

## The Six-Volt Zenith

by

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*When you have eliminated the impossible,  
whatever remains, however improbable,  
must be the truth.*

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle  
English author

**B**right rays of a warm October sun, now low in the west, came through Ed's open window casting a glare on the blank screen of his word processor. After living in air conditioned comfort all summer, it was good to open up the house again and enjoy the sights and sounds of early fall. He pushed the keyboard aside, removed his reading glasses, and turned toward the window. If he was selective with his viewpoint Ed could almost imagine he was a kid again back on the farm. Out by the curb two maple trees, much like those in the yard of their farmhouse years ago, were nearing their peak fall color.

In the unkempt flower bed near his south window, tall grass and weeds competed with a few remaining flowers for control of the area. Ed turned up the sound of his hearing aid. The buzzing of bumble bees became audible as they sucked sweet nectar from a few scraggly flowers; last survivors of a late summer drought.

Times were hard in the thirties. Most farmers had plenty to eat in those depression years, but there was little money for luxuries -- luxuries meaning anything you could do without. Ed smiled as he thought of his start in Ham radio--it must have been in the summer of 1938. He remembered the day well; it marked the beginning of years of excitement and pleasure that only ham radio can bring....

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It was late afternoon. Ed had just started to the barn with his milk pails -- he paused when he heard the familiar sound of their old pickup truck -- his father coming home from a neighbor's farm auction. Last night his father and mother spent quite some time studying the auction sale bill. A small 'x' was placed by each needed item, along with the maximum amount they planned to bid. At the top of their needed list was a cream separator. A decision was reached to spend as much as ten dollars for it -- but not one cent more.

Turning off the dusty lane, the tired young farmer brought his worn pickup to a stop under the large maple tree by the front porch. Ed could tell by the smile on his dad's face that all had gone well. He could see the cream separator standing proudly in the bed of the truck, tied securely to the wood stock rack. On the right side of the seat, Ed could see a large item carefully covered with his dad's blue denim coat.

Ed's father opened the truck door. With great care he picked up the covered object and carried it to the front porch where he gently lowered it onto the weathered pine flooring. With a flourish worthy of the great Houdini, he pulled his coat off of the glistening walnut cabinet. Ed fondly remembered how his father, who with a faint smile on his normally serious face, explained why he spent three dollars on something so frivolous as a Six-volt Zenith 'farm' radio.

"These radios cost over fifty dollars new," he said, "and this one is only two years old. "Furthermore," he continued, "it will cost us practically nothing to use. And those fellows up at Zenith -- they thought of everything -- this radio will even work on electric when it comes through here. All we need do is turn this little knob on the back and that changes it over to an electric radio.

He explained to his patient wife how they could switch batteries every week or so, between the pickup truck and the radio. That way they could keep the battery charged at no cost. Ed remembered the smile of approval on his mother's face. That afternoon, as they stood admiring the 'six volt Zenith', the young farm couple could little imagine how much that three dollar radio would change their son's life.

The 'tombstone' Zenith (a term used in later years because of the shape of the radio cabinet) worked perfectly. Within weeks, they considered the second-hand radio an indispensable part of the family. Ed remembered that night long ago when he discovered the radio would tune in people talking to each other. His dad thought of the short wave setting on the old Zenith as 'foreign broadcast' and had little interest in listening to a language he could not understand. Ed seldom had an opportunity to listen to programs at night, other than those selected by his father.

Then came the night that marked a turning point in Ed's young life. After their evening meal, Ed's parents made a trip into town to look for a new wood burning heating stove. They knew that rural electrification lines, now under construction, would reach their farm sometime in the near future, however they intended to continue using wood for heat as there was a surplus of timber on their farm. Ed was left alone with the Zenith.

Turning the bandswitch to (what he now knew, was back then) the 160 meter band, Ed heard a strong signal with a man giving what seemed to be a lesson on the Morse code.

At regular intervals the instructor would stop his lesson and announce, "This is amateur radio station W9BSP in Olathe, Kansas." As he listened, Ed had little understanding of what Marshall Ensor, W9BSP, was talking about, but it stirred his imagination like nothing had before. He caught a glimpse of the magical world of wireless that might open up if he would just continue to listen. In later life he would learn that he was not alone -- that fall over 500 newcomers joined the ranks of amateur radio, thanks to W9BSP and his sister Loretta Ensor, W9UA.

