

“Me and Little Radio NRH”

by

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Most SWBC history buffs will be familiar with TI4NRH, the Costa Rican shortwave station that was operated in radio’s early days by shortwave personality Amando Céspedes Marin. The history of the station was presented by Don Moore in his excellent 1993 *Monitoring Times* article, “The Unique Story of TI4NRH.”¹ Don’s article also appears on his [website](#) together with some [photos](#) taken at TI4NRH and some other interesting material about the station. Also at Don’s website is a brief 1979 *FRENDX* article by the late John Tuchsherer, “[Out of the Past . . . Little NRH.](#)”



In his article, John Tuchsherer mentions a book by Céspedes Marin called “Me and Little NRH” (the actual title is “Me and Little *Radio* NRH”), but indicates that he was never able to find a copy. A few months ago, Prof. Jerry Touger of Curry College, Milton, Massachusetts, who recently found a copy of the book at a yard sale and was interested in learning more about it, contacted Don who in turn informed me that a copy of the book had surfaced nearby. Prof. Touger graciously made the book available to me, and this article describes what I found.

Readers may find Don’s *MT* article a useful primer before reading further. Three other items are worth a look as well: (1) the Tuchsherer [article](#); and two items at [ontheshortwaves.com](#) -- (a) an article by Amando Céspedes Marin, “[How I Operate My Little Station ‘NRH,’](#)” from the July 1933 issue of *Short Wave Craft*, and (b) an article by Robert Hertzberg, “[NRH--A Unique Short-Wave Broadcasting Station.](#)” from the Fall 1930 issue of *Radio Design*. The last two items contain a good deal of NRH history that supplements the Moore article.

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“Me and Little Radio NRH” is a “real” book, 6 x 9 inches in size, 272 pages long, professionally printed. Although the copyright date is 1930, the book was printed and published in Costa Rica in 1931 when Céspedes Marin was approximately 49 years old. The version I examined was a paperback which sold originally for \$2.50. A leather bound version was available for \$3.50. The book is mostly text, but with some picture pages containing views of the station and of Heredia, the town where the station was located.

The text is divided into 52 sections, and while this paper does not review each section individually (nor in chronological order), it does cover most of the book’s major content. I have included footnote references to the particular sections of the book should some lucky soul come into possession of a copy and want to dig further into a particular topic.

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<sup>1</sup>*Monitoring Times*, March 1993, p. 18.

The book's section titles are illustrative of Don Amando's writing style. The book is entirely in English. On the title page, Céspedes Marin describes it as "A lively, queer, and interesting story, of the smallest radio station on earth." He explains that his use of the word "queer" is intended to refer to his imperfect English. He is obviously proud of his English-language ability, but also aware of its limitations.<sup>2</sup> The book is written in "broken English"--sometimes quite broken--and is also somewhat florid in style. While this requires some interpretation, and slows one's reading, it adds to the book's authenticity. No ghost writers here--this is the real Amando Céspedes Marin. (You can get a feel for the author's writing style in the *Radio Design* article referenced above, which consists almost entirely of material quoted from from Don Amando.)

NRH started broadcasting in 1928, and although it apparently operated into the 1940s, the book was written after the station had been on the air for only about three years. Thus it is an account not of NRH's entire history, but only its first few years. Although the station subsequently increased power, at the time it operated with a mere 7-1/2 watts.

At the bottom of many pages of the book are brief standalone quotes from letters to Don Amando that commented on his broadcasts and encouraged him in his work. Among the names are some that are familiar to DX historians, including Arthur J. Green, President of the International Short Wave Club, Klondyke, Ohio (formed in 1929), and Page Taylor of Detroit, Michigan, who was named *RADEX* shortwave editor in 1933. From these bottom-of-the-page quotes:

I do not know your antenna output, but your signals are very good and steadier than England, Holland or Bogota; they come in with more wallop. Little NRH is coming in better every night, with little fading and very satisfactory volume. – Lewis Allen, Amsterdam, New York. (p. 26)

