forgive me anyone that might disagree with me.

I think Spectrum Defense is probably one of the most important things that the league is doing because we hold, as amateur radio operators, the most prized spectrum from D.C. to Blue Light, I think, than any other service in the world. There's a lot of folks that want that spectrum for commercial use and billions of dollars have been traded on spectrum, so I think that's probably one of the most important things at least for me that the league does.

Ellen W1YL:

Inevitably, that is the root of it all. We have to have the strength in numbers and a lot of hams don't have the perspective and haven't thought about it. We have to show use and effective use of the frequencies we have. We have to support the organization that can represent us. There's just no question about this.

Eric 4Z1UG:

If you don't like the magazine or you think that the publications are too technical or not technical enough or whatever, I think there's a huge menu of reasons to support not just

the league. I also support my local club here in Israel and I support it for the reason that it is the only organization that talks to the communication's ministry. It's very easy, I think, to forget that we need somebody in the middle be able to affect maybe not change, but protection that we wouldn't have otherwise.

Ellen W1YL:

Absolutely, there's always strength in numbers.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I agree with you. Now you left the league at some point and you moved to Florida. How did that come about?

Ellen W1YL:

Let me see. We're going back into the 1980s now. After 25 years at the league ... This included, by the way, 25 years of winters on top of a sizable hill, the problems that ensued with dealing with snow and ice, and all of that. Our son was pretty well grown at the time and we realized that we still probably had a number of good years in front of us. We had worked a quarter of century at headquarters, had, I think, given a great deal of ourselves to ham radio and the organization, and realized there may be other paths.

We looked south, I think, principally to get to a better climate. I want to mention before that something we hadn't touched, a little aspect I got into that brought me the phone work, which is almost unheard of me. I remember years ago at the league, we were approached by the Library of Congress, the Division of the Blind and Handicapped. They were desperate and looking for people to read and record monthly QST for the blind and visually handicapped.

About a dozen of phone staff were given trial interviews and I was selected. It was a mixed sword because it represented a huge segment of my personal time because this was always done outside the office, not on league time, as a volunteer project, but also very interesting to read aloud QST cover to cover each month. Anyway, that is a little beside the point of moving to Florida, which we did.

Wound up in Homestead. It was just south of Miami, really wonderful climate, and we were well inland which everyone assured us this is where to be in case of a hurricane because obviously hurricanes never came inland. That is until August 24, 1992 when Hurricane Andrew came through Florida inland with winds over 200 miles an hour and literally blew us up into the Tampa, Florida area.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Now what you mean by that is you packed up and left Homestead before the hurricane hit or ...

Ellen W1YL:

We stayed in our house as almost everyone did as the hurricane got very close. In fact, I remember clearly we were sitting on the kitchen floor with a mattress over our heads. The hurricane with winds that over house were measured at over 200 miles an hour. It came through all of the night just like they always say, "Sounds like a freight train going through."

In the morning not much was left. We were not physically hurt at all. We were psychologically damaged for quite a while. It's a very shock filled situation. All the towers were gone. Two of our vehicles were badly damaged. The roof of the house was gone. Ultimately this wound up, was a decision for us to relocate, and this time to move across the state and up a bit to the area near Tampa, Florida where our son, Jim White, the later K4OJ lived and to be closer to what remained of our family.

We survived fine, but in fact, one cover of QST several months after the hurricane showed Bob on the cover and in the midst of the havoc created by Hurricane Andrew.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I think it's so unbelievable for people that have never been in a natural disaster like that. I grew up in California and remembered the February 9, 1971 earthquake as if it happened yesterday. The damage was just incredible, unbelievable, and you have no ... there's nothing you can do about it.

Ellen W1YL:

No. It leaves you in what I consider a shock ... a state of shock. Bob and I both experienced that for quite a number of weeks. We did not realize it, but it took us several months to get past that stunned state of what we went through August 24, 1992. We did. We wound up with a great piece of land about 8 miles from where our son lived, the perfect location for my boys to get together and build up the W1CW superstation which was a major highlight of our ham radio lives.

