

Keeping the past for the future Library of American Broadcasting

By Martin Hadlow

When the LAB's Curator, Chuck Howell, brought out the first box of QSLs for me to thumb through, I knew that I was just glimpsing the tip of a very big iceberg. "We've got over 30,000", he said. In a collection encompassing dozens of large boxes, all containing neatly indexed inserts, were filed over 30,000 radio reception reports, both QSL cards and verification letters. A veritable treasure trove of broadcasting history, saved thanks to the efforts of Jerry Berg and his team on the (CPRV) Committee for the Preservation of Radio Verifications



Entrance to Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland in College Park, MD.
© Martin Hadlow

I was at the Library of American Broadcasting (LAB) at the University of Maryland in College Park, MD., just a Metro ride away from downtown Washington D.C., USA. Located on the third floor of the University's Hornbake Library on the College Park campus, the Library of American Broadcasting is the preserve of the Curator, Chuck Howell, and his assistants, Reference Specialist, Michael Henry, and Resident Scholar, Douglas Gomery.



The author displays a QSL he sent when he was Manager of Radio Bougainville in Kieta in 1973 (and which he found in the CPRV collection) © Martin Hadlow

Chuck had brought CPRV box number twelve from storage for me to peruse. It was labeled Primary Collection: SWBC (Shortwave Broadcasting) A-B and he had thoughtfully selected it as it covered Australia. Sure enough, indexed under A were several QSLs from both ABC domestic shortwave stations and Radio Australia's glory days of international broadcasting. However, I also noticed that, under the Bs (and just past the Botswana file), was Bougainville (Papua New Guinea). Having been Station Manager of Radio Bougainville in Kieta in 1973, I looked forward to a nostalgic reminder of my days at the station. However, I was not prepared for the surprise of finding my own signature (and a few chatty notes) on two of the verification letters I had sent to American DXers who had reported reception of our shortwave signal. That 10KW transmitter on 3225 kHz sure had reach!

Immediately upon entering the Library of American Broadcasting, the radio and television enthusiast knows that riches are in store. In case we don't get the hint from the signage at the front entrance, we need look no further than the model RCA 44-BX microphone strategically placed in front of the reception desk. While young people today might associate this 'king of microphones' with current television 'late show' hosts, who often display an RCA 44 or RCA 77-D on their desks simply to impress their interviewees, I immediately thought back to my time as an announcer with 2XA, Wanganui, New Zealand in the late 1960's. Although more than 30 years had then passed since the RCA 44 had entered service with radio stations in the USA, the (then) New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation (NZBC) was still using the microphone and it took pride of place as the daily work-horse in 2XA's on-air studio. Seeing it again was like making the re-acquaintance of an old friend.

Library of American Broadcasting display of vintage radio equipment.

© Martin Hadlow



But the LAB is more than one or two microphones from radio's golden era of the 1930s. At the front entrance stands a colourful exhibition dedicated to the QSL card. "Last night, I pulled in China" is the catchy banner headline and displayed on the walls are facsimiles of old cards from such stations as WSAN, WSM, WFLN, KDKA, WGES, WSAI and, of course, China. There are even QSLs from Radio Afghanistan and wartime Nazi Germany's international radio station.



Library of American Broadcasting QSL Exhibition.
© Martin Hadlow

Nearby, a classic Hammarlund HQ-110 vintage radio stands outside a room dedicated to other old radio and television sets. In the corner is a huge piece of equipment labeled "Self Service Tube Tester". On the LAB's shelves and in the storage areas of the Library are some 225,000 photographs, more than 7,000 audio tapes, 9,000 recorded discs, 7,000 books, 300 periodicals, over 5,000 scripts, numerous artifacts and the CPRV QSL collection.

Library of American Broadcasting display of vintage radio equipment.

© Martin Hadlow

The LAB had its genesis in the Broadcast Pioneers Library, an archive established at the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) in Washington D.C. The collection moved to the University of Maryland in 1994 and has since developed exponentially. The LAB is now also the repository of the National Public Broadcasting Archives, and hosts the private papers of many former broadcasters and administrators.

Apart from academic researchers and interested professionals, the LAB is regularly visited by University of Maryland journalism and communication students who find a wealth of old and new material in its collections. The LAB's motto is Keeping the past for the future and, given the commitment of the staff and the interest of students and radio/television aficionados, both the past and the future look to be in very safe hands.

Martin is Associate Professor and Director of the Center for Communication for Development & Social Change at the School of Journalism & Communications, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.

He's passionate about radio history and has a varied and distinguished broadcasting and media career across the Pacific, Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, recently holding senior positions with UNESCO in Paris.

The CPRV [Committee for the Preservation of Radio Verifications] and the Library of American Broadcasting are amongst our original radio heritage partners

The work of Jerry Berg and others named in this article contributes a great deal to community led radio heritage initiatives and we strongly support and endorse their activities.