W6XN at Oakland, California, uses 40,000 watts, and NRH many times has been 6 times stronger; we seldom get PCJ Holland as clear and strong as Heredia. – Wellington W. Muir, Lockport, New York. (p. 30)

We could hear NRH as loud as Schenectady, and were all astonished at the power of your clear voice. – Antonio Varona, Cali, Colombia (p. 59)

Are you still using 7-1/2 watts power? The last time I heard you I noticed an increase in volume and an absence of fading. My congratulations for *Radio Design* "unique" five page story on little NRH, by Hertzberg. – C. E. Campbell, Hopewell, Virginia (p. 87)

Your little NRH comes in here very good, considering the power you are using; I think it can be compared favourably with many high powered stations of the World. – Rod J. Whelan, Berea, Ohio (p. 46)

Congratulations on your latest venture. I wish you every success in the World, and you may rest assured that I will do everything I can to place "Me and Little Radio NRH" in the hands of the short wave fans. –

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<sup>2</sup>"The Goodness of Knowing How to Read and Write English." Céspedes Marin recounts one small cultural breakdown when, in a reply to him, a writer at U.S. station KGO, Oakland, California, asked if he could send them some pictures of "natives" listening to the radio. Although presumably the station meant "local people," Don Amando interpreted it to mean indians, who, as he explained in his response, lived no closer to his town than American Indians lived to Oakland.

Clifford J. Daly, President, The International Short wave Radio League,  
Boston, Massachusetts (p. 121)

The book does not deal with Céspedes Marin's early personal life, which is well-covered in Don Moore's article. Nor does it contain major new revelations. Most of the NRH story has already been told in the above referenced articles, although the book addresses all of it in much greater detail and does offer a few new NRH anecdotes. The book's main topics are the origins of Céspedes Marin's interest in radio, the development of the station, and Don Amando's contacts with listeners and others in the radio world. Much space is devoted to the latter topic.

#### AMANDO CÉSPEDES MARIN, THE DXer

DXers of the 1920s and 1930s must have loved Don Amando. Because his first interest in radio was as a DXer and not a broadcaster, he was excited by those things that excite DXers everywhere. He first got interested in radio in November 1923, when he was 42. His old friend, radio tinkerer and sometimes-competitor Vicente Fernández, who lived 10 blocks away, let him listen in on his radio.<sup>3</sup> It resulted in three firsts for Céspedes Marin: his first reception report (to Mexican mediumwaver "El Buen Tono"), his first QSL, and his first on-air greeting from a station. He went on to build his own receiving set, albeit with disappointing results because the parts, which he ordered from a New York supply house, turned out to be defective. He was able to get them replaced only with the intervention of a friend in New York, and then loaned them to Fernández, who seemed always to be benefiting himself in small ways at Don Amando's expense.

Some months later, Céspedes Marin bought a "Lemco triple duty tuner." After adding tubes and batteries (which often were purchased separately in those days),<sup>4</sup> he listened for six hours every night for a week and heard 30 stations, again all mediumwave. After three months he had to replace the batteries, and then a transformer failed. However, it was during this period, as he received more postal replies from stations, that his DX juices began flowing and that he developed an interest in electronics. He began devouring radio magazines. In 1924 he built a Roberts set based on a circuit he saw in *Popular Radio*. It was when he heard KFKX in Hastings, Nebraska that he started thinking how nice it would be to transmit and to have his own voice heard over long distances.<sup>5</sup>

Don Amando continued with his set-building, constructing a receiver based on some *Popular Science* plans and then participating in the *Radio Broadcast* [International Radio Tests](#) during November 24-30, 1924. He heard England, and received one of the certificates that *Radio Broadcast* issued for the event.<sup>6</sup> Newspapers picked up the story, and as local interest in radio increased Don Amando found himself in the business of building receiving sets for others and repairing the sets which were then becoming available in San Jose. He had no repair instructions; he had to rely only on what he was able to learn from the magazines, to which he contributed some articles himself.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>"My First Listening."

