



T. R. McELROY
World's Fastest Telegrapher

J. R. McElroy's Chats

PART III

How to Conduct a Code Contest

"What about code contests, Mac, tell us something about how they run 'em and all the rest."

Just as sure as I'm sitting here at my trusty Underwood, some hoarse voiced fellow in the center of the audience will throw that question at me every time I get before a group of hams for an evening's discourse on code and a code demonstration.

Not only that, but last week while I was visiting the New York office of American Radio Telegraphists Association, I found that a bunch of the commercial operators wanted to get the low-down on tournaments. So here goes. I don't feel exactly like writing this morning. My fingers are especially clumsy and my eyes more than customarily bleary. Must of been something I et!

Before I get going on the code business, however, I'd like to make mention of one observation I made on this trip I've just completed which will probably be interesting to a lot of hams. You'd be surprised at the large numbers of commercial men who are enthusiastic amateurs. I was. I'll bet I talked with a dozen ops at ARTA who wanted to know my ham call, explaining that they whiled away many weary sea hours listening in on the amateur bands. I don't know much about that racket—that ham band stuff. But I thought that a lot of those who read this sheet must be interested to know that so many commercials do listen and so many commercials agree that the proportion of good fists among the hams certainly equals that percentage among ships operators.

And now for the story. First of all—to the best of my knowledge there has never yet been run off on a large scale, a code contest the rules of which strictly limit contestants to amateurs! If there were I'd never have been admitted. I'd like, sometime, to see some section group of hams run off a contest with plenty of publicity and confine it to hams, and hams alone. I'd say that a ham might mean an active radio operator who is not employed as a radio or telegraph operator and who has not been a radio or telegraph operator for at least five years prior to the contest. If we did that, we'd have the real champion amateur radio code operator! Any clubs desiring further data on this, are welcome to write to me.

And now for contest rules. I think that the best run contest I ever participated in was the one at Chicago in 1933. I lost that one, too, by the way. An old pal of mine won. Feller named Joe Chaplin who is now with Press Wireless, and a crackerjack operator.

We started that one off at 40 w.p.m. and ran upwards in a kind of elimination series until the winner was selected. Here it is in detail:

Material for contests is selected by the president or secretary of the club running it. Or, in the case of a larger and more important contest, by a contest committee, or by the nearest radio inspector. It consists of easy reading, plain English press, selected out of any daily newspaper. Unusual words, peculiar names and figures are deleted. The material is, in brief, a very clear, smooth

running, easy reading story with any words or phrases that might be difficult to grasp at high speed deleted and more common words and phrases substituted, to make it read smooth.

That part of the affair is perfect. But my objection has always been that the material has no punctuation and is usually copied on single-case mills. I would figure the ideal condition or rule to be that the material be considered plain English press, as it is, and that it be put down as press should be. With correct capitalization and punctuation. And my emphatic suggestion would be that such rules be embodied in any important contest. That the material must be punched on a perforator with correct punctuation and that it be copied correctly punctuated and capitalized. That kind of copy could form the basis for the securing of aid of some local important newspaperman to be one of the judges, with the resultant better chance for greater publicity for the club.

After the material is selected, it is punched out on a perforator which is a machine similar to a typewriter, excepting that when a letter is hit, perforations are made in a paper tape, like a typewriter ribbon, corresponding with the dots and dashes of that letter. Later the tape is run through an automatic transmitter wherein tiny pins shoot through the perforations on the tape to make contact and translate perforations into dots and dashes at speeds governed by the motor running the transmitter.

The material is perforated by some organization having access to a perforator. These are made by Teletype Company in Chicago, and are used by Western Union or Mackay Radio or any of the larger communication companies. And they are always glad to have one of their men punch out material for a club contest, if they are approached right. In this connection I might add that I'd probably be glad to take care of things of this nature for clubs if other sources fail them.

The roll of perforated tape is sealed in an envelope with the contest material and the seal broken at the beginning of the contest.

Tournament room is provided for in accordance with the number of contestants, and in the larger cities typewriters are usually provided at no cost by the typewriter companies who figure this a form of good will or indirect advertising. Same with head-phones.

The automatic transmitter used is a Creed automatic head or the more up-to-date and improved Boehme automatic head. There is a feller in Chicago, named Frank Borsody, who occasionally makes an automatic of his own design which functions very well and costs a small fraction of the commercial type. In fact I've used one of his heads for some time past. However, on these automatics if a club experiences difficulty in securing the use of one, I'd probably arrange that, too. This code contest racket is quite a hobby with me and I'm always glad to do whatever I can to help any clubs.

There is set up in the contest room an audio oscillator—either made up with tube

and transformer or a General Radio 1000-cycle oscillator. The oscillator note is running constantly and the make and break in the phones is at the transmitter head. Another thought in this connection is that it would be a wonderful feature of any contest to have the signal on a good loudspeaker also, so that the audience could hear what the contestants were copying. This would not bother contestants because the phones on their heads keep out any disturbance.

