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NCJ Interviews: Bob Cox, K3EST

NCJ: It is my honor and privilege to sit down with one of my best friends in ham radio, Bob Cox, K3EST. At least within the contest community, there aren't a lot of people who *don't* know that call sign. Actually, quite a few know more than that and are good friends with Bob. So, Bob, how did you get into this crazy hobby and into contesting in particular?

K3EST: Like a lot of kids, when I was young, I joined the Cub Scouts and then became a Boy Scout. A counselor in the Boy Scouts worked for a radio company and got me interested, eventually in assembling my first Heathkit, an AR-2. This was like 1950-something. I listened to that AR-2 for 4 years. Recently I went back and looked at my SWL logbooks and saw call signs like W4KFC and W3GRF. So, I was listening to hams long before I knew who they were. Around 1958 I got my Radio merit badge, and I was teaching at a summer camp for Boy Scouts on the Chesapeake Bay — Camp Roosevelt — and got my license. I put up a dipole at the camp and started working some fellows. One of the first stations was a ZL. So, I was very pleased that I could get that far with a dipole at 20 feet or so.

From that point, I started getting more and more interested in radio. My Novice call sign was KN3EST — just a random call sign the FCC issued — but it turned out to be a pretty good one. Eventually I started getting more and more interested in working DX on the Novice bands. It turned out that 1958 was a pretty good year to get started, because, as you may recall, that was a pretty good sunspot year. On 15 meters you could work Russians until about 11 o'clock at night, pretty outstanding for a young guy trying to get started in radio.

NCJ: So, the natural transition is to DXing, and that's how a lot of us started. What caused you to cross that chasm between being a DXer and a contester?

K3EST: I started out making friends on the air, and one of my first friends was Jack Reichert, then-W3ZKH, now N4RV. There were some other hams on 10 meters, and we got chatting, and they invited me to a club meeting. Well, it turned out that the club was the Potomac Valley Radio Club — PVRC. We used to meet in the Red Cross building in Arlington, Virginia. I was still wet behind the ears and amazed at all the people there. Meetings had 40 or 50 people, and, after a while, you'd get to know some of them. They were all stars of the radio world. People like W4KFC, W3GRF, and W4KXV and many others who were making their names.

Bob and his wife Junko relax at the NCCC Awards Banquet in 2011. [Bob Wilson, N6TV, photo).

I joined the club, and Dick Phelps, then-W4KXV, later N4RP, recruited me to operate a multi-multi from his place in Virginia. Dick is now a silent key. He got me interested in multi-multi contesting. I operated with Fred Maas, KT5X, who had another call sign at the time. Fred is now very active in SOTA — Summits on the Air — he climbs all kinds of mountains out in the west, over 10,000 feet, and puts them on the air. Fred and I operated at 'KXV for about 2 years. At a club meeting, I realized that there were other multi-multis around. There was another station over in Maryland, W3MSK at the time. They invited me out there, and I realized that 'MSK's station was much, much, much bigger than 'KXV's. I moved up the ladder out to that station, and I became very active there for many years. So, that's really how I got interested in contesting — through friends, club meetings.

NCJ: It's still the same kind of dynamic. It's almost like you have a sponsor, as if you're joining some kind of organization. You're *sponsored* into contesting, and that was your experience as well as mine and many others. You mentioned W3MSK, later W3AU. That was my first multi-multi experience. I'm not sure you remember, but my first year at W3AU I was operating 40 meters, and the person I was operating with was you, Bob. Remember that?

K3EST: I remember. [Laughs]

NCJ: And I distinctly remember at one point when you got upset with me for not sending fast enough.

K3EST: Believe it or not, the stations that W3AU had at that time for multi-multi and well as some others were bigger than the stations are today. At Ed's place, on 15 meters, where I usually hung out, we had 7 over 7. And this was 1965 — 7 over 7 on 20, 5 elements on 40, 11 elements on 10 at 200 feet. And many more antennas.