<sup>4</sup>"The First Home Made Set."

<sup>5</sup>"The Wonderful Hastings, Nebraska."

<sup>6</sup>"Radio Broadcast' International Test."

<sup>7</sup>"Radio 'Doctor' and Pusher."

## THE START OF NRH

Céspedes Marin was still interested in transmitting. His first experience was when he and Fernández exchanged coded messages by tuning their regenerative “bloopers” beyond the oscillation point, turning them into miniature transmitters.<sup>8</sup> Then he built a four-wire, 60' high, 40' long antenna, and from plans in *Radio News* he built several small voice transmitters which he distributed among his friends. He recounts the humor of their reaction to his first transmission on the subject of how chickens could be made to lay more eggs.

Don Amando also built a transmitter for his banker friend, Collado, and he experimented with more antennas, including a 65' vertical with a silver ball on top. This he built in 1925 at the encouragement of the local governing council which wanted Céspedes Marin to provide entertainment via radio reception in connection with the town's 100th anniversary.<sup>9</sup>

Céspedes Marin built his first superhet receiver, a Victoreen Super with an indoor loop, and sold it for \$125. Then he built himself another receiver, as well as a transmitter, using the latter to broadcast music locally on “longwave” (by which he meant mediumwave). Reflecting some of the experiences of early radio broadcasters in the U.S., he transmitted music using local talent and obtained some free records from record stores.

His first shortwave reception was on August 5, 1927. He found that he could hear KDKA, 2XAD (Schenectady) and PCJJ, and sometimes he would rebroadcast their signals on his own mediumwave transmitter, whose range was some 50-75 miles.<sup>10</sup> His main broadcast interest was in promoting his radio business and perhaps presenting a little news. He became very interested in shortwave and ordered an Aero transmitter, the details of which are described at length.<sup>11</sup> In the laissez faire radio environment of the time, he was able to get permission from the Secretary of the Interior to transmit on shortwave using any frequency from 200 meters on down. He made up the call letters NRH--“N” for North America (a common usage in those days), “R” for Costa Rica, and “H” for Heredia--and the station was born. The first day of transmissions (following a test period) was May 4, 1928, on the 40 meter band and with a power of 7-1/2 watts. According to material in various issues of *Radio Design*, his shortwave programs originally were on the air at 0300-0400 GMT nightly, changed in 1930 to 2300-2400 and 0200-0300 (and by then not necessarily every night).

## INCREASING POWER

In 1930 Don Amando became interested in increasing power to 75-150 watts, but at the time of the book's publication this effort had not been going well. He solicited contributions by mail from about 300 of his listeners and received about \$145. He also received about \$250 worth of parts and equipment from some of the companies with whom he dealt in his radio business. He found it very difficult to gather together all the things he needed, a process that was complicated by the language barrier. He was unable to get the equipment to work properly at the time, but, as he described it, he preferred the “kick” of working with only 7-1/2 watts anyway. “How I wish, after the experience, that I would never had thought

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<sup>8</sup>“The Bambu Antenna and the First Long-Wave Broadcasting.”

<sup>9</sup>“How I Made A New Antenna.”

<sup>10</sup>“The Shortwave Fan.”

<sup>11</sup>“How I Built the NRH Transmitter.”

about the increasing of power.”<sup>12</sup>

## LISTENER CONTACT

Much of the book is devoted to the letters that listeners sent to Céspedes Marin, and to his role as citizen of the world. As noted in Don Moore’s article and as recounted in “Me and Little Radio NRH,” his first reception report was received on May 18, 1928 and was from one Henry P. Karr in the Panama Canal Zone, 300 miles away. On July 4 he received a report from Felix Vaca Ch., 23 years old, in Guayaquil, Ecuador, some 1,200 miles distant. Then came a newspaper clipping from Cuba reporting that NRH had been heard there, 1,000 miles away, followed by more reports from Cuba, as well as from El Salvador and Guatemala. In July, in order to avoid amateur radio interference, he moved from the 40 meter band to 30.5 meters (about 9835 kc.).<sup>13</sup> As was typical of the time, Céspedes Marin references NRH’s location on the band only in wavelength (meters), not frequency (kc.).<sup>14</sup>

