



Looking Back

Tom Williamson, 166 Burris St., Hamilton, Ont. L8M 2J8

Looking Back is a nostalgic reflection on the shortwave scene of yesteryears, written from the personal experience of the author, who has been DXing the shortwave bands for over seven decades.

Generation X

Shortwave broadcasting in the U.S.A., prior to World War II, was very different from today. It was entirely commercial in the sense that government was not involved in transmitting programs and most of the active stations were affiliated with the well-known networks (CBS, NBC, etc.) or commercial companies such as General Electric and the Crosley Corp.

Relaying a main mediumwave affiliate was a common source of programming, although some broadcasts were specifically prepared for shortwave use. Philosophically, the idea of a distant pickup point and RE-broadcasting the signal over a local AM medium-wave station was the motivation for thinking of the SW transmitter as an "experimental" one.

Hence, in the good old days of callsigns, they were allocated the letter X. The full grouping of letters and numerals was reminiscent of ham calls, using the number to indicate the geographic region. Thus we had combinations such as W2XAD Schenectady, NY, W3XAU Philadelphia, PA, W8XAL Cincinnati, Ohio, W9XJL Superior, Wisconsin, etc.

The Westinghouse Company seems to have been the leader in this relay idea, with broadcasts from the KDKA mediumwave station sent out by a shortwave transmitter, 8XS, picked up at KFKX in Hastings, Nebraska, and retransmitted to KGO mediumwave on the West Coast. At a later date the callsign on shortwave became W8XK in Pittsburgh, PA.

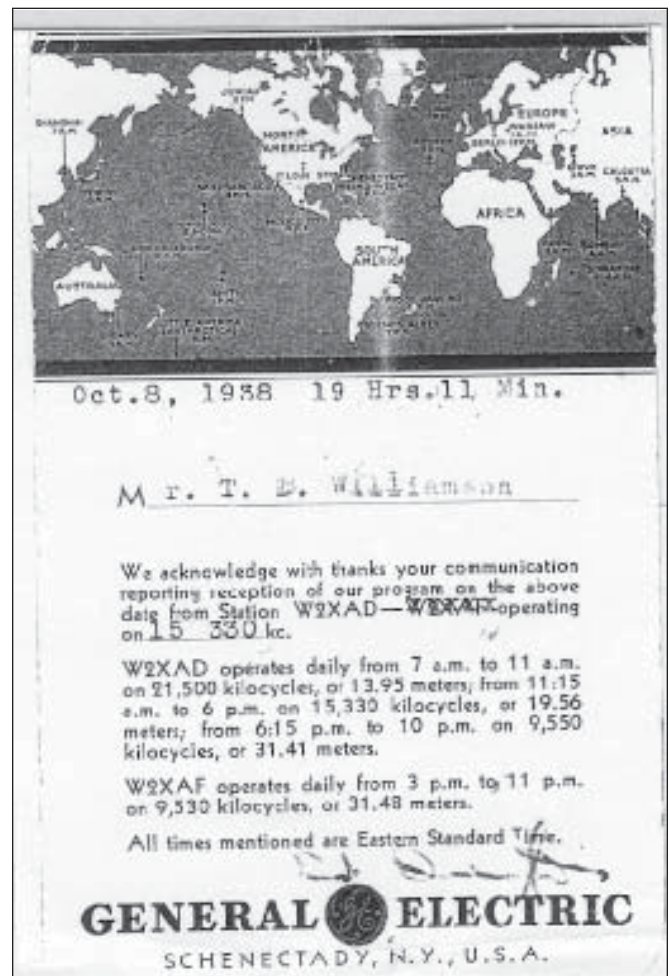
Despite the efforts involved, it was obviously difficult to make a commercial success in SW broadcasting, for both technical and logistic reasons. Quite frankly, as a teenager living in England in those days (1938), I do not remember advertisements in the U.S. stations' programs. But then I would not have been interested in farm products or soap from across the Atlantic! However, I do remember some excellent historical medical "discovery" programs under the title of "Men Against Death"!

This type of docu-drama, as well as educational programs from an unusual station, W1XAL of the World Wide Broadcasting Foundation, in Boston, made life interesting.