I shall never forget the happiest time of my life was seeing Bob and our son work together and building their dream station which I got to operate.

Eric 4Z1UG:

What did that station consist of?

Ellen W1YL:

We wound up with an alpha and great many pieces of equipment, but mostly we wound up with some very big antennas, tall antennas. The tallest tower we had was about 130 foot tall. We had 2 smaller towers and during this entire operation, we fought the battle and won to allow hams to build towers on properties in the Tampa general area. We paved the way and got rid of all of these superficial arguments, and showed we were legal and safe.

It was wonderful, Like most good things that come to an end, it was a tremendous problem to downsize without W1CW and K4OJ at my side. Things got down and there is a silver lining in this whole situation. I see that when I sit down in front of my station set-up remote controlling the W7RN superstation. I often feel, Eric, that perhaps I have already gone to ham heaven.

Eric 4Z1UG:

It's quite amazing what you're doing now. One of the questions that I ask every time, because I think that it's the answer I get when I get a new subscriber and I send them a message, and I ask them what their biggest challenge in ham radio is. The biggest challenge that almost all of them write back to me is that they have no time or little time for amateur radio. During all the time that you were operating and now it's my understanding you sent me a picture that you have your 70-year pin as an amateur radio operator. I think as an ARRL member, I think that's what the pin was. How did you overcome the time management challenge for ham radio through the years?

Ellen W1YL:

Mostly with sleep deprivation. Get up early, state up late. Remember, all these years we were working full-time and we were not operating during the day. We were at work. Somehow, we managed. Bob was always a poor sleeper and spent many hours at night on 40 meters CW, and become sort of a beacon.

During that period of time, I loved 20 CW and coming home from work. While dinner was simmering on the stove, I'd be chasing DX on 20, and we made time. I think perhaps what was going for our family, that we were all in this. In the traditional family, sad to say this, the wife is still not that into ham radio and the situation I can understand is very different.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Right. There's a competing interest often times. Yours is actually a ham radio love story it sounds to me.

Ellen W1YL:

It was.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Worthy of a movie perhaps.

Ellen W1YL:

The CW wouldn't be that effective, but a wonderful life. I pinch myself. Where did these 70 years go and how am I so privileged to have the opportunity to be on the cusp of this new technology, and realizing I am having every bit as much fun working CW, working my friends as I ever did. I have concluded that half a dozen QRQ, CW QSOs are much more effective to my well-being than a bunch of vitamins.

Eric 4Z1UG:

Would you recommend CW as an operating mode for people who are getting on in years?

Ellen W1YL:

Not necessarily CW. It's whatever turns you on. I've had a lifetime of CW use. That is as easy for me as talking into a microphone, perhaps easier. Whatever you're interested in, do it, make it happen, and you will thank yourself for it. Happily for me, it has been and hopefully always will be my ability to get on the air, to feel really like a ham again. I am very grateful to so many of the group made it possible and encourage me to do this.

I know Bob would have been happy. He always used to say, "If you don't try something, you'll never know if you can do it. If you don't try it, you've already failed." I've tried it. I was quite apprehensive about my ability to phase into this new technology and to remotely operate, but it has been just wonderful. It has rather saved my life come to think of it.

Eric 4Z1UG:

I think with that, this is a great place to 73. As I expressed to you at the beginning and I'll express to you now, I am so amazingly grateful, Ellen, that you've agreed to speak with me on QSO Today. You have an amazing story and what a fantastic ham radio life you've had. You're an example, I hope to the younger people who maybe listening to the QSO Today Podcast.

With that, I want to wish you 73 and thank you so much for coming onboard.

Ellen W1YL:

Sincere 73, Eric.

Eric 4Z1UG:

That concludes this episode of QSO Today. I hope that you enjoyed this QSO with Ellen. Please be sure to check out the show notes that include links and information about the topics that we discussed. Go to www.qsotoday.com and put it in W1YL in the search box at the top of the page. If you listened to the QSO Today Podcast on a smartphone, then you can use the iTunes store or any of the podcast apps available in the Android or Apple store.

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