

## **Dr. Ralph "Doc" Muchow: 1917-2000: A Friend Gone But Not Forgotten**

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*As soon as news of Dr. Ralph Muchow's death last March became public, I contacted The Antique Radio Club of Illinois and asked if they could supply us with an article touching on both the man and his famed collection. Art Bilski, Director of Public Relations for ARCI, took on the job and promptly supplied us with this very moving and personal account. He also provided the photos for the article and arranged for us to use the eye-catching panoramic view of the museum originally photographed for Smithsonian Magazine.*

*Long-time AWA members remember Dr. Muchow's impressive Old Equipment Contest entries at our annual conference, and AWA records show that in 1983 he won the Thompson "Best of Show" award. It should also be noted that the Doctor was a Fellow of the prestigious Radio Club of America.*

*I can't resist sharing a personal memory of Dr. Muchow. In the late 1960s, I moved to Chicago with a truckload of possessions that had been in storage for many years. Included was a large collection of battery sets and related artifacts that I decided should now be thinned out. I put an ad in the paper, and among the prospective buyers was a lean scholarly-looking man who seemed remarkably knowledgeable about my wares.*

*I won't say he was exactly snobbish about my stuff--but he let me know that he already had at least one of everything I offered. He did purchase a few things "to use as trading pieces," he said. Among the items was my extra Music Master horn. The years had not been kind to its pot-metal base--which was full of cracks and other distressing faults.*

*I was quite embarrassed about even showing it, and suggested it might take a pattern maker to mold and cast a new base. "...or a dentist," he replied in a tone that assured me that the horn would be looking pristine in short order. I've thought about that conversation off and on over the years--imagining the doctor at work on the base in his office, dental tools in hand, efficiently filling cavities with porcelain or amalgam.--MFE*

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**I**n downtown Elgin, Illinois, stands an unpretentious looking two-story office building. The kind of building you expect to visit for an appointment with your doctor or dentist. But for many years, only one dentist operated out of the building: Doctor Ralph Muchow. The remainder of the building--24 rooms in all--was filled with Doc Muchow's incredible 3,400-piece radio collection, possibly the world's biggest.

It all started in the 1920s when the Doc, fascinated by radio as a youngster, began building crystal sets. His passion for radio led him to move to progressively more complicated tube sets as the technology advanced. He kept pace with the art and science of radio right up through the sophisticated multi-tube receivers of the 1940s. No repair or restoration job on a pre-World War II radio ever stumped him, and this knowledge and ability became

extremely useful as he built his private collection.

Dr. Muchow graduated from Northwestern University Dental School in 1939. He served in the U.S. Army as head of the dental survey office at Camp Ellis in Illinois (1943) and transferred to Percy Jones Hospital in Battle Creek Michigan the following year. In 1946 he established roots in the town of Elgin Illinois, practicing dentistry there until his retirement in 1999.

Though most serious radio collectors know of Dr. Muchow's accomplishments in our hobby, it is not as generally known that in the 1930s he was a nationally-ranked ping-pong player. In fact, he was the top-ranked table tennis player in Illinois, and second nationally,

from 1937 to 1939. In 1988 he was inducted into the city of Elgin's Sports Hall of Fame because of these distinctions.



Dr. Muchow shows off his 1930s Atwater Kent "Fontana."

Despite his early attraction to radio, it wasn't until 1968 that he began to collect seriously. Among the many stories he shared with us about his collection was one about how he got started. One day in the late 1960s, as he was walking past an Elgin antique store, he spotted two old radios in the window. The proprietor had no information about the sets but did say that they were not working. After negotiating for a bit, Doc bought both radios for \$35. Within a few days both radios were again working. One of them, a beautiful Atwater Kent Breadboard Model 10 still in the collection, is probably worth more than \$1,000 today.

