

## A Christmas Trip To Cortlandt Street

by Mel Comer

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**A** few days before Christmas some time in the early 1920s, my grandfather escorted me from my home in West Orange, New Jersey to that fabulous radio market in New York City known as Cortlandt Street. Even then, the area was well known for its many radio shops selling new, used and surplus equipment. The radio craze had just exploded, and radio was soon to become a household word.

Before then, radio was in the hands of professionals, the occasional tinkerer picking up local stations on his crystal set, and radio hams transmitting with their spark rigs. The latter were well on their way to making developments that would lead to the replacement of spark with continuous wave signals generated by tubes.

But by the time of our Cortlandt Street trip, rooftops in residential areas had sprouted all kinds of wires and insulators--some with BIG lightning switches for grounding during electrical storms. Four-wire flat-top antennas with spreaders could be seen looking in every direction! The longer and higher ones promised the best results.

The roofs of multi-tenant apartment houses became tangled masses of confusion. Wires crossed everywhere. Some were shorted or torn away, leading to heated discussions among their owners. And more and more antennas were appearing every day.

Inexpensive crystal sets were the order of the day. Factory-made ones were available, but "Make Your Own Radio" articles appeared in newspapers and magazines everywhere. You wound your own coils, found a chunk of galena and a fine wire "cat's whisker," and put up a nice long antenna (or "aerial" as it was usually called).

It was a bonanza for the radio shops of the day, who packaged exotic minerals in small round wood boxes bearing names such as "Xtra Loud Sens Crystal," "Death Valley Crystal" (a popular one!) "Du-Tec Xtal by Dubilier," "Foote's Pyrite," and "Silicon by Bunnell". Cat's whiskers came packaged in small glass tubes, some labeled "Super-Fine." All collector's items today.

The crystal set required endless probing with that fine-wire cat's whisker to find a sensitive spot on the galena. Imagine what a boon it was to the listener when vacuum tube detectors came into common use.

In some areas, nearby high powered commercial spark stations would come blasting in, sending high-speed code generally unintelligible to the listener. Some manufacturers offered wavetraps to tune out the offending signals. Some were effective, but if you lived next door to a spark station - OUCH!!!

Later in the era, table sets using tubes appeared. Housed in furniture cabinets, the easy-to-tune radios were ready to go at the flick of a switch. Now you could concentrate on trying to pick up news and entertainment from the few broadcast

stations existing then.

Conversations with neighbors were often full of such questions as "How far did you get last night?" "Did you hear KDKA Pittsburgh?" "Philadelphia?" "Chicago?" "Ever get Des Moines, Iowa? Boy!!-that one was a doozy to add to the list!." The "DX bugs" were always trying, buying, experimenting--anything to improve reception.

Radio advertisements featured call letters of stations from hard-to-get localities in order to highlight the qualities of the sets being offered. "East coasters--can you get California?" (Always the big come-on.) Dig deeper--in your pockets! Let's go!

Anyway, there we were on Cortlandt Street. At the far end, near the river, we came to a store so loaded inside that the sidewalk was piled high with the spillover--mostly junked marine sets. Take your pick for a few bucks and haul it away! Wireless Specialty! Amrad! National Electric!, the IP's!-- all with those beautiful shiny nickel dials, multiple switch taps, detector units. The ones that had missing parts or were bashed up were really dirt cheap.

There seemed to be little interest in these government-surplus long-wave receivers--just a few fellows salvaging parts. Picked-over carcasses were often pushed out to the gutter for the trash man to dispose of. Imagine if a place like this existed TODAY!!

Now we rounded the corner to Fulton Street. Here at number 45 we found the world-famous Electro Importing Company, with Hugo Gernsback presiding! Inside was shelf after shelf of beautiful, well-organized equipment. Sophisticated clerks waited behind the counters to explain the features and operation of the gear.

Adjacent to this store building was the laboratory of Mr. McCandless, who manufactured DeForest's spherical Audions. When the E. I. Company came out with their early spherical Audion control unit, purchasers could just run next door to pick up a tube. However, this was a dying market because the new Radiotron UV-200 detector tube had been introduced. But as we poked around in the E. I. Store, we saw several of the wood-based spherical Audion control units tucked and forgotten in a remote corner. The highlight of my day came when Grandpop purchased a brand new E. I. loose coupler as my Christmas present!

Further up Cortlandt Street, there were no end of famous radio stores--Davega and many others-- all displaying beautiful cabinet radios in their windows. Many of them featured the new UV-200. But I wondered who would want to pay those fabulous prices when the real fun and joy was came from building your own set.

Traveling back across the Hudson River towards home, I happily clutched my E.I. Co. package along with the latest issue of Radio News. What fun it was then to build up those early sets from scratch!

<sup>1</sup> *The Antique Radio Gazette* was the official publication of the Antique Radio Club of America. ARCA merged with The Antique Wireless Association in the spring of 1994, and the content that appeared in the Gazette during its 1972-1994 publishing history is now part of the AWA archives. Though edited to conform to *The OTB's* current standards of style, this article appears essentially as originally published.