When Ed's parents returned home from West Plains he was still listening to W9BSP.

"Dad, I'm listening to a fellow over in Olathe, Kansas giving radio lessons," said Ed trying to suppress his excitement. "He gives lessons on code and radio theory over his short wave radio. May I please use the radio for an hour every night? I sure would like to learn radio."

His father smiled. "Well now, Martha, what do you think about this? I think we could spend an hour reading or something while Ed listens to the radio. A young man can't learn enough in these times. What he learns just might come in handy later on."

"I agree with you completely," answered the attractive farm wife, her blue eyes sparkling. "We have been spending too much time sitting in front of that radio anyway. I'll declare, it seems we hardly know each other anymore."

Through the fall months, and well into December Ed continued to listen nightly to W9BSP. He learned to copy code, radio theory, and about the ARRL. Ed took full advantage of this new knowledge. With the aid of an ARRL license manual, a 1938 Radio Amateurs Handbook, and his new subscription to QST magazine, the mystery of Ham radio began to disappear. As his understanding of the hobby progressed, the desire to become a participant was overwhelming.

In the spring Ed took a bus to Kansas City and passed his class B examination. His W9 call arrived a few weeks later.

Ed, and a couple of school friends went to the Kansas wheat harvest that summer. He earned enough money to buy a SW-3 and build his first transmitter. He felt fortunate; the long awaited rural electric lines to their farm were finally completed soon after he obtained his call. Otherwise, the cost of batteries to power both a transmitter, and a receiver might well have made ham radio a luxury he could not afford. He smiled as he thought about his first station. He still had the SW-3, but the transmitter with push-pull 45's had been dismantled long ago. Anyway, it was only the first of many transmitters -- Ed could remember most of them.

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A delivery truck rumbled past the Maple trees. The sound brought Ed back to reality.

“Well, enough daydreaming,” he said, “if I am going to get this classified ad in the November copy of ‘The Emitter’ I better get to work.

Slowly he began to type--

*For Sale. After 57 years I am retiring from Amateur Radio. I offer the following for sale. One National SW3 with coils for 20, 40, and 80 meters. One Hallicrafters SX-28 w/speaker, one RME 45, One Kenwood 820 transceiver, One Ten Tec Paragon, one HT, one 2 meter FM base station with antenna, one HRO-60 w/spkr One home built KW linear, one QRP rig, several boxes of parts, hundreds of QST magazines, and a 40 foot tower with a three element tri-bander and rotor. Prices negotiable. Ed Yates, 611 Maple Street.*

Ed printed out a copy of the advertisement and carried it into the living room. As he passed the TV he turned it on -- it was almost time for the evening news. As he waited for the commercials to end, he read and re-read his carefully worded lines.

“Oh yes,” he said to himself, “I may as well sell the old Zenith. I’ll dig it out of the basement and clean up the cabinet. Someone out there might be willing to pay a few bucks for it. If I’m going to quit, I may as well get rid of everything.”

The Zenith was under his operating desk behind a cardboard box full of magazines.

“I’ll just pull these magazines out from under the table -- I can go through them later,” mumbled Ed to himself. “There are a lot more around if I can remember where I stored them.”

As Ed tugged at the heavy box his eyes became level with the desk surface. He looked at the little Vibroplex Blue Racer.

“By gosh, that reminds me,” thought Ed. “I forgot to list the D-104 and my two Vibroplexes. I’ll get that ad re-written first thing in the morning. The mail man don’t come by until about 1:30 -- I’ll have plenty of time to get it in tomorrow’s mail.”

Carefully, he inspected the 110 volt cord on the Zenith. It appeared rather worn.

“I think I’ll put a new cord on this old set before turning it on,” thought Ed. “I suppose I should put in new filters and check a few by-pass capacitors also -- I don’t want to sell someone something that might blow up in their face. There is ample time to do that before the ad appears.”

He arose at his usual time the following morning. As he walked by the TV he turned it on to get the seven AM newscast. He waited for the commercial break to plug in his coffee maker. After the news he drove down to McGulley’s for a light breakfast. While eating, he kept going over the wording of his advertisement. He wanted to make sure nothing was omitted.