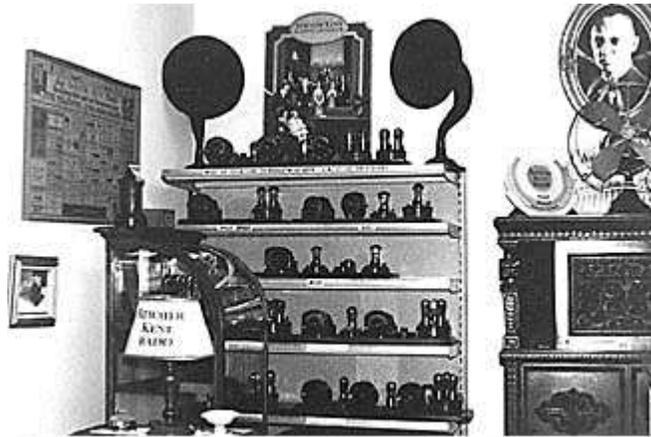
As with many dentists, the Doctor would close his office every Wednesday. But instead of playing golf, he would go hunting for radios. As the Wednesdays rolled on, the collection grew..and grew! Originally stored in the basement of his home, it quickly outgrew the limited space. And as with this author's collection, the radios began showing up in every room of the house.

Finally Carole, Doctor Muchow's beloved wife, put her foot down and the radios moved to the office building where Doc had his practice. Slowly and surely, as tenants moved out of the building, the collection continued to expand. Today it fills the entire building.

Despite his 30-year immersion in the hobby and his acquisition of some of the rarest radios in the world, Doctor Muchow never lost that radio interest and "fever" that he had as a young boy. I was attending a bi-monthly meeting of the Antique Radio Club of Illinois

last year and Doc, as always, was in attendance. He had in his hand one of those new transistor radios powered by a hand-cranked gyro--just given to him by his son Steve. The sparkle in his eye and the joy in his voice of course reflected his pleasure at receiving a sensitive gift from his son. But I suspect it was the same sparkle that was present more than 70 years ago when he built his first crystal radio.

As the years passed, Doctor Muchow met and kept in contact with fellow collectors throughout the world. He became one of the earliest members of the Antique Radio Club of Illinois. Once the club was formed it was only a matter of time until the radio swap meets began. Today, Radiofest (held each August in Elgin, Illinois) is one of the largest gatherings of radio collectors in the United States. And each August, come rain or shine, the Doctor would be out there, looking at all the radios, swapping stories, and meeting new and old friends. An award in Dr. Muchow's honor is given each year to the "Best of Show" radio entered in the annual contest. The Doc would personally present these awards adding to their significance.



A small section of the museum's Atwater Kent display.

Each year, in conjunction with Radiofest, Doctor Muchow would open his private not-for-profit museum for viewing. This event became a family affair with immediate family and grandchildren all participating in the tour. Just this last year I escorted a news reporter over to the museum for an interview. We were early so we walked around, on our own, from room to room. Although I had been there many times before, the impact of so many working radios in one place was breathtaking.

Immediately after I introduced the reporter to Dr. Muchow, they formed a bond like that between teacher and student. Doc could talk for hours about radios to anyone who would listen and he never tired of telling the stories about each and every radio. His mind was sharp and I suspect he could remember where each radio in the collection came from.



The Doctor and his museum pose for a Smithsonian feature article. (From Smithsonian Magazine for February, 1997. Photo by Henry Groskinsky.)

Doctor Ralph Muchow is deservedly recognized as one of the founding fathers of radio collecting and he will forever be part of the Antique Radio Club of Illinois. I

doubt that anyone will ever be able to duplicate the collection either in terms of numbers or depth. Neither will anyone be able to duplicate the man.

This year, during Radiofest, the museum will be shuttered and dark. Its future remains unknown as the family considers all possible options. But no matter where the Doctor is, I am sure that he is still surrounded by the radios of yesteryear--perhaps listening to The Shadow, Jack Armstrong, and other radio shows of his childhood.

Our deepest sympathies are extended to the family. The Doctor may be gone but he will never be forgotten. To those of us who are avid radio collectors, he represented the dream that we all cherish. But Dr. Ralph Muchow was more than just a radio collector and family man. He lived a full and active life and will forever be missed.