Many people may not know about the introduction of the Beverage antenna into mainstream contesting. In 1970, people were having all kinds of problems making contacts on 80 and 160 meters, because of static and weak signals. Charlie — now W6UM — a theoretical physicist, told Ed that he'd read a couple of papers on a thing called a Beverage. He brought the papers in, and we took a look and wondered how this thing could possibly work — it's only 3 feet off the ground. So, we strung out a wire around the estate of W3AU, and it was

about 3 feet off the ground, fed with coax at one end. K2GL — our big competition at the time — well, we just walked all over them. So, Buzz and his boys asked us how we did it, and we told him that we had this Beverage thing. They put one up, and the rest is history.

When I first started at W3MSK, I was on 15 meters. At that time AM was still in wide use, and I remember working a guy in Madagascar. His comment to me was, "Your signal is so strong that it stomps like an elephant's foot." I'll always remember that. [Laughs]

So we were really rocking and rolling against our competition, which was K2GL and W2PV at that time.

NCJ: I think we all have those kinds of stories. When you look at getting started in contesting through my lens, you're talking about the 1970s. The whole style of contesting was different. Even though there were these big stations around, the big rates weren't happening back then. On 15 sideband, what was a big rate for you?

K3EST: Well, if I could have a rate of 80 to 100 per hour back then, I was doing a pretty good job.

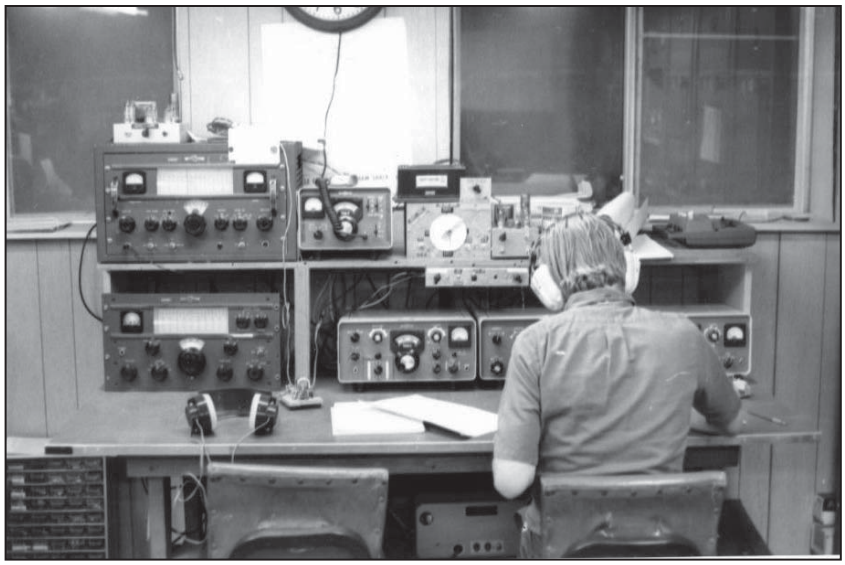
NCJ: When you operate at W3LPL, K3LR, WE3C or another big station, 200-plus hours are kind of standard. So, even though we're all concerned about the growth in contesting in today's world, the difference between the numbers today and back then is just staggering. You can work more now in an hour or two than many stations worked during an entire contest back then.

As you fast forward a little bit, Bob, you discovered that there were some islands in the Caribbean that proved to be kind of interesting for radio. Can you tell us a bit about how you got involved in some of that?

K3EST: I think the first pioneering stations down there were PJØDX and PJØCW in the late 1960s by some FRC and PVRC guys that clued us in to the fact that there was something happening in the Caribbean and that you could actually have more fun there than in the states by running guys. The next year a group of us operated as PJ2CC.

NCJ: You operated mostly multi-ops down there. Did you do any single ops?

K3EST: No, I never did a single op. I was always on 20 meters, with KB2XZ (now SK), Bill, and occasionally Jack, N4RV. Essentially, I was always on 20 meters. One interesting tidbit about that. We tried our best to get to 200 countries on one weekend. We tried our best but we never made it. We made it to 185 or so. Bill, who owned a big company, had a Rolex watch and put it on top of my rig. He said, "Bob, if you make 200 I'll give you this." Of course I never made it. [Laughs].



K3EST operating from W3MSK/W3AU in 1969. This station dominated the multi-multi competition over the course of 2 decades.