Ed returned home about eight and went directly to his computer. The “ad” was re-written to include his mike, bugs, and old Zenith. After proof reading the re-written copy He addressed an envelope to the newsletter editor, and took the ad out to his mailbox.

“Well, that’s that,” thought Ed. “Mother always said there was a time and place for everything. I guess my time as a ham is about to run out. Somehow it’s just not the same anymore.”

He picked up the morning paper from his driveway, went inside, poured himself a cup of coffee, then carried the paper and coffee to his easy chair in the living room. This was Ed’s favorite time of day. The doorbell rang before he finished the front page.

“Now, who in blazes could be bothering me at this time of day,” he thought. “I’ll get rid of ‘em in a hurry -- it’s probably some darn salesman.” Somewhat irritated, Ed arose and opened the door.

“Good morning, Ed” said the elderly gentleman. “I would like to look at the radio equipment you advertised. I am especially interested in the Zenith and the SW-3, however I just might take the rest of your station off your hands. Could I come in and take a look at equipment?”

Ed looked at the callers unruly white hair. He was a well dressed. Ed was desperately trying to remember if they had met before. A wisp of smoke curled up from the worn briar pipe the caller held in his hand. His carefully trimmed mustache drew attention the old gentleman’s pleasant face and friendly eyes.

*He knows my name -- I’ll bet he is one of those club members who only show up when there’s something to eat -- probably one of those collector types, he thought. I’ll bet he thinks he can buy this old stuff cheap and turn a quick profit. I’ll just play along and sooner or later I’ll remember his name. His face sure looks familiar.*

“Yeah -- sure -- ,” stammered Ed, rather confused, “and a very good morning to you. Come on in -- would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Why, yes I would,” answered the smiling gentleman as he stepped inside the well kept room. “That’s very kind of you Ed. I just made a rather long trip here, and it would be nice to relax a few minutes before we get down to business. Is it permissible to smoke in your home?”

“Oh sure, that’s perfectly fine,” answered Ed. I was a pipe smoker for years. As a matter of fact the odor of good pipe tobacco is still rather pleasant. Here, have a seat in this chair. I’ll be right back with our coffee”

Ed was stalling for time. *“How did he know my station was for sale? My advertisement is still out there in the mail box. Who is this old fellow? He seems very well educated, he’s well dressed -- and seems to have a lot of confidence. Perhaps he is a Doctor, a Dentist, or some other professional I have known.”*

Ed served his visitor a cup of steaming coffee, then sat down. He decided to come right to the point. “Now sir, if you don’t mind telling me, how did you know my station was for sale?”

“A perfectly logical question,” replied the old timer. “I can understand your curiosity. I was just about to ask you why you were selling all your gear. Are you planning on adding state of the art equipment?”

“No,” replied Ed, “I am quitting ham radio for good. There is nothing in it for me anymore.”

“Such a pity,” said his caller, “Such a pity. Perhaps you might tell me what caused your loss of interest. It would seem you were once a very active ham.”

“Oh yes, I was intensely active,” replied Ed. “sometimes I was too active. I know I spent time with ham radio that I might have spent more productive elsewhere.”

“Then you did enjoy ham radio for years -- is that correct?”

“Yes, I sure did,” said Ed.

“And now.....? As Ed’s visitor waited for a reply, he picked up an ash tray from the table by his chair -- knocked the tobacco from his pipe -- carefully re-filled it from his tobacco pouch -- then looked directly at Ed as he re-lit his pipe. Ed felt compelled to reply.

“Now, ham radio is gone. No one builds anything anymore,” answered Ed.

“Oh come now, my friend, I am sure you see all the construction articles in the ham magazines.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t -- you see I let my radio magazine subscriptions lapse a few years ago. I even let my ARRL membership go after 48 years.”

“Oh, I see,” replied Ed’s caller. “Then you may be somewhat surprised at certain developments. For example, how much are you asking for your HRO and RME-45?”

“I want fifty bucks each -- and please don’t try and talk me down on the price. Both units are in excellent condition.” *I know I’ve seen that face before..why can’t I remember,* thought Ed.

