

A Conversation with Ellen White, W1YL

The first family of ham radio lived in *The White house*. We're speaking, of course, of Bob and Ellen White, W1CW (SK) and W1YL, and of their equally famous son, Jim White, K4OJ (SK). Some time has elapsed since the days when the Whites, then living in New England, were woven tightly into the fabric of contesting, DXing, and the ARRL. When Bob ran the DXCC Desk and Ellen was Contest Branch manager, while Jim grew up to become a fixture on the contest scene. A contester who witnessed much of that era in and around ARRL Headquarters is Rosalie White, K1STO. While no relation to Bob, Ellen, and Jim, Rosalie was a bit of a trailblazer herself, and it seemed appropriate to ask her to help NCJ readers recall just how special that time was for ham radio. She does so in an interview with Ellen White. — Patrick Barkey, N9RV

Rosalie: The quintessential question: How did you develop an interest in Amateur Radio?

Ellen: I vividly remember Christmas night 1942. I had just turned 16, and two cousins invited me to go to a popular indoor roller skating rink. I welcomed the opportunity for fun and during the evening a young sailor persisted in skating by me. I found no way to dissuade him and eventually he (Bob White, then W6QEZ) insisted on escorting me home! Shortly thereafter, as a young World War II radioman, he sailed through the Panama Canal and to the South Pacific — and terrible battles he never talked about. We corresponded during my last 2 high school years, and he hit me pretty hard with the concepts of ham radio and Morse code, then unknown to me.

In this trying time for our country, the government required high school seniors to take a "war course" — a special class to equip graduates with a skill the government thought useful should the war continue past our graduation. One course was Morse code. I had little difficulty learning the code, to the absolute delight of this young sailor who was corresponding with me. In September 1945 Bob was up for discharge, and his choices of where to live were his San Diego hometown or where I lived, New York City. The obvious solution to him was New York. We eloped, marrying in October 1945. Oh yes, my wedding presents from Bob were The ARRL License Manual and Terman's Principles of Radio Engineering!



Ellen White, W1YL.

Rosalie: And you took it to the next step, getting your Amateur Radio license?

Ellen: We went to San Diego so I could meet his family, and to study the job situation, which was bleak. Bob's stepdad was W6APG and his sister's husband was W6CHV. Bob and the guys were devout ARRL members.

We returned to New York for jobs, which proved almost as non-existent, but Bob felt if he got his commercial radio licenses, opportunities could expand. He enrolled at New York's Melville Radio Institute, insisting that I too had to do this! Within a year we both had the First Phone and Second Class Radiotelegraph Commercial licenses. No one said this stuff was hard, so I had no preconception that it might be beyond me.

I took the Class B FCC Amateur Radio test, leading to W2RBU. Bob practically had a fist fight with the FCC examiner, who had marked incorrect one of my hand-drawn schematics. Bob proved the guy wrong! A female showing up in those days to take the Amateur Radio Class B test rather disrupted the staff. You had to wait a year before you could take the FCC Class A Amateur Radio test. At year's end, I had my Class A, but I never felt a desire for phone operation.

I clearly remember the day I got my first license. Bob said, "Now you must join the League. This is the right thing to do." In an unpredictable way my first tangible connection with the ARRL came via a technical editing job for the Institute of Radio Engineers (IRE), now the IEEE, working with ARRL pioneer Clint DeSoto, W1CBD, the editor of *160 Meters and Down!* The realization of this quiet man's fame and the

privilege of working for him did not hit me until decades later. At IRE I met then-ARRL President George Bailey, W2KH, and was mightily impressed. But this wasn't the time for what would lead me on my path to ARRL Headquarters.

We returned to San Diego and worked briefly for Convair, the Consolidated Vultee aircraft giant. I wound transformers in the electronics lab — interesting, but offering little future potential.

Then Bob got an opportunity for a communications job in Hawaii with the FAA (then the CAA), and we transitioned to Hawaii, with me as KH6QI and Bob as KH6QJ. I heard local broadcast station KPOA practically beg for someone with a First Phone to interview for an engineer's job; they sounded pretty desperate. No one on Oahu was available with a First Phone, I was, though, and wound up as a station engineer, unheard of for a woman in those days.

Rosalie: Electronics-related careers seem like stepping stones to your eventual ARRL move.

Ellen: My station engineer duties involved transmitter maintenance (usually in the middle of the night), going on remote broadcasts, getting phone calls from KH6J chiding me on how the station sounded, cutting souvenir interview discs for Lurline cruise ship passengers, running my own pop music program, etc. The downside was the pay, and after a year we returned to San Diego.

