

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Last Friday evening, Charlie received a phone call from his long time friend Mike who asked him if he would care to go the following morning to the Fairfield Flea Market with him. Mike is a very active trader of radio related material. Charlie is not. Beside the fact that Mike's a serious Collins collector and CW DXer, he particularly enjoys finding incredible deals in which he's able to buy equipment from government auctions, estate and bankruptcy sales, etc. and then resell the items at different flea markets in his area, sometimes at a profit. He does it mostly for fun rather than income but he often realizes a tidy profit from his clever merchandising. Just a few years ago, Mike's high bid at a government auction won a pallet full of commercial Collins HF amplifiers, all sealed for shipment to Viet-Nam but never shipped or opened. These amps were 30 years old and brand new with spare tubes, etc. Each one was worth many thousands of dollars. Charlie bought one of those beauties from Mike for a fraction of its worth and uses it every day. Charlie doesn't usually buy or sell anything at flea markets but simply enjoys the social part, meeting many of his friends and maintain good relationships. At his age, Charlie really doesn't care to be tempted into buying more "good stuff" because he might need it someday. At Charlie's age, he's trying to give things away, not add any more to his collection of equipment but since Mike asked him to go, he agreed. He'll bring a few dollars along, just in case he can't resist buying something that calls out to him

The Fairfield Fair Grounds are a good solid hour ride from DX Hill. Mike picked Charlie up very early, about 4 AM. Charlie had just scanned 40 meter CW for a short while, worked one YB0 station and walked old Rufus in preparation for his pre breakfast nap. On the long drive to Fairfield, Mike explained that he heard that many pieces of an estate belonging to an old flea market friend who recently became a Silent Key was going to be offered for sale. In fact, Mike heard that the estate administrator purchased an entire double row of tables to display the collection of boat anchors, KW amp components and lots of good stuff that the fellow had collected over 30 years of flea market trading.

Charlie started imagining what some of the items might be and asked Mike if he thought there would be any military surplus gear or lots of different vintage stuff like Temco, RME, Harvey-Wells, Drake, etc. Mike shrugged his shoulders and said he had no idea but he'd surely think there would be all of that. Of course, Mike hoped to find some Collins gear which he especially loves.

They stopped at a drive through coffee place along the way for a little sustenance; bagels and coffee to hold them until noon when the grilled sausage sandwiches would be out in force. Further, Mike didn't want to waste any time once they got to the flea market. He knows from years in the game that the best deals take place in the first minutes of the event. The doors open to the public at 8 AM but being a registered dealer, Mike is permitted to come in at 6.

They pulled into the fair ground parking area just about 5:30, shortly after sunrise. With the sharp eye of an experienced flea marketer, he scanned the trucks and cars to see who was there and maneuvered his truck into a spot close to a few others that he recognized. Mike jumped out and told Charlie to stay close. He was going to check things out.

Dealers' dealing with other dealers before the opening time is a prime activity in the art of flea market dealing. Mike spoke to several fellows as they were unloading and even jumped aboard a

couple of trucks to check items not yet pushed to the tailgate. He found the fellow who was heading up the estate sale and learned that a large rented box truck full of “stuff” was due to arrive just after six. Mike learned that for reasons of fairness, he would not deal any of the items before the opening of the gate to regular buyers. The person in charge was not a ham. In fact, he was a family friend of the Silent Key who was actually an antique art broker. He brought a crew from his own brokerage business to unload the truck and set up and man the 24 tables that had been purchased for the estate offering.

Wow! Mike was astonished at how organized this was being handled. He cannot recall ever seeing a ham flea market quite like this one. It should be quite a show. Sure enough, just about 6:15, a large Ryder truck followed by a half dozen cars drove in and was directed to a coned off reserved space. Of course, they were given special consideration in light of the substantial fee they had already prepaid for 24 tables. This flea market was obviously built around this estate event.

With the precision of an experienced team, the truck driver backed in and the crew of at least 15 husky men went to work, carrying radio after box after more radios after more boxes and even a few equipment racks on dollies. Mike and Charlie stood and watched as they and others were requested to do. Mike had a small spiral notepad and was scratching notes about many pieces. Charlie just leaned against a post, smiled and watched with his arms folded across his chest. He saw some amazingly clean old beautiful rigs like a gleaming Harvey-Wells TBS-50 with its chrome trim sparkling and a showroom condition Collins 30K-1. Mike looked at Charlie with wide eyes and pointed. Then he scratched some notes. After lowering the hydraulic gate with the 30K-1, the crew loaded what looked like another 6 ft rack, a pre war 30J transmitter and lowered it down to the ground. Each of these Collins units weighs about 350 pounds and in the museum condition they were in, was easily worth several thousand dollars each. Mike just shook his head and looked at Charlie. He asked, “Oh my Gosh! Did you bring a bag of large bills, old boy?” Charlie shook his head and could easily see Mike’s wheels spinning.

