

## **My Father's Radio**

by Corey Flintoff

My father's name was Al. He was a steamfitter. He drank boilermakers, and he drank too much, but in every other respect, he was a great dad. He'd grown up in Tacoma, Washington during the Depression, so he could turn his hand to anything. He'd cut brush in a C.C.C. camp when he was a teenager (afterward, he could never stand pancakes, because some days that's all they got to eat, three times a day). He'd boxed in fight clubs, and gone down to Panama on a merchant freighter. He was an optimist. If my mother's motto was "don't count on it," his was "why the hell not?"

My father loved to hunt and fish. He knew how to work on cars and "kickers," which is what he called outboard motors. We lived in Fairbanks, Alaska, and when the weather was so cold the car wouldn't start, he'd warm up the crankcase with his old-fashioned brass blowtorch.

My father loved to build stuff. He built our house on Noble Street and the cabin on Summit Lake. Everything he built was made to last. One spring, he and I built a kite to fly on Creamer's Field. The cross pieces were strips of building lathe and the sail was butcher paper. It had silk neckties for a tail. It must have weighed as much as I did. I remember he got red as a turkey from running with it, and when it finally did get airborne, it nearly jerked him off his feet.

But my father could be delicate, too. When I was around 10, he and I built a crystal radio set as a Cub Scout project. Our receiver had the classic oatmeal box wrapped with copper wire as a tuner, and we used a springy little wire called a cat's whisker to tickle a lump of galena crystal and rectify the signal. The finished product had my father's signature sturdiness, because every piece was precisely fitted and screwed to a heavy pinewood base that had been shellacked until it gleamed like a coffin lid. My father was immensely proud of the result, and so was I.

When we connected the antenna and coaxed our first staticky signal out of the air, we were triumphant. Mind you, the sound in the bakelite earphone was a weak and wavery thing, like an insect voice from the bottom of a bucket, when in fact, the radio station tower was in that very same Creamer's Field just a half mile from town. I was tactless enough to point out that, with the sleek plastic Hallicrafter's radio in the next room, we could pull in not one, but two stations, with perfect clarity. My father, who'd given this project a week's worth of his spare time, was not in the mood for comparison shopping.

Even though radio was nothing new to me, that crystal radio made a powerful impression. It came out of the air like magic, and all you needed was a contraption of wires and mineral to catch it. Neither my father nor I knew that we were looking at my future.

My father died just a year or so later. He would probably have preferred for me to make something of myself, to become a mining engineer, which is what he'd wanted for himself. But still, if I'd told him I was going into radio, I like to think he would've said, "why the hell not?"

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