NCJ: Of course, the reason why we know all of this is that you did another crazy thing in radio. You woke up one day and were director of the CQ WW. How did that happen, and was it a dream, or did it actually happen?

K3EST: Oh, yes it happened. Well, it was a good dream. Occasionally a nightmare. But a good dream. Frank Anzalone, W1WY, was the director, and he wanted to pass it along to someone else. So he handed the job off to Fred Capossela, K6SSS, who was living in California. Fred recruited some local guys, who turned out to be people like N6AA, N6TW, and N6ZZ. And they were all helping him. He wanted to retire as well after a few years, and he wanted to appoint two people — an east coast and a west coast person — as directors. He asked me and I said yes, I will do it. He called Larry Brockman, N6AR, who also agreed. We did it together for 6 or 7 years — we would alternate modes. Then, Larry moved on, and I had it from 1977 to 2012, carrying the CQ WW as the director.

NCJ: That's probably one of the most extraordinary contributions and runs of anybody that I can think of in contesting. It's just absolutely amazing. Is there anything that just pops right out in your mind that was really memorable during your time as director?

K3EST: Well, I remember lots of things. One of the best parts about it was meeting so many talented and skilled contesters. When I first took it over, only Americans were on the contest committee. I said that since this was a worldwide contest, we had to have DX operators on the committee. The first three people we signed on were Tack, JE1CKA; Tine, S5ØA, and Paulo, I2UIY. This is a very fond memory of joining with them, and talking to them in person, and visiting them, because they are, in their own right, very big people in their own countries, and they have control over their own contests.

NCJ: The log-checking process, of course, has changed so much. It might be interesting for our readers to learn how things were done before computers and all of that. Or even the beginning of computing. What was the process like to publish results?

K3EST: That was the most tedious part of the job, of course — compiling and checking the results. When I first took over, and from then into the late 1980s, everything was a paper log. Every year about 45 or 50 large boxes from UPS would arrive at my door. I'd have to open each one separately, look at each log, log them, put them in order, and try to shuffle them around to the individual log checkers.

One of the people who contributed greatly to the early phase of log checking was Dave Donnely, K2SS, a professor at Yale. He wrote some original contest checking programs for the committee, especially in checking for dupes. Still, you had to type in many logs to make sure they were being checked okay. Usually it was only the top scores that were checked thoroughly. The rest of the logs were not, because there just wasn't the manpower to do it and the computers to make the work easier. You could do it if you typed in all 3,000 logs, but no one wanted to do that. That's how serious CQ WW log checking started out.

Eventually entries turned from paper logs to floppy disks. Today you probably

Bob, K3EST, poses proudly with his awards for working all Japanese cities, Guns (non-city areas analogous to US counties), and KU (large cities) — a total of 1369 areas worked with a QSL card from each. Bob is the only North American station to earn all three.

couldn't even find a computer with a floppy drive. At first there were large disks, and eventually it was the high density disks that had 1.2 megabytes on one disk. I would get all the disks. The process was similar to paper. I was facing 3,000 disks per mode, all of which had to be put into my computer, one by one, to determine if I could even read the disk and figure out the data. I would download them all into a separate file, zip file them, and send them off to Dick, N6AA, who was actually doing all the real log checking. That's how it went from paper logs stacked all the way up to the ceiling to eventually disks to eventually just Internet submissions.

NCJ: It's a curious process as to how you acquired some committee members. I remember visiting when you were living at K3ZO's house and seeing stacks of Russian logs, and becoming completely fascinated by looking at the log entries firsthand. This was in the paper days. And you just casually said, "Well, you could get involved and look at these a little closer if you want. I have some boxes you could just take home and check them out." And the next thing I knew, I was locked in.

K3EST: Yes. Behind the scenes it was really, really a lot of work. Making sure it was fair and just for all the entrants. On one level it was a real pleasure to do it, and on another level it was a lot of work, and I think that most committee members can attest to that as well.

