

John Stokes - A lifetime devoted to Radio and its History

John Whitely Stokes was born in Herefordshire, England in 1917. His father was a Civil Engineer who following the First World War found living conditions rather difficult in the "Old Country" and sought pasture anew in New Zealand where he had relatives already living. On immigration he found work with the Government Public Works Department in this country and lived for a time at various places including Murchison (around 1925) before being shifted to Hobsonville about 1929 where he was employed on the development of the aerodrome there. Unfortunately with the collapse of the world stock markets in 1929 and the resulting long economic depression, John's father eventually found himself out of work and moved his attention to farming at Henderson. Thus John's early education came from attendance at a variety of schools around New Zealand. In this respect he was typical of a number of New Zealanders who grew up in those difficult times. In the following paragraphs, written just before he died, John describes his early radio experiences which led to him making Radio a career.

"In 1925, radio or 'wireless' as it was then often called, was very much of a novelty and was many years away from being accepted as an everyday household appliance. Because so few of the people in Murchison had ever heard a wireless set in operation, they were naturally curious to have the experience. Their opportunity came on the occasion of a concert to be held at the Church Hall where the owner of a radio had arranged to demonstrate his pride and joy that very evening. The little hall was packed with people eagerly waiting to hear the magic sounds. A small metal trumpet had been placed on a table, but no other apparatus was in evidence. Two wires led from the loudspeaker (for this was what it was called) across the road to the owner's house opposite. But alas! no sound, loud or otherwise, issued from the loudspeaker. What a disappointment! However, in spite of the lack of results on this occasion my imagination had been fired by the idea of hearing voices and music from afar and in the course of time, radio became my chosen vocation.

It was whilst we were living at Hobsonville that I became interested in electricity and started experimenting with batteries. From then on it was but a step to radio and before long I had become the proud possessor of a crystal set, a factory built one because I did not know that it was possible for a boy of my age (I had not yet turned 15) to make one himself. Later, I found out that the necessary parts were available and that instructions appeared in magazine articles. My set had been purchased indirectly from a shop in Queen St by the name of Superadio, I say indirectly because the firm did not have any crystal sets in stock, but not wishing to lose a sale which included a pair of headphones and an aerial outfit, sent me off over the road to Johns Ltd to procure a set on their behalf. I was not asked to pay anything before setting out, so obviously the shop assistant at Superadio trusted me to come back. I remember the price of everything came to 30 shillings: 15 shillings for the set and 15 shillings for the Brandes earphones with the aerial wire and insulators thrown in.

With what excitement did I carry my newly acquired treasure down to the launch steps clutching it firmly on the trip home. It was a Saturday and I had a temporary aerial hooked up in no time. The first voice I heard was that of a sports announcer at a football match. In those days of very limited broadcasting hours, IYA was the only station on the air for most of the time and when Lewis Eady's station 1ZR was broadcasting it was too low a power to enable crystal set reception at a radius of ten miles and thus I was unable to hear it on my set. From then onwards my one ambition was to own a valve

set, though such an item was well beyond my means. At that time very few families owned a radio even a crystal set, but it was not long before my father came to realise I had gained enough knowledge of radio to construct a valve set and entrusted me with the job of making one, which I did without any assistance except from the odd magazine article I came across, but I am getting ahead of my story.

My interest in radio had all the while continued to grow and I was still dreaming of the time when I could afford to construct a valve set, so it was an exciting day indeed when my father decided that we should have a radio in the house and commissioned me to build one. Actually, I think he may have had second thoughts about my ability because a day or two later he asked me to accompany him to look at some receivers which were to be auctioned in the city. However, we came away empty handed, much to my relief as I was much more interested in making a set than in buying one. So it was that on a Saturday morning when my father had to make a weekly report to the P.W.D. office in town that we were able to combine a shopping trip with his visit. Because Dad's new job could only be reached by car he had been supplied with a Model 'A' Ford, which he also used for the weekly trips to Auckland. One day, after official business had been completed, we set off for Johns Ltd in Chancery St where, for the first time, I was able to see and actually handle radio parts. Included among the items we bought was a 2-volt accumulator, but no decision was made regarding the HT supply. I was opposed to the idea of buying H.T. batteries as I could not stand the thought of their gradually running down. On the other hand, H.T. eliminators were very expensive items, but I was eventually able to locate a British made 'Lissen' which cost five pounds ten shillings, about half the price of an American unit.

No difficulties were experienced in constructing the receiver even though having to use ordinary household tools. The only job not done at home was the drilling of the bakelite front panel, and this I was able to do one day in the metalwork class at school. Being a battery set, no metal work was involved as all the parts were just screwed on to a wooden baseboard and the job was soon completed. Then came the first try out. It worked 'first pop'. What a thrill, but that was nothing to the thrill I got from searching for distant stations. I certainly won't forget the first time I picked up KFI Los Angeles, with the announcement - "Owned and Operated by .Earle C. Anthony Incorporated, 1000 South Kope Street, Agents for Packard Motors" remaining in my ears forever after. Following that, my urge to get distant stations lessened somewhat as the thrill gradually abated.