They watched this gut wrenching exhibition of nostalgia until the truck was emptied out in about 30 minutes of orchestrated heavy duty material handling. These guys knew what they were doing and not being hams, had no personal interest in any of the gear. It was all just big heavy equipment to them. They all wore new clean white cotton gloves so they wouldn’t mark up anything and large items like the Collins 30J and K units were wrapped in blankets to prevent any scratches.

By 7 or so, all the estate items were being loaded onto tables and contents of boxes revealed and displayed. Mike, Charlie and many of the other dealers started walking down one side and then the other to look over every item. There were vacuum variables, multiband B&W coil sets, many Peter Dahl transformers and chokes, dozens of multi KV bridge diodes and single diodes, ceramic sockets for all sizes of tubes. Anything one would need to build just about any high power HF amp was there. The Silent Key must have been buying and trading for all the good items he found for decades and never used most of them.

As Mike and Charlie walked the aisles, they were talking to one another about this one and then that one. Between them, there was no piece of equipment that they didn’t know very well and could tell stories about. They saw a Temco RA-150, a Hammarlund Super-Pro, Central Electronics 10A and 100V, Gonset Twins, Hallicrafters S-20R, Drake 2B and dozens of other well known classic receivers and transmitters. The funniest thing was that they attracted a growing crowd following along behind them, listening to every word they were saying. It was a

scene straight out of the short story by Robert Browning, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin". Of course, the followers were flea market clients, not unwanted pests in the town but as Charlie and Mike moved from one radio to the next and wandered through their memories talking about one old radio after another, the new hams listened and learned. By the time they reached the end of one aisle and were about to turn up the other side, they noticed that they had 20 or more relatively young folks in tow.

Charlie just was amazed as he turned to face the crowd and told everyone, "Folks, there's a lot of ham radio history here. Mike and I will be glad to answer your questions and you're most welcome to follow us as we tour the tables. But, don't take too long to make up your mind to make an offer on any of these great pieces. They're all in fabulous condition from what I can see and someone will snap them up." Mike wished that Charlie wouldn't have said that. But then again, it's probably as well because Mike couldn't afford to buy everything.

While Charlie stood in the crowd at the end of the estate row of tables, Mike ran over to see the Collins 30J and 30K transmitters. The 30J was one of the finest transmitters Collins ever made and it was released just before World War II. It is a true jewel. The 30K came after the war and with its companion 310B exciter was the top transmitter any wealthy ham getting back on the air in 1945 would buy. Mike owns a Collins KW-1, a 50's vintage 6 ft tall KW, a jewel of its own, but has always wanted the 30J or K to round out the bridge years around the war. He spoke with the estate administrator and asked what an acceptable bid on either of those units would be. The gentleman saw Mike's name tag and replied quite seriously, "I'm sorry but these units cannot be purchased. The will clearly states that when the collection of these items is offered for sale at this event, I am to watch for you and be sure that if you express any interest in them, both units should be given to you." Mike was speechless! His jaw hit the ground. He couldn't talk. He had known this fellow for 20 years or more and they bought and sold many items between themselves but he didn't know him that well. He asked, "Why on earth would he do something like that? These transmitters are worth thousands of dollars." The administrator merely stated, "He knew how much you loved these units and knew that you'd give them a good home. Oh, we will deliver them to your home as well. Is someday next week OK? Please write your address and phone number in my notebook, if you don't mind."

Mike thought he was having hallucinations. Maybe that bagel he had had some wacky juice in it. Finally, he asked this estate person if he was imagining all of this. The gentleman smiled and replied, "It is our pleasure to carry out his generous wishes. The other items here are for sale of course at regular prices. You're welcome to bid on them."

He thanked the administrator profoundly and ran to find Charlie and tell him about it.

Charlie was "holding court" right where he left him, at the end of the row, explaining to one of the new hams how a three element yagi worked. Mike whispered the story into Charlie's ear. Charlie's jaw dropped. "You're not serious!" Mike nodded that he was. He then said that we have to go down this other aisle and buy some things. They did exactly that, still trailing an entourage of new hams who wanted to learn ham history.

Charlie bought a pristine straight code key for \$100. It was hand machined out of brass and mounted on a golden marble base. It was positively gorgeous and Charlie couldn't pass on it. Mike bought another Johnson Viking transmitter. He has Viking Ranger, Viking I and Viking II but this one was the CDC model, continuous tuning from 1.8 to 30 MHz. He also bought some broadcast microphones and two 500 cycle mechanical filters for a Collins 75A-4 receiver. All in all, it was a very good day. Mike said, "I'll buy lunch on the way home, Charlie." Yes indeed, it certainly was a very fine day at the Fairfield Flea Market.