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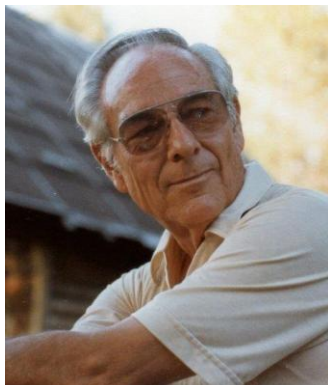
Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

First Person

Transmitter Site Access Issues: Part 2: Grader Meets Neighbor



By Tom Epperson

[October 2016] When we left Tom Epperson, he was facing a CP that was running out and a neighbor who was committed to preventing him from even getting to the property. Our story continues as we see and appreciate Tom's inventiveness to solve the literal roadblock.

In 1951, the station for which I worked, KCNA, received a Construction Permit to grow from a local 250 Watt station to a 5,000 Watt regional powerhouse.

However, the CP was issued with a deadline of six months. If construction did not begin within that time period it would not be renewed. The job was to get a road to the property where our new station would be built. No access = no station.

And with neighbors getting together to do all they could to delay any construction until the CP ran out, our chances for success were starting to run out.

At least it seemed that way, until I discovered a sneaky solution.

FINDING THE RIGHT TIME

There was only one way to try to pull off something like we needed to do. It would be when everyone was asleep.

Plans were made accordingly. First, we contacted the owner and operator of the grader we had hired and set the date to put our plan in action.

Next, I borrowed a transit from a contractor friend, and bought a bundle of what I think are called grape stakes – thin strips of wood about four feet long. I tore up an old sheet into many thin strips to be used as flags to make the stakes visible.

On the appointed day, at two o'clock in the morning, our surveyor, Gene, and I arrived at the beginning of our proposed road.

DARK AND QUIET SURVEY

Working in silence, using hand signals, we surveyed the center line of the right-of-way from the end of the graded portion to the point where the road would enter our property.

There was no moon. It was very dark but the transit proved to be effective. About every fifty feet we put down a stake with a white cloth strip tied to the top. (It was later determined that the most any stake was off the center line was three inches.)

We were now ready for the grader which was scheduled to arrive at four-thirty, so we went back to the intersection of Swan and River Road to wait for it to arrive.

NOT THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Unless someone has been out in the middle of the desert at four o'clock on a dark morning it is impossible to realize how quiet it can be. A dropped pin is easily heard.

To our dismay the silence was interrupted by the sound of the big diesel road grader seemingly still miles away. As it got closer it got louder - *a lot louder*. By the time that thing got within a half-mile of us I was sure everyone in that end of the county was awake.

So much for our stealth approach!

When it arrived at the intersection we proceeded to our project. I rode with the operator, explaining to him what we were going to do, while Gene followed in the car. Once there, I led the way on the ground ahead of the grader as it started to open the road, staying just to the right of the stakes, but as close to them as possible.

A VERY QUICK RESPONSE

We had not gone ten feet when Mr. Cohen came flying out of his house in his bathrobe. Mrs. Cohen was right behind him.

He was instantly in my face threatening to kill me if we moved another inch.

I have never, ever, seen anyone in such a fit of rage. The man did not have a gun with him but he declared he had one and would not hesitate to use it if we continued. Meanwhile, Mrs. Cohen was in front of the grader, screaming, defying it to run over her.

They were totally out of control.

I did not think the situation would come to this but considering his state of mind, I could not take the chance. I told the operator to shut down and go back to the car with Gene who would keep an eye on things while I went to the Sheriff's Office to try to get help.

BUREAUCRATS HEAD FOR THE HILLS

When I arrived at the Sheriff's Office at about 6 AM, I was told that they had people out looking for me!

Mr. Cohen had called demanding that they arrest me for grading a road on private property. Had I not had the map provided by the County Engineer, proof that it had been surveyed, and been able to explain what we were doing I would have ended up behind bars.

When the officer in charge began to see the whole picture he tried to call the County Engineer at home to verify my story. He was advised the guy had left town for the day. Attempts were made to contact other County officials. Every single one of them was out of town. What a coincidence!

Back to the map. Explain everything again.

Finally, the officer agreed that I could go back to work. He said that he would call Mr. Cohen and tell him to come to the Sheriff's Office to talk about threatening to shoot people. It was assumed that this would allow us to proceed without the threat of being shot.

BACK INTO BATTLE

When I got back to the grader the scene was very quiet and we assumed that we could proceed with no further problem.

Wrong!

The instant we started clearing the road Mrs. Cohen came charging down in front of the grader in her car, an old Chrysler convertible with a box in place of the trunk lid.

I got up in the grader with the operator to figure out what we were going to do. We tried to back off and go around her but no matter what we tried she would end up in front of us, tires spinning, dirt flying everywhere. After a few minutes it looked like a war zone with the ground all torn up and vegetation flattened.

While this was happening, I saw several cars arriving on the scene and a number of people were standing around, watching.

How did they know what was going on?

Once again, everything came to an immediate halt.

THE CAVALRY ARRIVES!

The operator was getting totally frustrated and I was getting mad so I got off the machine, went up to the car, and told Mrs. Cohen that if she did not get out of the way I was going to run over her car.

As I got back on the grader the operator and I were discussing what we were going to do next when I heard some yelling behind me.