Getting down to the beginning of the contest itself. The envelope is broken open by one of the judges. The roll of tape is placed on a spindle similar to a motion picture reel and beginning of the roll placed into the transmitter. Previously the transmitter has been adjusted to approximately 40 w.p.m. Words per minute are determined by five letters to the word. The tape is sent through at the opening speed of 40 w.p.m for five minutes, and then jumped to 42 w.p.m. and so on upwards. But here is where my ideas differ again.

Men in a contest are under a terrific handicap. The mental strain is great. As an example, I know a feller, Benny Sutter, who held the title some years back at something around 50 w.p.m., which is not fast at all. Benny can copy nearer 60 w.p.m. than 50. But like all of us, the nerves go to pieces in the strain of a contest. Benny is working for Press Radio now, with Joe Chaplin, and they both copy regularly, plain English press at better than 50 w.p.m., all in the line of a day's work.

I suppose, in connection with this mental strain angle of tournaments, that it is only fair for me to mention that an old time telegraph operator pal of mine, Candler in Chicago, deserves a lot of credit for his part in working with us toward the minimizing of the difficulties in this particular connection. The fact is, I'm really happy to have the chance to give full credit to him for his assistance to me along these lines.

To save time and to save razzing the nerves of all concerned, I would say start the tape at 40 w.p.m. and run for 2 minutes only. Then about 42 w.p.m. and then 45 w.p.m. and from that point upwards, increase the speed at about 1 to 3 words per minute at two-minute intervals, the judges picking up papers at each speed and disqualifying contestants on the basis of errors.

My idea on errors would be this: no such thing as errors. Typographical errors, all okay. All men can't be expert typists. But actual telegraphic errors, I feel, should throw a man out. Why, I can copy as high as eighty words per minute BUT with plenty of errors. What is the difference whether a man copies fragmentally at 80 w.p.m. or copies with a flock of errors at 60 w.p.m.? I would urge that the contest rules eliminate any contestant with more than, say, 5 per cent errors, and that the winner be judged on that basis. For example: they start at 40 w.p.m. That would be 80 words in a two-minute run. A man with four errors would have 5 per cent errors and would be okay. With five errors or more he would be eliminated. Errors mean each letter copied wrong. Although

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I would allow a contestant to type over to correct an error due to clumsy typing.

On the basis of those rules, let us say we get up to 60 w.p.m., which would be 120 words in two minutes. A man could have six errors and still be within the five per cent, and the contestant with the best copy at six errors would be the winner. But suppose a contestant, typing fast, failed to capitalize the word Chicago, and then realized his mistake and shot back and corrected his typographical error. I would say it is not an error. Because in press work for newspapers an operator is permitted such typographical corrections and it would be penalizing an operator on his typing alone to debit him with an error such as that, when he corrected it during contest.

On the basis of all my years of experience in code contests, I would say that the most desirable feature I can think of is the requiring of contestants to correctly capitalize and punctuate with the resultant greater publicity for all concerned through the fact that newspapers generally would recognize such copy as actually constituting real press copy. The next desirable feature is putting signals on a loud speaker for all to hear; and the next, keep it down to two minutes to save nerves of all concerned.

I'll soon give you a story on sending tournaments. Meanwhile, 73s to all.



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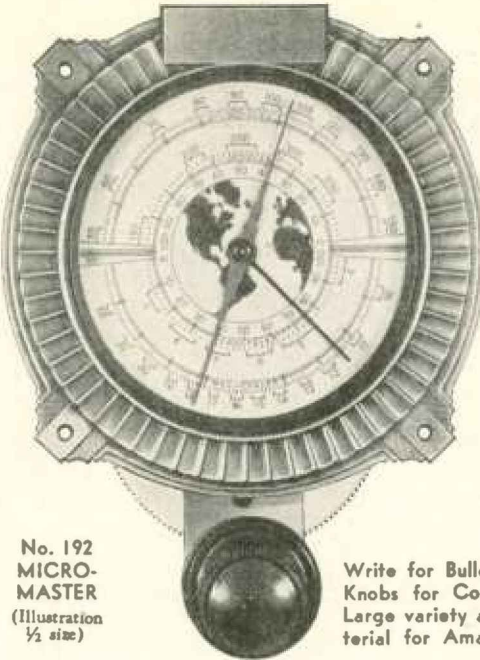
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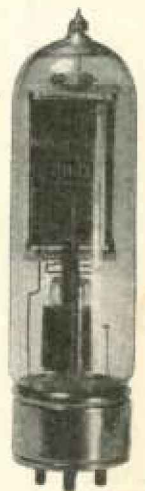
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