



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

NAB 2011



By Phil Alexander

[April 2011] Phil takes his look at the NAB Spring Show.

Since time immemorial one of the first signs of spring has been a gathering of the broadcast clan called the NAB Convention. Today, this group assembles in mid-April at Las Vegas.

But that was not always the case.

THEN

Once, the broadcast electronics industry was a Mid-Western gathering because Collins was in Cedar Rapids, Continental in Dallas, Gates in Quincy, GE in Syracuse, RCA in Camden, etc.

Which made Chicago a good central point.

Long before there was a McCormack Place there was the Conrad Hilton, one of Chicago's premier hotels and flagship of the Hilton chain. In the 50's and 60's the entire NAB convention fit within the Hilton on Michigan Avenue in Chicago.

OFF TO SEE THE SHOW

In the spring of 1964 I had been working as Chief of a small group of stations in southern Indiana and Illinois for several months when the topic of needed equipment came up. One of the fellows in the discussion with me was the Station Manager and the other was the Sports Director. More importantly, they were both sons of the owner and for all practical purposes ran the station.

I made the remark that all the equipment of the industry would be on display at the NAB show near the end of April and we could see it all in one day. Their main objection was the time that would take them away from the station – two day's travel plus a day to see the show.

As I was a pilot and spent most of my weekends flying, I told them that with good weather we could do it in one day as Chicago was less than four hours away even in a small plane, and we could land at

Meigs field on the lakefront, less than three miles from the Hilton. This sounded like a good idea so we decided to wait and see what the weather looked like, and if that cooperated we would go.

So it was a month later that I found myself confronting a devilishly difficult crosswind landing with a vicious onshore wind from the lake on Runway 18 at Chicago's Meigs Field, which I pulled off successfully even though both my passengers were a little green around the gills.

NAB 1964

In those days getting into the show to see the exhibits was a little more difficult than it is today, but I knew a couple of Gates salesmen, one of whom had given me the phone number for their booth with instructions to call him when we got there – and he would get us in.

By lunchtime we were on the floor seeing all the new equipment of Gates, Collins and RCA in the large radio exhibit hall that covered two thirds of the lower basement of the Hilton. There was a much smaller TV section on the other side where RCA, GE, Phillips, Dage, Sarkes-Tarzian and a few others were set up to show their new color equipment. But we did not have time to waste on the new marvels.

We saw new consoles, sports mixers, transmitters and the infant automation industry equipment of Schaffer and IGM, cart machines from Spotmaster and the infamous Gates ST-101 that Paul Timpe tried to sell us until I explained the downside of losing every spot if it broke as I had seen happen at a couple of stations.

RADIO WAS THE FOCUS

The dominant feature of the show was radio equipment. Every transmitter, every FM antenna, every console made by the major manufacturer was there.

The equipment set the pace for the industry and the stations decided how they would use it in their operations. Thus each of the major manufacturers had huge booths divided mainly between transmitter and studio equipment sections with small sections for miscellaneous items.

In the middle of the afternoon a tall fellow in a severe, almost formal, black suit and blindingly white shirt with black tie strode into the hall followed by more than a dozen followers hanging on every word. Some were clearly show press but others appeared to be engineers trying to learn the latest direction of the industry.

The man leading this entourage was Prose Walker, Chief Engineer of the NAB and a sight not easily forgotten.



AND NOW

The Captain of the Southwest flight told us to be sure we were buckled in tightly as he expected the high surface winds near Las Vegas would make the last 30 minutes of our trip to McCarran Airport a little rough. We landed just after sunset so the winds died and he gave us a fairly good ride even though it was a little choppy.

I picked up my car at Hertz, checked into my hotel, grabbed a sandwich from a taco stand and called it a night.

NAB 2011

Moving around over the next few days made one thing very clear to me: the day of the latest and greatest technological whiz-bang leading the way is over.

There are probably several reasons for this, but it is clear our technology has matured to the point of reaching commodity status. The era of hardware design dominance is ending because what can be put on a commercially viable silicon chip has been fully exploited by several equipment manufacturers.

No one would admit this directly, but two major manufacturers, each in their own way, made it obvious that they recognized and were confronting the new demands of this sea change in their business environment.

DIFFERING FOCUS

At the Harris "estate" in the north hall I found a couple of almost lonely transmitters among the end-to-end workflow solutions offered for television. One tube, the brand new one totally solid-state.

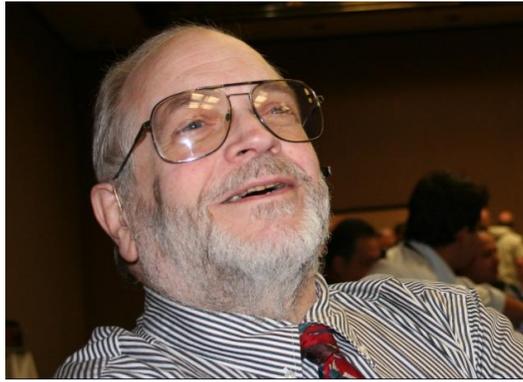
Stripped of all the graphic design, you could be excused if to the convention attendees it appeared that the hardware whiz-bangs had been supplanted by software. Just think: a 10 kilowatt FM transmitter in about two feet of rack space. Just plug in the computer of your choice and you are in control.

Meanwhile, Nautel sort of took a slightly different tack. Each year Nautel has a private gathering of their Users Group where they update everyone about new developments and directions. Their President, Peter Conlon, is usually the first speaker and often offers his insight of directions of the industry and Nautel in particular.

He message this year was that the industry and its needs were changing - and one of the major changes that users of Nautel could expect to see was the company make great effort to improve what already is "world class" support for users of Nautel equipment.

While their approaches were quite different, both companies seem to see an evolution from gee whiz technical whiz-bangs to producing daily results through greater integration with their users. Yes, there will be newer whiz-bangs from time to time, but I expect the focus will shift from technology to ease of operation and daily results.

The new reality is very different from the one based on tubes that fit within the basement exhibit halls of the Hilton in Chicago all those years ago. Our business is evolving to a new paradigm and we must either adapt or fall along the wayside.



Phil Alexander CSRE, AMD, is a veteran broadcast engineer based in Indianapolis, IN. Contact Phil at dynotherm@earthlink.net

Return to The BDR Menu