A Blast from the Past
A Look at Amateur Radio in the 1920s and ’30s

By Steve Abarta, K6TLM

None of us is old enough to remember the early days of Amateur Radio. And the days were truly “early!” Here are a few landmark dates to keep in mind:

- 1896 – Marconi demonstrated Morse Code signals over distance of 2 or more kilometers
- 1899 – Marconi sent wireless messages across the English Channel
- 1910 – First radio society formed in Australia – Wireless Institute of Australia
- 1912 – Radio Act of 1912 passed US Congress after RMS Titanic sank
- 1917 – 1919 – Amateur radio ceased operation during WWI
- 1921-22 – First contacts between US & UK (one way)
- 1923 – First two-way contact between US & UK
- 1927-28 – First International Radiotelegraph Conference established bands 80/75, 40, 20, and 10 meters
- 1933 – W6DEI began SSB Voice Experiments on 75 meter LSB

So, to say that my Dad, W6BIF, Lester (Les) Abarta was active as a pioneer in the hobby is no stretch of the imagination. Dad was first licensed in 1929, and except for WWII and the decade following that war, he was very active, primarily on CW. Unfortunately, he was effectively “off the air” from 1941, until around 1955, when I was just 14 years old. (OK, now you know how old I am!)

I will never forget the day that Dad came home and set up -- in what had been MY bedroom -- a transmitter and receiver. I had no idea it was and what it all meant, and although I was not happy that I had to again share a bedroom with my younger brother, I was more excited to find out what ham radio was all about. It was not long before he was on the air (CW) and making contacts all over the world.
I was captivated!

Although CW was his first love, it wasn’t long before he was on AM, making DX contacts left and right. Being able to hear the voices added to my interest and gave me the desire to get my Novice license, which I got in 1957 (KN6YDL) and my General in 1958 (K6TLM).

Back in those days, a Novice license was good for only one year, and if you didn’t pass the General test by the time the year was up, you would lose your call. Well, I failed the test twice – once for the code portion, and then the theory. So, by the time I finally passed the third test, my Novice had expired, and I was issued a different call, for which I am grateful. K6TLM is a much better call on CW than K6YDL.

By the way, I mentioned above that Dad was on AM for a number of years. Single Side Band (SSB) had not really taken hold back then, and I recall many times when Dad would call SSB “monkey talk,” since none of our receivers could copy it. And, I guess, it did sound like monkey talk! (No offense, monkeys!)

So, at our next club meeting on April 11, I am excited to again present a slideshow of many of the pictures my Dad’s photo album that I acquired after his death in 1982. Most of them were sent to him as QSLs from the many DX contacts he had made. (By the time he passed away, he had over 300 countries confirmed!)

I also have a few pictures of his homebrew shack that was set up in his parent’s home in Glendale, California, as well as shots of our beam tower that was destroyed in a violent wind storm in 1958.

So, come and join us as we experience a “Blast from the Past!”