In addition to the aforementioned "big boys" of U.S. origin, there were a number of smaller operations,

such as W4XB, "from the palm-fringed shores of blue Biscayne Bay in tropical America", operated by the Isle of Dreams Broadcasting Company. This one was in the "experimental" HF band of 11 meters, often assumed to be occupied by FM stations (but these tended to use slightly higher frequencies toward the top of the band).

In the late thirties, war clouds were gathering, and a few weeks before the declaration of war (September 3rd, 1939), the U.S. callsigns were suddenly changed to 4-letter combinations. This was confusing, to say the least. W1XAL became WRUL, W8XK became WPIT, as examples. Note that in the original calls, the number was always followed by the X.



Now let's take a look at what was available on the dial from the U.S.A. in those times. Here are the main stations:

- W1XAL – WRUL Boston, MA 10kW
World Wide Broadcasting Foundation
- W1XK – WBOS Millis, MA -
Westinghouse

W2XE – WCBX C.B.S.	Wayne, NJ	1 kW
W2XAD – WGEA General Electric, NBC relay WGN	Schenectady, NY	40kW
W3XAU – WCAI relay WCAU, CBS	Philadelphia, PA	10kW
W3XL – WNBI R.C.A.	Bound Brook, NJ	35kW
W4XB – WDJM Isle of Dreams Broadcasting Co., relay WIOD	Miami, FL	1 kW
W6XBE – KGEI General Electric	San Francisco, CA	-
W8XK – WPIT Westinghouse, relay KDKA	Pittsburgh, PA	40 kW
W8XAL – WLWO Crosley Co., relay WLW	Cincinnati, OH	10kW

which seemed huge to us in those days.

Not long after this, the U.S. government took over all remaining SW broadcasters (some smaller ones had quit) in the early days of establishing the now famous Voice of America. In its starting days they even used utility point-to-point transmitters, such as WCW, WCB and WJQ Press Wireless.

By some time in the forties, the 11 meter band had disappeared from use and private SW broadcasting was virtually dead (no doubt to the relief of some of the owners, who thence could concentrate on making a profit from AM and FM stations!). Furthermore there were no religious organizations putting stations on the air. Yours truly cannot help but wonder how long the present crop of "Christian" stations will last; it must be an expensive task.

Soon after these changes, the U.S. regulators required SW stations to use higher power and directional antenna systems. Powers had been in the 10-40 kW range mostly, but were upped to 50 kW minimum,

I hope you have enjoyed this look back at early times – and I haven't even mentioned the reception problems of battery-operated sets, body capacity, etc!

World Wide Broadcasting Foundation
UNIVERSITY CLUB - BOSTON, MASS. U.S.A.

W1XAL VERIFIES
YOUR RECEPTION REPORTED ON

September 21, 1939 Date
11.79 Mc 21.20 BST 851 PM

Thank you and please write us again.
Do you know this is a non-profit Station supported by gifts and voluntary contributions? Won't you become a part of this Station by joining our **WORLD WIDE LISTENERS' LEAGUE?** Write for our leaflet.

Programs of
LITERATURE NEWS
SCIENCES MUSIC
WORLD PEACE DRAMA
ECONOMICS TRAVEL
and
Special International Good
Will Broadcasts. 15.25 — 6.04 — 11.79 — 21.46 — 11.73 — 15.13 Mc.



THE NATION'S STATION

THE CROSLLEY CORPORATION

WLW
WEAI & W8XAL
CINCINNATI

October 19, 1939

Mr. T. B. Williamson
3 Highland Road
Purley, Surrey,
England

Dear Short Wave Listener:

We are pleased to verify your reception of our short wave station (W8XAL). This station operates on the assigned frequency of 11.79 kilocycles (49.5 meters), with a power of 10 kW authorized by the Federal Communications Commission.

International Station
W2XE
COLUMBIA BROADCASTING SYSTEM

July 19th 1939

Dear Listener:
Thank you for your recent communication. This will verify your reception of International station W2XE on frequency No. 6 on May 20th 1939.

W2XE
1. 6120 Kc., 49.02 M.
2. 6170 Kc., 48.62 M.
3. 9620 Kc., 31.09 M.
4. 11820 Kc., 25.38 M.
5. 15210 Kc., 19.66 M.
6. 17830 Kc., 16.83 M.
7. 21520 Kc., 13.91 M.

COLUMBIA BROADCASTING SYSTEM, INC.
E. A. Tucker
International Station W2XE