I'd like to say a word about Dick, N6AA, and his group. When I first came on, as I said, there was Dave, K2SS, who did a lot of pioneering work on log checking. Eventually Dave wanted to get back to his research at Yale, and so I was looking for another person who can do the log checking. I was looking for about a year. I called up Tree, N6TR, who had been working on another checking project with Dick, N6AA. He suggested I contact Dick, who said he would do it. Dick came with a cadre of helpers including Phil, N6ZZ, and Larry, N6TW, both great guys who are now SK. They contributed greatly to what we now call UBN and NIL, and all other aspects of modern log-checking processes. They thought it all up and created it. Especially Dick, who would go through all of the logs and make up his mind which call signs were unique and which were not. That was a massive amount of work, and he did it for 10 or more years. He was still involved after that, and has since taken up bird watching in a very serious manner.

I had to find an expert log computer guy fast. Fortunately, Ken, K1EA, was available to help. His expertise was invaluable and continues today.

NCJ: A natural transition for a committee member to go right into bird watching. The mantra of the whole committee was the unsung heroes. The reality is that the worldwide was really known as the contest that was a trend setter. Not only in terms of the rules that we created and categories and things like that, but also the mechanics of log checking. A couple things must come to mind that you really feel came out of that experience, don't you think?

K3EST: There were many. I think the CQ WW and the people behind it actually influenced all of contesting. Two really major things happened. It became obvious that eventually we'd have to use the Internet to submit logs, and that we'd have all kinds of different formats coming through on our web page. Trey, N5KO, who was on the committee, created a file format which everyone would have to use to submit the logs. He was also involved with ARRL on a project with similar objectives. And the question came up about what to call it. One magazine would certainly object to calling it either the ARRL format or the *CQ* format. So, he came up with the Cabrillo format, which was the name of the junior college where he was learning Spanish next to his house, Cabrillo College. He created a universal format, which now has commonality across all contests, so the sponsors can use it to check logs.

The other thing is that John, K2MM, set up the web page to let each user have a password to see their log-checking reports and their logs to make sure they were okay. Eventually we decided to go one step further and have open logs, and so that happened as well. I think the CQ WW was the first to have these ideas. People could look at PJ1B's log or K1AR's log or any log that they wanted to. They could get information about propagation, etc. It was sort of fun to look at a VU log and see that they were in a totally different contest than you.

NCJ: You remind me of the classic K3EST line that you used to use with me and others. And that is, "Even when you tune on a dead band, they're all there." Even though you can't hear them, right?

K3EST: They're all there. Everybody's on the air. It's just that propagation might prevent you from hearing them.

NCJ: To see all of that innovation we used to try out on the contest community, and frankly, the vast majority of things were well received. There's always opposition from some on anything that you do. But, I think the log-checking project that was produced and others carried on after you retired was significant and continues to be so.

One of the things that I've always admired about you is that you like to do crazy stuff on the radio. Some of those activities we've maybe heard of but never got involved with. I'm thinking about the days

when you were chasing Oblasts and Russians. To this day, you've got a remarkable QSL card collection, is that right?

K3EST: That's probably true. Back in the day — and first of all, I'd like to thank Willy UA9BA, for his nice remarks about me; we had a great time together. Back in the 1970s I realized — I was living in Maryland at the time — and I thought, "How can I learn about propagation?" I realized that if I just worked Russians, I'd know everything there is to know about propagation to the north, since the country spans everything from northwest to northeast. About three times a week I'd drive about 45 minutes down to W3AU's house. I'd call CQ for maybe 3 hours each evening when it was very easy to work central Asians and Russians. And eventually I got almost all of the oblasts, and I needed somebody to help me work the last ones. Willy stepped up to help, setting up schedules to work some of the rarest ones and getting the QSL cards.

NCJ: And then, of course, I think a lot of people don't realize that you are sort of a big dog in the IOTA world these days, and that has been capturing your fancy.

K3EST: Well, I needed something to do after I was retired from the committee I got started working on that. I was interested in islands, and I was interested in the history of islands. Eventually I was asked to help out in part of the IOTA process.

NCJ: This leads into a question as we wrap up. Going by a simple calculation, you are either in or approaching year 60 in this hobby. That's kind of mind boggling when you think about that. Doing anything for 60 years is really a pretty remarkable achievement, including breathing.

K3EST: That part is important.

NCJ: So, what keeps the fire in the belly going for you? I mean, how many more 5905s do you have left in you?