Turning around I saw two Sheriffs cars had arrived. Ten or eleven deputies got out and walked toward us. I was asking myself "What in the Hell is going on?" as the Sergeant-in-charge came up to me asking to be briefed on the situation.

Taking him back to the car, I got out my map and explained one more time the conditions we had at the moment. We walked up the right-of-way so that he could see all of the stakes going to our property. I was very careful about what I said because I really did not know why he was there or whose side he was on.

Finally he indicated that he understood and that he saw no reason that we should not finish our job.

Yeah!!!

CALMING THE SITUATION

At this point, the Sergeant went right up to Mrs. Cohen and politely told her to move the car.

She exploded. Screaming and yelling she defied the order. In a very firm, loud voice he again told her to "move that car!" The screaming did not stop but she moved the car.

By now, a lot more cars and people had arrived. The Sergeant then told his men to keep those people back. It looked like most of them were just curious but a few of them were obviously hostile to our effort.

Several of the deputies maintained a circle around the grader as we continued to open the road. They stayed with it until we reached the far end. The others kept the onlookers where their cars were parked.

TALK OF THE TOWN

To this day I do not entirely know how the people that showed up knew about the razzoo on Swan Road.

I did learn later that one of the local stations apparently stumbled on to something at the Sheriff's Office and had included it in their morning news. Presumably someone at the Sheriff's Office who knew about the threats earlier, saw the potential for serious trouble and took action.

How or why they decided to send two car loads of deputies is beyond me. It is all the more amazing because in those days the department was not all that large; most of the officers on duty must have been out there with us.

However, the first news broadcasts that day were only the beginning of the stories that got out to the public. In fact the whole thing got totally out of hand. By late morning all of the local stations, including our own, had put something on the air about the altercation. By mid-afternoon the accounts of what had happened became bizarre.

TALK OF THE STATE

Then occurred the most incredible event of the incredible day.

It should be explained that in those days all the news was made available to the stations by teletype. National news, state-wide, whatever, it was sent or received by teletype. One of the news people at a local station sat down at their teletype machine and requested a practice line. This meant that he wanted to practice sending a story. A practice line went nowhere therefore whatever was typed went nowhere.

Oddly this time, whoever was responsible for switching the line blew it. They switched the line onto a statewide network. The guy, believing that his story would never be seen, concocted a lengthy, imaginary, but believable, chain of events of the day. Since this story was on a competing station and their statewide network of affiliates we did not hear it but we sure heard about it.

Stations all over the state included the story in their evening news. The local evening paper, not to be outdone, ran their version of the story. The upshot was that I became famous in a day that Gene and I supposedly had been shot at with everything from a BB gun to a machine gun.

At least one lawsuit resulted from the story on the practice line. Mr. and Mrs. Cohen sued the

station where it originated, but it was resolved although I never knew any of the details.

THE VICTORY DANCE

The memorable day finally ended with a new road.

It was a true road, but it went across a sand wash and was so rough that an ordinary car could not use it. Only a jeep or pickup could get through. And since it went within ten feet of the Cohen's bedroom window, they would have a fit, yelling at us every time we drove by.

Nevertheless, just before sunset George Chambers drove up the new road in his Chevy Carry-all or whatever it was, and did a war dance on our property.

The Cohen's, faced with defeat and reality, soon followed up on their pledge to buy enough adjoining property to allow the right-of-way to pass their place at an acceptable distance. And guess who graded the new road? The County did!

The opposition also, apparently in defeat, folded their tent and went away. The county put a big steel culvert in the sand wash and built up the roadway to their standards.

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In time, the road became a normal two-lane county road which ended at our property entrance. Swan road had been officially extended.

Anyone looking at map today might wonder why Swan Road, straight as an arrow over 98% of its length, suddenly jogs to the East north of River Road – exactly where the Cohen’s house was located.



Left: Swan Road as it is today, a divided highway that bends to the right.

Above: the Cohen home. The original right-of-way between the house and the road was blocked by the wall that can be seen.

That portion of Swan road, which started as a rough trail, is now a divided highway and the easement moving the road away from the Cohen place is still there. The months of planning were no longer based on an iffy situation. There were many things on hold that were suddenly turned loose.

JUST A MINOR ISSUE REMAINING

With the access victory in hand, we still had a minor issue to solve: The deadline on the Construction Permit was staring us in the face.

We had to show that we were indeed building a transmitter site, not just feuding with the neighbors.

The building was completed ASAP – it had to be done quickly – because our suppliers had started shipping. We had equipment and items like thirty-nine miles of wire that had to be installed or temporarily stored.

Before the towers could be erected the tower bases and guy wire anchors had to be in place. A lot of holes had to be dug out and concrete poured.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!

Fortunately, two or three hectic weeks of effort brought it all together and enough was accomplished to satisfy the FCC – our permit was renewed for another six months.

We then went on to finish the construction of the three towers, ground system, transmitter installation, testing, and, in due course, KCNA received its FCC Grant of License Authorization on January 3, 1952.

If I were to go into all the detail of what was done during the intervening months it would probably take a three-hundred page book. It could be titled *How to Build a Transmitter Site* with the subtitle *You Would Not Believe How Much Stuff Can Go Wrong*. Many of you likely

But, without doubt, the most memorable part was the day the road grader came to North Swan Road.

Tom Epperson’s broadcast experience at KCNA began in 1947. He was drafted in 1954 and after the Army went into Electrical Engineering, largely with Motorola.

If you would like to contact Tom, his email is: tepperson@abbacomm.net

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