Because initially I had no interest in anything except the distance getting ability of a set, it had not occurred to me that a radio was supposed to be a means of family entertainment and consequently I had made no provision for loudspeaker operation. The use of headphones meant that only one person at a time could listen in and Dad soon wanted to know why we couldn't have a loudspeaker. I explained that it would be necessary to add another valve to our set thus converting it from a two to a three valver. The necessary money was soon forthcoming and I was requested to obtain the needed parts. This time it meant a trip into town on the train by myself one Saturday morning and by that afternoon I had fitted in the extra parts and got the loudspeaker going. During the next few months that our set remained in operation, one of my regular duties was to carry the 2-volt accumulator into town in my schoolbag to get it recharged at a radio shop in Syrnonds St. I can still remember acid-eaten schoolbooks which resulted from the accumulator being jammed in alongside them in my bag.

By this time I had managed to save up enough to buy the parts to make up a one valve shortwave set with which I spent many happy hours sitting on the side of my bed listening in. On Sunday nights VK2ME Sydney was a regular broadcaster and was the first station I ever wrote to for a verification. I still have the card they sent me. Here again however, I never became a dyed-in-the-wool DXer and was eventually attracted to 'audio' long before the days of Hi Fi. On the farm I soon found the monotonous work was not at all to my liking but my presence there was essential as otherwise my father could not manage without my help. However he could see that I was not happy and made a selfless attempt to carry on by himself after he had allowed me to apply for a radio job in the city. It was in mid 1934 when I started work at the old-established electrical firm of Tumbull & Jones Ltd in Wellesley St. This firm had taken me on although at the time there was no opening in the radio workshop but with an understanding that I could transfer as soon as a position became available. For the previous couple of years Tumbull & Jones had been manufacturing radios under the name 'Troubador' at their Auckland branch, but the venture had apparently not been very successful as this operation was discontinued at almost the same time as I joined the firm. After the factory was closed a radio service department was set up in its place, the need for which occurred when T & J took up national distributorship of Courtenay radios manufactured by Radio Corporation in Wellington. It was to this newly created department that I transferred and where I remained.

In 1937 I sat and passed the radio servicemans examination but had to wait until 1940 before the necessary three years had elapsed and I could become registered. By this time World War II had been in existence for over a year and there was talk of conscription being introduced. For a few weeks past, a friend and I had been talking about joining the Air Force so that when a small classified advertisement appeared in the N.Z. Herald inviting applications for enlistments in the Royal New Zealand Air Force as "Radio Mechanic" I wrote in and was duly interviewed by a selection committee and provisionally accepted for training as a "Wireless and Electrical Mechanic". It was still early days and the R.N.Z.A.F. had enough applicants to enable them to pick and choose from. Before being fully accepted it was required of trainees that they had to be able to send and receive Morse code at a speed of eight words per minute, and to this end had to obtain a certificate from the District Telegraph Engineer's Office. However, shortly afterwards this requirement was abolished due to a change in Air Force trade classifications, but not before I had wasted several evenings taking lessons in Morse code from a friend. When the time came I found that I had been accepted for training as an Aircraft Electrician, the reason being that there were no positions for Radio Mechanics as very few aircraft were fitted with radio. This I found rather surprising but had no option but to continue. It was shortly after I had turned 23 that I received instructions to report to R.N.Z.A.F. Station, Harewood on July 5th, 1940."

John served five and a half years in the Air Force during which period he met up with his wife, Erna, who became his partner of a lifetime. After the war ended, John returned to his old employer Turnbull and Jones. He was eager to have his own business and started up in a shed off Balmoral Rd. about 1946 as STOKES RADIO. Business prospered and allowed a shift into more congenial premises at Balmoral in 1951. From there two further shifts within Balmoral found him operating STOKES RADIO & TV at 617 Dominion Rd where he stayed until he retired from business in 1988.

Radio developments took place at a rapid pace and John was in a good position to absorb the changes over the years, especially as they involved radio broadcasting. Receiving set design moved from the battery operated devices of the 1920s to the mains operated multivalve units of the 1930/50 era where superheterodyne circuits, all-wave operation, automatic volume control, high fidelity output, elegantly designed cabinets and many other improvements were introduced.

John became interested in the history of these changes, the people who developed them and the commercial firms which produced them for the eager public to buy. From there it was but a small step to the collection and restoration of samples of these sets. At this point he found that there were others in Auckland with similar thoughts and quite naturally informal discussions were held. These culminated in the formation of a Vintage Radio Society at a meeting in John Stokes shop in Dominion Rd. on 26th November 1979. One of the first decisions of the Society was to embrace others outside of Auckland which changed the title to the New Zealand Vintage Radio Society. This decision meant it was vitally important to issue some sort of regular newsletter and in May 1980 the first Society bulletin was published. John Stokes was the Editor and he remained so until Ian Sangster took over at the end of 1992. John remained the Founding Editor during the rest of his life.

Valves and the radios which used them, always interested him and he collected these to the point where he became a NZ authority on valves and vintage sets. This pastime took into the publishing field and his book on valves, together with his two books on the "Golden Age of Radio" have received worldwide acceptance. Interestingly, John often stated that he thought interest in vintage radio would be a temporary phase in NZ but to date there is no evidence of this.

John traveled extensively overseas in the course of his exploring the radio world and made many friends of like inclination. He corresponded widely. In 1988 John retired from business. On perusing one of his old job books, it is amusing to note that his repair charges in the days of Imperial currency ranged from five shillings and threepence to four pounds, two shillings and five pence.

On the 5th August 1999 the NZ Vintage Radio Society lost its founding member; a modest person and tireless worker who went to no end of trouble to ensure that the many questions asked of him were as correctly and faithfully answered as his excellent memory and large library allowed. His memory will live on in the text of his books.

John is succeeded by his wife and two sons.