“My, my, you have lost touch with radio. I would gladly borrow the money and buy a hundred of each at that price. Are you aware of the tremendous interest in classic gear? You could get five times what you are asking. I wouldn’t be in a hurry to sell if I were you. I work a lot of CW, and many, many stations I work are running antique or home built equipment. It’s almost like radio in the thirties. Perhaps you should look at a few current magazines before selling.”

“You’re not serious,” replied Ed with a look of amazement. “You mean to tell me there is a market for those old boat anchors. Maybe I am a little out of touch.”

“Ed you should listen on seventy five -- up around 3885 Kc -- er --Khz. You’ll hear some of the best audio you can imagine. A lot of fellows are running old AM broadcast transmitters. I’ll bet your ears would enjoy hearing those old Gates, Collins, and RCA , rigs running on the ham bands.”

“That’s interesting, but what’s all this about home built gear. You say hams are building again?”

“Ed hams of all ages are building things. A lot of fellows are into QRP now and it is not unusual to work homebuilt transmitters running less than one watt. Other hams are into computers. I know several hams who take parts from old obsolete computers and add a few new parts and come up with a state of the art computer.”

“But what about older type stuff? What about tube type transmitters and receivers. They went out in the early seventies.”

“Yes, it seems tube gear lost popularity in the seventies. Almost all construction projects appearing in magazines was devoted to the latest solid state devices. Then a remarkable thing happened; as hams started collecting older gear they started building transmitters and receivers from years gone by. Why you would be surprised at how many hams are building regenerative receivers and breadboard transmitters. Yes there is something in ham radio for everyone. The market for old gear, from every period in ham

history, is strong and healthy.” answered the elderly gentleman. “A lot of hams collect and restore old gear. One of the most sought after older receivers is the National SW-3.”

“Many of our fraternity intend to leave their restored equipment to museums when they become a silent key,” said Ed’s visitor. “They want to make sure youngsters coming into our hobby will know of, and appreciate our rich heritage. But let’s get back to business, I want to take a look at that SW-3 of yours. I’ll pay you well. If it is not too much trouble I would like to try it out on 20. It’s been a long time since I tuned one of those little receivers.”

Ed reached under his desk and removed a corrugated paper box. Carefully he lifted out the little SW-3, the power supply, and three sets of coils.

“Well, there it is,” he said. “That’s my first receiver. It has not been fired up in years. There is a good chance it will have a bad filter or something.”

Ed connected the two units, plugged in a set of phones, and hooked up the antenna and ground. with his hand on the 110 volt plug and eyes on the rectifier, he plugged the set in. He and the visitor stood silently as they watched in anticipation of possible trouble. All seemed fine. Ed put on the phones and tuned across the dial. He paused -- apparently he had a station tuned in. The caller noted a smile on Ed’s face as he adjusted the regeneration -- then tuned slowly back and forth across the 20 meter band. Ed took off his phones, stood silently for a moment, then taking his handkerchief from his pocket wiped a tear from his eye. He said nothing for a long while. Then he handed the phones to the elderly visitor.

“Say,” said his unknown caller after listening to the SW-3, “that’s one heck of a receiver. It’s clean as a hound’s tooth. There is absolutely nothing as pretty as good CW on a regenerative receiver. I can just imagine the interest I’ll stir up on straight key night running a 6L6 Oscillator and using this receiver. I guess all we have to do now is arrive at a price. I see SW-3’s going from \$300.00 to over \$500.00. I’ll make you an offer of \$500.00 right now. I believe that is a fair price.”

“Oh yes, that’s more than fair,” replied Ed. “I was going to ask \$125.00 for it. But...somehow...well, you see...Ed fell silent for a moment. I have been thinking while we have been visiting...I hate to disappoint you, but I may want to keep the SW-3.”

“My good man, I understand precisely how you feel. I would never think of parting with it, if it were my first receiver. I think you just made a wise decision. Let’s forget the SW-3 and take a look at the six volt Zenith.

“Yes, of course,” answered Ed. “Last night when I dug it out of storage I found a rather deep scratch on top of the cabinet. I don’t think you would want it.”



“No matter at all, Ed,” replied the buyer, “all I need is the power supply. I will junk out the set for parts.” He removed his billfold. “Now, if you will just give me a figure I will write out a check.”