Don Amando received his first report from the United States on October 15, 1928. It was from 19-year old Charles J. Schroeder of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who had heard the NRH signal from 2,500 miles away on his four-tube receiver.<sup>15</sup> Many more reports followed. The first from Canada was received on March 15, 1929; a listener in England wrote in June of that year, and a listener in Spain heard NRH in October. In 1930 Céspedes Marin heard from Venezuela, France, New Zealand, India, Jamaica, Australia, South Africa, Rhodesia, the Philippines and many other countries. He received reports from 24 countries over two years, and from all states but seven. In December 1930 he received a report from Chicago on NRH’s mediumwave channel, 318 meters.<sup>16</sup>

Listeners were aided in identifying NRH by some of the sound effects that Don Amando used over the air. These included the tick-tock of a clock, bugle calls, a harmonica, and, on the quarter hour, the recorded chimes of Westminster. He was also known to whistle the station’s call letters and address in Morse code.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>“The Thought of Increasing Power”; “The Master Oscillator and Power Amplifier.”

<sup>13</sup>“The First Report From Panama”; “From the ‘Chimborazo’ Land” [Ecuador]; “The First Newspaper Clippings.”

<sup>14</sup>NRH’s exact frequencies are a bit uncertain. Although in the book Céspedes Marin says he started out in 1928 in the 40 meter band, in *Radio Design* he says it was 39 meters. In the book he says he then moved to 30.5 meters, whereas in *Radio Design* he references 30.3 meters. Obviously, precision in frequency measurement, at both the sending and the receiving end, was not what it is today. Moreover, Don Amando may not have been speaking with precision, and it cannot be certain exactly how he calculated wavelength. At best all of these references must be considered approximations. Magazines and club bulletins of the time gave the NRH wavelength variously as 30.3 meters (1929), 30.8 (1930), 30.5 (1931), and 29.3 (1931), which would correspond to approximately 9900, 9740, 9835, and 10240 kc. respectively. Later in the 1930s, by which time frequency rather than wavelength was in common usage, the NRH QSL certificate showed the frequency as 9670 kc.

<sup>15</sup>How ‘Uncle Sam’ Door Was Opened.”

<sup>16</sup>“One Report From Almost Each Country on the American Continent”; “The First European Reports”; “From the South ‘Venice’ Land”; “The First Report from France”; “New Zealand First Reports”; “The Lady of the Blossom”; “From Far Off Australia”; “From Asia and from Africa”; “Chicago Reports NRH in Long Waves”; “Hearty Reports to NRH”; “The NRH Diploma.”

<sup>17</sup>“The ‘Mascottes’ and Voice of NRH.”

Céspedes Marin obviously loved people, writing wistfully about the listeners who came all the way from Manizales, Colombia to visit him, and about the visit of a famous Mexican army aviator, Colonel Roberto Fierro, who traveled to the station by plane and spoke over the air on September 8, 1928.<sup>18</sup> (In 1930, Fierro would make the first non-stop flight between New York City and Mexico City.)

Listeners liked to compliment Don Amando. One called him “The Lindy of Central America” (Lindbergh having made his famous flight in 1927). Another listener, Mr. Eli Bert Drake of Crafton-Ingram, Pennsylvania, put his feelings into rhyme (p. 197):

“To Old NRH”

From far off Costa Rica--ten o'clock by Eastern Time,  
Station NRH broadcasting if you please;  
With an entertaining program from that sunny southern clime,  
While up here in the North we nearly freeze.

Mr. Céspedes is putting on his show at his expense,  
It's a pleasure and a hobby of its own;  
While we who listen in agree his staff is all immense,  
We wonder how he does it all alone.