While Bob job hunted, he insisted that I go to college. I went to San Diego State College, double majoring in math and physics. I was now W6YYM and heavily involved in ARRL activities. I joined several Amateur Radio clubs, and I did a short stint as a local radio station broadcast engineer. Eventually I became the ARRL San Diego Section Communications Manager (now Section Manager) and enjoyed it.

Then came that fateful 1947 issue of *QST*. I beat Bob to the draw that summer month, and got to read our journal first, wherein ARRL Communications Manager F. E. Handy, W1BDI, noted a need for two hams to work in the ARRL Communications Department. Bob and I applied and were hired.

Rosalie: A whole new chapter in life for you — at ARRL HQ!

Ellen: The Communications Department, fondly called CD, was the on-the-air



Ellen as KPOA station engineer.

operating arm of ARRL, responsible for the Field Organization, contests, DXCC and operating awards, W1AW, Field Day, ARRL club activities and more.

My first ARRL role covered myriad CD functions, developing the ARRL Affiliated Club Program, coordinating the Frequency Measuring Tests, nurturing ARRL's Field Organization appointees, station activities reports in *QST*, CD parties — anything and everything that needed doing. Bob, W1WPO/W1CW, became “Mr DXCC.” His devotion to it — taking home 2 hours of work most nights — made DXCC the dominant coveted award. I was the staffer entrusted with recording *QST* for the blind and handicapped for the Library of Congress. I recorded at home, where it was quiet, although in later years, listeners often heard faint CW emanating from young Jim's activities in our radio shack!

Sometime later, I wrote my first *QST* technical article, “Contacts vs Multipliers,” when hams had no computer programs to easily calculate contest scores. The article delineated a simple way to figure if it was worthwhile to chase multipliers or just amass more Qs to increase your overall score. This was also when the quarterly ARRL CD Parties were at their zenith...such great fun! There was a sort of suspicion about YLs being “real hams,” real contest operators, high-speed CW operators (yes, even somewhat at our League), let alone being published in our beloved manly technical journal! One response I received was an approving note from Dick Baldwin, W1IKE (later W1RU), who would be the future ARRL head honcho. Those forays into the field of contesting led to my full-time job with the ARRL Contest Program.

Rosalie: What did supervising the ARRL Contest Program involve?

Ellen: ARRL HQ contest operation those days merited a one-person staff with summer help from college contest wannabes who turned into pros — with call signs such as K1TO and K4OJ. Contesting was my life — beginning with opening the envelopes containing paper logs through the awards process — you name anything to do with ARRL contest sponsorship, and I was “the man.” Studying contest rules, analyzing activity and scores, checking logs, writing *QST* contest announcements and follow-up articles, physically doing the page layouts before the days of computerized page layout software, suggesting ideas to famous *QST* cartoonist Gildersleeve, photo selections, shipping awards. The process happened for all ARRL contests, CD parties, Sweepstakes, ARRL DX Contests, and ARRL VHF Contests. Being thoroughly immersed in each specific contest was a very satisfying job.

Rosalie: Did you contest much prior to being hired in the CD?

Ellen: When I began working with CD's many programs, my personal involvement in contesting was operating at home on CW in CD parties. At-home operating was limited, because of competition for the station by Mr DXCC and later by the burgeoning contesteer, son Jim, then K1ZX. Also, after 8 hours at ARRL, routine home chores, and the hours of monthly recording of *QST* for the Library of Congress, I had few leisure hours. I chased CW DX in early mornings before work; this netted 320 DXCC countries and WAZ with little effort, but a great deal of fun!

Rosalie: What was your favorite contest?

Ellen: Because operating time was slim, shorter-duration contests appealed to me. I greatly enjoyed CD parties and Sweepstakes plus my First Class CW Operators' Club membership activities.

Rosalie: Did you have contesting role models?

Ellen: I was fortunate that my years at HQ coincided with what I considered to be many greats in our hobby — W1FH, W3GRF, and many Frankford Radio Club members, the now K7JA, W4KFC, and so many Potomac Valley Radio Club members, KH6IJ, WØNWX (later an ARRL president), burgeoning club competitions... Northern and Southern California DX clubs...the beginnings of the Mad River Radio Club, etc. Like-minded hams in Connecticut (specifically W1ARR) agreed with my thoughts: “Why don't we have a major club in our area?” A handful of us met in our Burlington, Connecticut, living room, and Murphy's Marauders, the progenitor of the Yankee Clipper Contest Club, was born, and contest greats soon developed.

Rosalie: What were popular contests when you were at HQ, and did that change over your years there?

Ellen: My years at ARRL saw major growth in all the big contests, plus enhanced interest in 6 meters and above. The availability of more flexible manufactured gear at a time when complex technology entered the picture made it easier for many to go multiband and try different modes and frequencies.