You mean you just need the parts -- I don't know -- I was kinda hoping the set would be restored and put in use“. Really, after second thought -- there is a lot of memories in that old Zenith. Perhaps I was rather hasty when I listed it for sale. I may want to clean it up and put it in my living room. It would please my father and mother to know the old set was all polished and making music again.”

“I understand your feelings perfectly. However, since you are inactive and have no plans to get on the air, I know you want to sell the HRO, and the RME. I would also like to buy the homebuilt linear.”

“Yes, I suppose you are right. There is no need to keep them. Every weekend there is a darn contest of some kind. All you can hear on the bands is CQ, test...CQ, test.....”

“I know,” answered the old gentleman. “It's really wonderful when you think about it. From the sounds of our bands on weekends a great number of our group love to contest. Contests give newcomers a chance to improve their operating skill, and many fellows get a kick competing against themselves. For example -- if you have just built a new rig it is fun to see if you can make WAS or WAC during one weekend.” And remember, fellows like you and I who are retired have five full days every week when there are no contests. Even on weekends there's are still a lot of rag-chewing QSO's on 30 and 80 meters.

“Er, - well, - you see, - I guess I never thought of it that way,” said Ed in a low voice. “But even if contests are OK there are still the DX'ers calling each other names, and causing deliberate interference. I have been called names that you wouldn't believe, and all for no reason at all that I could see. Such rudeness has no place in Amateur Radio.”

“Ed, I agree with you 100%. Rudeness and name calling have been around since the advent of radio,” said the visitor. “It is deplorable now, and it was deplorable years ago. I have raised old Ned with a lot of lid operators for their rotten CW and rudeness on the air. I even threatened 'em with an unthinkable instrument of torture. Still there are those among us who take delight in causing problems.”

“However,” continued the old timer, “Just pause and think how many hams there are that would never do such a thing. It is a very, very small percentage that cause problems. Ignore them, by letting them offend you, you are lowering yourself to their level. Take the high road and see how pleasant ham radio can be.”

“Now, Ed, let's arrive at a price on the HRO and RME. I think \$600.00 for the pair is more than fair; how do you feel about it? I have a WRL Globe Scout, and a Heath DX-60 that will make ideal companion pieces for those two receivers.”

“You have certainly given me a lot to think about,” answered Ed. “I have reconsidered, to be perfectly frank I really don’t want to sell anything. I hope I have not caused you too much trouble.”

Ed’s visitor re-lit his pipe. . “Ed,” he said, “this has been one of the most pleasant mornings I can remember. If I were you I would go out there and get that letter out of the mailbox and tear it up in little pieces.”

“That is precisely what I intend to do,” replied Ed, smiling. “I want to start cleaning up some of this gear today. I should be on the air sometime before next weekend. I have a lot of catching up to do.

“I suppose since you have nothing to sell I better be going. I have other people to see before the day is done. I have really enjoyed the visit, Ed. Perhaps we will meet again.”

“Come by anytime,” said Ed. “The coffee pot is always hot and the welcome mat out for fellow hams. By the way -- I never did get your name.

The old gentleman smiled. “Years ago, when I was tearing up the ether with ‘Old Betsy’ I was sometimes called ‘The Old Man.’ I liked that name. Good day, Ed.”

Ed walked down the porch steps with his caller, then stopped at his mailbox. He reached inside and removed the letter to ‘The Emitter’ Editor. As he tore the letter in small pieces, he turned to see which way his visitor was walking. No one was in sight. The street appeared deserted.

Ed walked into his living room and started tidying up the place. He was puzzled to find there were no ashes or match stubs in the ash tray. He reached for the visitor's coffee cup, but it was not on the table. He searched the room for some time. There was only one coffee cup -- his own. Then on the table beside the little SW-3, Ed noticed an old QST -- the 50th anniversary edition. Ed picked it up and thumbed through the pages. A picture caught his eye. “Why, that’s....that’s .....you mean.....he was just here.....Naw ..it couldn’t be. I must be drinking too much coffee. There’s simply no way.”

Ed turned on the SW-3 again. As clean CW signals rattled the diaphragms in his headphones Ed smiled....”On the other, hand maybe it was. Anywhere there is ham radio he is never far away.”