His Station has a power of a little over seven watts  
and yet we get it clearly through the air;  
If he should discontinue we would miss his program lots,  
The thought of this is more than we can bear.

We thank you Mr. Céspedes, here in the U.S.A.,  
May you enjoy prosperity and make  
A lot of others happy as you're making us to-day,  
This poetry is from your old friend Drake.

Although by 1930 Céspedes Marin was answering almost 150 letters per week, he tried to stress friendship and give things a personal touch. Illustrative of this was his QSL. He did not like cards or impersonal mimeographed letters. His QSL was a certificate of which there were a number of iterations over the years (for examples, click [here](#) and [here](#)). Neither did he like to receive reports on postcards, a practice that was not all that uncommon in those days, particularly in mediumwave circles. Upon receiving such a report from John Z. Adams, a stock broker-DXer in New York, he wrote back a rather strong letter (quoted in the Tuchscherer [article](#)) which in turn prompted a joking comment about the matter (at Don Amando's expense) from a colleague of Adams in the April 4, 1930 “Investment News” column of the *New York Daily* (presumably a newspaper).<sup>19</sup>

The station changed its call letters to TI4NRH late in 1930. The “NRH” call letters had been selected mainly for fun. It turned out that, in accordance with the Washington Treaty of 1927, the call letters NRH actually belonged to the U.S. Navy. When Don Amando and the Costa Rican government were so informed by the U.S. Charge d'Affaires in San Jose, the station was granted a proper, government-designated call which simply attached the old “NRH” identifier to the TI4 prefix.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>“From the Emerald's Country”; “Old NRH and Aviator Colonel Fierro.”

<sup>19</sup>“Hearty Reports to NRH”; “The NRH Diploma”; “The Story of a Post Card.”

<sup>20</sup>“The New Call TI-4-NRH.”

## CÉSPEDES MARIN, INTERNATIONAL AMBASSADOR

It was his role as an international ambassador of goodwill, and Costa Rica booster, that seemed to excite Don Amando the most, and it is clear that he enjoyed the publicity that came of it. He kept track of the many mentions of NRH which appeared in station lists, radio magazines and catalogs and other publications of the day. (He seemed especially proud of an article by one Charles D. Isaacson that appeared in the radio section of something called *Zit's Theatrical Weekly*.) Céspedes Marin also had an "NRH Mail Club" for which it appears there was a newsletter of some kind. In June 1930 he sent off a chain letter about the station together with a list of addresses of NRH correspondents and a request that the recipients let him know when they received the letter and passed it along. He calculated that the letter traveled a total of 68,485 miles. He also was proud of the gifts that he received--clippings, postcards, stamps, newspapers, even books and chocolates--and at the station he kept an album in which some of the paper items were displayed.<sup>21</sup>

Céspedes Marin was not reluctant about making the most of his radio contacts. NRH would sometimes rebroadcast programs from KDKA--the first station he had ever heard on shortwave--as well as stations from Germany, Mexico, others from the U.S., etc. Don Amando initiated an exchange of letters with Walter C. Evans, KDKA superintendent, and upon learning that on the air and in various newspaper articles KDKA had mentioned NRH and its rebroadcast of KDKA programs, he took encouragement and promoted the KDKA-NRH "relationship" as that of big brother and little brother.<sup>22</sup>

The station's fame paid off for Don Amando in practical ways. Because of his efforts to promote Costa Rica, he was able to get the Chamber of Commerce to go to bat for him with the government and obtain for him the right to use the mails at no cost. If the Governor's seal was on the envelope, the post office would affix stamps at no charge and send the letter on its way. Below, from the CPRV collection, is an NRH envelope which evidences this practice. It bears a handstamp beginning with "GO . . ." and ending with what appears to be ". . . REDIA," with the postage stamps placed on top of the imprint and cancelled with an "OFFICIAL" postmark. (The language of the imprint can be seen better in another NRH [envelope](#) on Don Moore's website which presumably says "GOBERNADOR" or "GOBIERNO" DE LA PROVINCIA DE HEREDIA.

