

Classic Radio

Museum Exhibit Showcases Local Ohio Ham Radio History

In 2023, the Clark County (Ohio) Amateur Radio Association (CLARA), W8OG, looked for ways in which we could reach out to the community and improve recognition of our hobby. We realized that a historical view of amateur radio would provide more than a century's perspective of how radio practitioners, technology, and the community have grown together.

Building Partnerships

We looked at local institutions and established a partnership with Clark County Historical Society (CCHS; <https://heritage.center/about>), which is widely recognized by residents and maintains a regional museum called the Heritage Center. The museum is in the center of downtown Springfield, Ohio, in the restored City Hall and Marketplace building, which was built in 1890.

CLARA also wanted to partner with the Westcott House (www.westcotthouse.org), a local Frank Lloyd Wright building. Burton and Orpha Westcott had the home built in Springfield in 1908. The Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy purchased it in 2001 and restored it to its original condition over a period of 4 years under the auspices of the Westcott House Foundation. The restored building is a showplace of Wright's

architectural talent and is a big draw for visitors to the area.

Orpha Westcott introduced amateur radio to her son, John McMahon Westcott II, who held the call sign W8AGA (8AGA during that period). During the restoration, a group of amateur radio operators formed the Westcott Wireless Preservation Association to research John's ties to ham radio. John, who was alive at the time of the restoration, contributed insight and artifacts from his association with amateur radio. During the reconstruction of the Westcott House, club members found the concrete base of John Westcott's antenna. The club, and particularly Matthew Cline, KB8WFH, constructed a simulated spark-gap transmitter as a feature for the home, to accompany other period replicas. The transmitter included materials salvaged during the restoration, such as wood, glass for a capacitor, insulators for the wiring, and a large neon-light transformer for power.

Museum Exhibitions

To gauge community interest in ham radio, we conducted several combined events with the Heritage Center museum, including station demonstrations and workshops for Morse code and building crystal radios, as well as a larger exhibition in fall 2023.

We also collected donations and loans of radio equipment for the Heritage Center, which complemented objects in their collection. CLARA members helped CCHS assess the value and importance of items received previously as donations.

A key activity was to loan the Westcott House's spark-gap transmitter simulation as the centerpiece of a larger exhibit. Except for minor repairs, the device was intact after years of being in storage. Replacing the Morse key was our biggest challenge. Club members collaborated to locate and purchase a Morse key from eBay and installed it prior to the exhibit's opening.

In addition, club members came forward with period equipment, station accessories, QSL cards, awards, and certificates to contribute to the exhibit. CLARA and CCHS organized displays, illustrations, and a community timeline that showed key events — the sinking of



Matthew Cline, KB8WFH, explains the spark-gap transmitter simulator and its relationship with John Westcott, W8AGA, and the Westcott House during the exhibit's open house.



Roger Ward, KE8PHY, and Rachel Ward, KE8PHZ, try out the restored spark-gap transmitter.



One of the timeline displays.

the *Titanic*, the midwestern blizzard of 1978, and the 1974 Xenia, Ohio, tornado — linking each one to ham radio activity. For example, the Westcott family visited Europe and were scheduled to return to the US on the inaugural voyage of the *Titanic*, but postponed their trip due to illness. This slice of history added a notable local story to the exhibit.

Clark County, Ohio, is the birthplace of 4-H, a youth development organization established in 1902 by Springfield Township Rural School Superintendent A. B. Graham. As another link to local history, the exhibit recognized a local club station, W4H, which operated at the Clark County Fair in the 1990s.

The CCHS staff prepared exhibit panels covering key events, such as the invention of radio, operating on the *Titanic*, telegraphy and Morse code, disaster response, operator interactions, and a special tribute to CLARA member and former ARRL Great Lakes Section Manager Dave Coons, WT8W (SK). Earlier in the year, CCHS and CLARA recorded Dave discussing his career, shipboard operations using Morse code, association with HandiHams (<https://handiham.org>), and the Military Affiliated Radio Service

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=p47kPmuW3A0).

These recordings, created for the exhibit, were also featured in a web-based presentation by CLARA on amateur radio, sponsored by CCHS (www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZOiLg5ZQX0).

A Successful Collaboration

We opened the exhibit in October 2023, with a combined club meeting and community open house. Approximately 40 people attended, including children and parents. The spark-gap transmitter demonstration was the centerpiece of the event, with an accompanying introduction about W8AGA by KB8WFH.

One of the benefits of preparing the exhibit was the identification and correlation of these various aspects of the adoption of amateur radio. We learned that CLARA was formed by the merger of two area clubs — Western Ohio Repeater Association and Springfield Amateur Radio Association — around 1980. The historical records from these groups will be donated to CCHS because of our collaboration.

All photos provided by the author.

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