K3EST: Well, recently I became interested in working all Japanese cities, Guns, and KU's. It takes a long time, and actually was a lot of fun. I think I am the first North American to do all three. That's the sort of thing that keeps me going — the challenge. But I've never lost sight of the fact that radio is damn magical. It really is amazing to sit in one place and talk to some guy far away, and talk about anything, and all of a sudden you can't talk to him because propagation changes. It's not the same thing as *Skype*, or something like that, where you're talking to one person. This way anyone in the world can listen to you. And they can call you. As for contesting, after a while, you don't try to win anymore. You try to do the best you can, let's put it that way. Probably like most people in contesting, when you get on casually, it means you really are getting on the best you can. So when I get on a contest now, say, I get on 40 meters, I try to work all of the multipliers I can. That's fun for me.

If you don't mind, I'd like to mention one thing that we sort of skipped over, and that's Fred Laun, K3ZO.

NCJ: Oh, please do.

K3EST: I'd like to mention the fact that when I was working the Russians back in the late 1970s, I heard on the television that a US diplomat had been shot in Argentina. It was Alfred Laun, K3ZO. Fred and I have known each other since the mid 1960s. I was his QSL manager when he was in Thailand. Wow, this was terrible! I noticed that he was transported first to the Canal Zone and then to Sibley Memorial Hospital in DC. I went over and saw him, and he told me he was going to be in Washington for a while and was looking for a place to live. I told him I was renting a house in Maryland, and that maybe he'd be interested in looking at it. He came over and bought the house. [Laughs].

That's how simple that worked. Fred bought the house, and I stayed there, and, between Fred and me, the station was on almost 24 hours a day. Nobody is more active than Fred in terms of being on the air. It was because of him that I learned about perseverance. We had lots of nice talks about Southeast Asia and other places he was stationed. Fred was a real influence on my life, and I want to thank him for that.

NCJ: A lot of people share that affinity. Fred is just an amazing person. You really strike a chord with me and many of readers I am sure — radio and exchanging reports and all that is one thing. The whole social aspect of it, it's so amazing to me and I'm sure to you. We could go almost anywhere in the world and there's a pillow and a bed for us if we want it. Isn't that something?

K3EST: Yes, that's very true. As you have probably done, I've travelled plenty of places in the world, in my younger days especially. You find out, when you go to these places and you contact somebody ahead of time, and they say, "Oh my gosh, let's meet for dinner." So we meet for dinner and they say, "I've got a bed at my place," and you say okay. The next time they may be in the States, they can stay at my place, and it's no problem. It's this wonderful first-name hobby, where everyone is known by their first name, that makes friendship easy.

NCJ: That's the part about contesting, you know, when contesting gets criticized for using up the bands and all that kind of stuff. Our hobby should be blessed to have people who are so excited about radio as we are, and utilize the airwaves, and keep it in the hands of amateurs, and not other applications that would take it away from us.

Is there any one closing thought that you might have, Bob, as you talk to the readers seeing this? Let's call it K3EST's words of wisdom. If you could look at the world of contesting today, the good, bad, and the ugly and everything in between. What message do you have for our readers and fellow contesters?

K3EST: Essentially we're all here because we love contesting. We love the challenge, and, most of all, if we give it some thought, we love the friendships we've forged over all the years. Personally, I, K3EST, want to thank everyone for all the contributions and input they've given to me over all my years as CQ WW director, making those 35 or so years exciting and rewarding. I want to thank each one of you personally.

Contesting itself covers a very broad range of interests. The thing you can do is to choose whatever is of interest to you and to maximize what you do with it. Have as much fun with it as possible. Winning is not everything. In fact, most people who enter contests don't win. They enter to have fun.

NCJ: That's great. I think the key point there is really all about having fun.

So Bob, I just want to close by saying thanks for all of your insights, and some of the inside scenes. You've got 60 years in, and I'm honored to have shared 40 of them with you. I really have viewed you over the years as one of my mentors and frankly a hero. And most of all a dear friend. Thank you for joining us today, Bob.

K3EST: I appreciate that very much John. I really feel the same way about you, and all the friends I've made in contesting.