Céspedes Marin also got the town to give him free electrical power, and later it agreed to pay for a new microphone and for the wiring of some town buildings--bandstands, the theater, church, school, etc.--in order to facilitate live broadcasting.<sup>23</sup>

Don Amando relates several interesting radio-related stories in the book, including one where he attributes the saving of his young son's life indirectly to radio. His wife had let his son fall asleep in his sister's bed one night while Don Amando was at a friend's house "DXing." When Don Amando arrived home at 3 a.m. his wife wanted him to move the boy into his own bed, but Don Amando was too tired and left the children where they were. Within a few hours an earthquake occurred and totally destroyed the

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<sup>21</sup>"How Factories Made NRH Famous"; "Compliments of the Little Station"; "Air and Variations"; "How Factories Made NRH Famous"; "Compliments of the Little Station"; "Air and Variations"; "Tuning on the Poas Volcano"; "The Story of a Chain Letter"; "Some Fraternal Publicity to NRH."

<sup>22</sup>"KDKA of Pittsburgh, Big Brother to TI-4-NRH"; "Rebroadcasting Stations."

<sup>23</sup>"The Chamber of Commerce of Costa Rica and the First Air Mail Report"; "Heredia's Prize to Little NRH."

room in which the boy would have been sleeping.<sup>24</sup> Had Don Amando not been out radioing” that night, the boy would have been killed. (This story is also recounted in the *Radio Design* article.)

Céspedes Marin liked some humor with his radio. For the fun of it, in June 1929 he put his month-and-a-half old son, Alvarito Enrique Céspedes y Arias, on the air. (Other members of his family can be seen on a 1939 QSL from amateur station [TI4AC](#) on the CPRV website.) Joseph B. Sessions was listening in Bristol, Connecticut, and upon the event Mrs. Sessions sent Alvarito a pair of hand-crocheted booties. Sessions became one of NRH’s most devoted listeners. He told Céspedes Marin that from June 1929 until “Me and Little Radio NRH” was published he never missed a single night of NRH’s broadcasts. Sessions was President of Sessions Foundry Co., and on a trip to the United States Don Amando visited the Sessions home.<sup>25</sup> Another time, a listener in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania asked Don Amando if he would bark and whistle for his dog over the air, and Don Amando obliged. And there was the time when Don Amando sent a disassembled chair as a gift to another of his regular listeners, Charles J. Schroeder of Philadelphia, then gave him a call over the air to ask if he got it. (The chair is still in existence, owned by Schroeder’s daughter, and can be seen on Don Moore’s [website](#).)<sup>26</sup> I was especially pleased to see Céspedes Marin relate his playing of a song for one Ralph I. Dale of Lexington, Massachusetts, the town where I live. Don Amando, and NRH, got around.



In several places in the book, Céspedes Marin emphasizes personal and organizational qualities that were important to him: being on schedule (he said that his transmissions were always on time), and emitting a dependable signal, one that could compete with the big stations notwithstanding its small power. He took

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<sup>24</sup>“The Radio and the Earthquake.”

<sup>25</sup>“The Little NRH, the Newest Radio Home.”

<sup>26</sup>“The Wonderful Cries of a Baby Boy”; “The Lindy Dog of Horsham”; “Radio Telepathy Experiences.”



pride in his small transmitter, and in the efficiency of his one-man operation.<sup>27</sup> Surely anyone who can write a book of this size with an imperfect facility for the English language is deserving of admiration.

Amando Céspedes Marin was nothing if not a colorful character. In DX terms he combined the pride of accomplishment of an Arthur Cushen with the international outreach of an Eddie Startz. And the excitement that thrilled Don Amando then is the same that stirs the DX embers today.

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<sup>27</sup>“The Preservant Work”; “Little NRH ‘Like Any Standard’”; “NRH Inside Work”; “How I Built the NRH Transmitter.”