

A Remarkable Talk -- WJ1B's Key Collection
by
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I am a member (and Vice President) of our local, Watchung Hills, NJ, amateur radio club, NPARC (www.nparc.org). During March, 2011, we had a visit and a talk by Harold Kramer (COO of the ARRL), WJ1B.

When Harold was initially invited we expected that he would want to discuss the ARRL. Instead, he said he'd like to talk about, and show us, his key and sounder collection.

When the day arrived, Harold laid out an amazing group of devices; some familiar (like a classic J38 key) and others (like a fully automatic, mechanical, dual action Melehan Valiant) that none of us had ever seen. He then gave a talk, illustrated by the keys and less familiar items, tracing the history of CW from the origins of the telegraph, through modern day. Did you know that a young Theodore Vail was deeply involved with Samuel Morse and Morse did not create the 'Morse' code by himself – I didn't? He even had a rare replica of the first Morse Code Key invented by Vail.

He traced the design of keys from initial creation, when keys were very tiring to use, through generations of improvement including the 'camelback' key.

He explained that in early railroad telegraphy the sounding devices were used to print out the incoming code. But when the printers failed (which apparently was common) the telegraphers found that they could 'read' the incoming messages by just listening to the clatter of the sounders. So began human code reception.

He went on to explain why there were shorting bars on early keys (to provide a continuous circuit through the whole telegraphy system, when the key was not in use) and followed this with the story of Bill Brown who made keys by hand from 1964 to 1979. Harold also talked about another key maker, Ted McElroy, who set the world's record for Morse code telegraphy (over 70 wpm, in 1939), a record that stands to this day.

As part of this fascinating history lesson, Harold talked about collecting telegraphic apparatus. His collection includes early professional keys and sounders as well as some wonderful amateur radio keys. He has a great website, at www.wj1b.com, that includes photos of prizes from the collection.

At the end of his talk, as he showed some of the more 'modern' keys in his collection, Harold (possibly somewhat nervously) let the audience, including some younger members present, play with these amazing pieces of history.

I know I never thought about collecting keys. My shack only has my day-to-day paddles and a Bulgarian Army straight key I use when the spirit (or 'straight key day') moves me. Now I won't key up without thinking of Harold and his historic collection!