Rosalie: You saw changes in contesters' typical home stations?

Ellen: More and more modest homebrew stations morphed into complex commercially purchased stations with interfacing devices built by contesters. Antennas were big on the list of home-brew devices — aspirations escalated beyond modest tribanders at 60 feet.

Rosalie: Did you see a change in the number of contesters during your tenure?

Ellen: With the proliferation of smaller-scale specialized contests, I saw increased participation. Those participants soon “got it” as to how much fun they had, and then they would try Sweepstakes.

Rosalie: We know Jim loved contesting. Any funny family stories you can share?

Ellen: A very young Jim got interested in building model rockets during Connecticut's tough winters — he and Bob were impatient for the spring “fly off.” One fateful day when yet another model couldn't be located, he read an article in a model rocket

magazine that explained how ham radio/VHF could help with retrieval. That day he called Bob a dozen times with questions about ham radio. Jim never looked back at rockets, and ham radio became his life, too. In pretty short order he went from Novice to Extra Class and K1ZX. His proud parents rewarded him with an ARRL Life Membership. We never prodded him. He just saw our dedication to what ham radio was all about, the importance of ARRL, and the great fun we had sharing this as a family.

Rosalie: Even before Jim got licensed, you encouraged young people to try contests, and the CD hired many hams just out of college.

Ellen: We felt the example we displayed together, having such a good time as equals, not elder to younger, demonstrated something palpable that resonated for young people. Seeing Jim's devoted interest in operating and contesting, we understood this was a way young people could enter a life-long avocation and related vocations.

Rosalie: You must have met many contesters when you traveled for ARRL, and I know you invited many HQ visitors to your home on the spur of the moment for dinner. How did they react to your being a female in contesting?

Ellen: I was privileged to travel to major contest meetings and never got any "anti-female" business. I was treated with respect. And they had real interest in who I might think would be top in the next big contest! It was my privilege to present awards to top clubs, too.

Rosalie: How did you all end up in Florida?

Ellen: After one particularly bad Connecticut winter and a terrible storm, a family decision was made to leave HQ and move south to Homestead, Florida. Not too many years later, Bob and I had the misfortune to be in Hurricane Andrew's epicenter. NOAA recorded winds exceeding 220 MPH a



Bob and Ellen, newly licensed as W2RBU.

mile away. From Andrew's wreckage, we started over again, closer to Jim, who had become K4OJ, near Tampa. What a plus to be physically closer! His enthusiasm and technical ability renewed our love of contesting and big towers! This move introduced us to new technology, with Jim building an interface allowing relatively easy multiband operation. The first time I switched bands and all station components and beams did the same; I had arrived in ham heaven!

We again contemplated the question: "Why don't we have a major contest club in this area?" Again our living room hosted a meeting. With Jim's intense interest in good operating, maintaining an active club and helping newbies, our hopeful handful developed into the Florida Contest Group, now headed by Jim's best friend Dan, K1TO. (Both were my mischievous ARRL summer contest help, years earlier.)

The past dozen years have been extraordinarily difficult. I endured losing my

life partner W1CW. Yet, there was a double whammy. Just about a year later, K4OJ was scheduled for heart valve replacement. It was not meant to be.

As with many others seeing the years race by, I'm now physically unable to maintain a QRO station with big antennas and a 130-foot tower. It has taken more years to downsize, than it did to develop the antenna farm. The towers are now gone, the station has been dismantled. But never fear, I anticipate some big-time remote operating! Thanks to W1CW, a wonderful partner who encouraged my forays into technology of all kinds, his mantra became mine (and also that of our ham-to-the-core son, K4OJ): If you try something and fail, so be it. But, if you don't try you have already failed!

My tenure at our League HQ, in the CD, moving up to Contest Manager, and writing for our *QST*, was the most rewarding work of my life. I would do it again in a heartbeat. I've been licensed since 1947, and the thrill and excitement of Amateur Radio remain. Most Florida Contest Group members show their continuing respect for Jim by appending "OJ" to their 73, as do I. 73 OJ

About the Author: Rosalie White, K1STO, began her career at ARRL HQ in 1973, working under Ellen White, W1YL, and George Hart, W1NJM. After a few years of growing, Rosalie was asked to lead the new ARRL Club & Training Department, and duties later expanded to managing the ARRL Field & Educational Services Department. She returned to her Hoosier home state in 2005 to help care for her mom. She volunteers many hours for the Amateur Radio on the International Space Station (ARISS) program, as one of two US ARISS delegates (ARRL's rep) and was recently re-elected as ARISS-International Secretary Treasurer. She wants to get back to contesting beyond Field Day fun, possibly from K9IU. An answer to an oft-asked question is, "No, Ellen and I aren't related, but that would've been cool!"