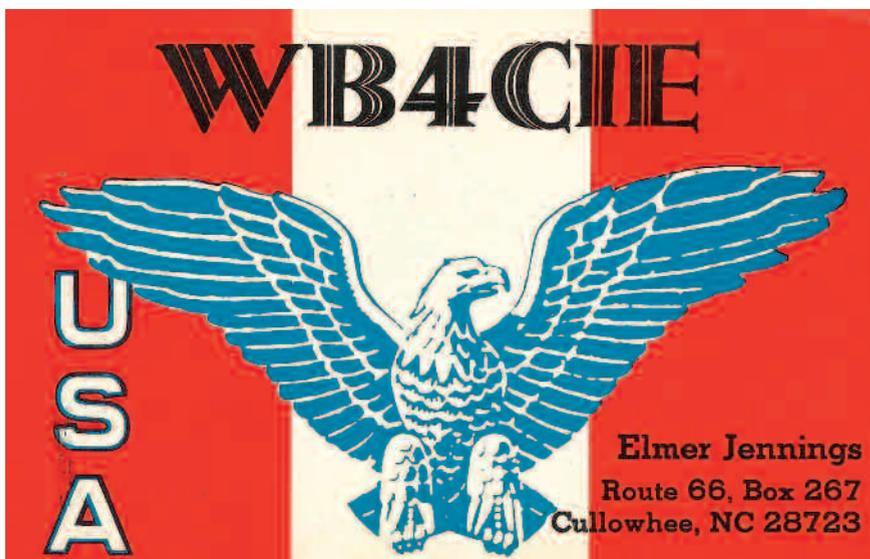




Can You Acknowledge Receipt?

Carol Richey explores how researching your ancestors' hobbies can add context to their lives

AT FIRST GLANCE, THEY APPEAR TO BE TYPICAL POSTCARDS, 3-1/2 by 5-1/2-inch cards with names, addresses, dates, and short, handwritten notes. The stack of cards, found nestled among books which belonged to my husband's grandfather, spans 40 years. The senders hail from all over the United States, from Miami, Florida to Ashland, Oregon; from San Diego, California to Eastport, Maine. The farthest comes from more than 2,500 miles away.



QSL cards are used to confirm communication between amateur radio operators. This card, belonging to "silent key" Elmer Jennings, was found through the QSL Cards From the Past website, www.oldqslcards.com. (Courtesy of author)

Upon closer inspection, you notice these are not typical postcards, but rather a special calling card for amateur radio operators, known as QSL cards. The cards are sent to confirm two-way radio communication between two amateur radio operators, reception of a two-way radio communication by a third party, or one-way reception of a signal. QSL posed as a question means, "Can you acknowledge receipt?", and as an answer, "I acknowledge receipt." It is one of many Q codes, abbreviated signals agreed upon by the International Telecommunications Union and used internationally in radio communication.

According to Steve Nardin, president of the Fort Wayne Radio Club in Fort Wayne, Indiana, bragging rights were a driving force behind the introduction of QSL cards. When amateur radio began, communication was limited to only a few miles. As technology advanced, communication expanded to reach greater distances.

"With greater distances, there came to be significant bragging rights for the 'hams' that could send and receive the farthest," Nardin explains. "Of course, just like fishermen, people would often embellish their accomplishments, so a system of verification was deemed necessary."

Another purpose of QSL cards, Nardin adds, is to provide proof that an amateur radio operator has met the qualifications for awards or special operating challenges. For example, the Worked All States award is earned when an operator establishes contact with another amateur radio operator in each of the 50 states, and the Canadaward certificate is issued to those who confirm two-way communication with Canadian amateur stations in each of the provinces and territories. The coveted DX Century Club award, on the other hand, is earned for contact with operators in 100 different countries.

QSL cards must be presented to an examiner who verifies the goal had been met before the certificate is granted to the operator. Many proudly display their awards and certificates in their radio room, called the "shack". As Nardin points out, "Again, that bragging rights thing!"

However, many operators simply enjoy collecting QSL cards as a tangible reminder of their contacts with other operators. QSL cards contain details about

the contact and the operator's station. Usually it includes the sender's name, call sign, location, signal report, band or frequency, mode of communication, date of contact, and a request for a return QSL card or acknowledgement of one received.

Beyond this essential contact information, the cards often contain unique details to reflect the operators' personalities. Many contain a photo, illustration, or cartoon. Some are serious and look like professional business cards; others, less so, such as one which shows a skeleton rising from a coffin, stating "For all you know — I may be DEAD! Why don't you call me?"

"QSL Cards from the Past," www.oldqslcards.com, is a website dedicated to the preservation of this unique part of amateur radio history. It includes scans of more than 2,000 old QSL cards online, as well as a searchable master list of more than 39,000 cards in the collection.

While QSL cards can be sent by direct mail, through a QSL manager, or a centralized bureau, rising postage costs and the internet have led to electronic QSLs. The most important internet-based QSL service is "Logbook of the World", www.arrl.org/logbook-of-the-world, administered by the American Radio Relay League (ARRL), the national association for amateur radio. It accepts electronic log book files sent to it and automatically matches contacts. Awards and contests are handled electronically, and the service has a verification system so operators no longer have to take a stack of cards to an examiner.

One might think easy communication is now possible with the internet, and cell phones



Amateur radio operator Elmer Jennings, of Cullowhee, North Carolina, Call No. WB4CIE, in his radio room. (Courtesy of author)

would mean the end of amateur radio. However, according to the ARRL, there are approximately 2.5 million amateur radio operators worldwide, with more than 704,000 licensed operators in the United States alone.

Do you have a relative who is an amateur radio operator? Amateur radio enthusiasts are often quite passionate about their interest and more than willing to share it with others. Ask them to share their passion with you. Or do you have a silent key (an amateur radio operator who has died) in your family who may have left behind a collection of QSL cards, and a visual history of their passion just waiting to be discovered?

A common frustration in family history research is being limited to the mere collection of dates and facts, unable to tap into the richer

story of our ancestors' daily lives. My husband's mother was raised by her maternal grandparents; my husband only visited his grandfather a handful of times. He was considered a recluse, living in a shack he built on the mountain-top. Yet his collection of QSL cards tells me another story. Among them I see names which appear again and again, suggesting a close friendship and possible sources of additional information.

I am grateful for these cards. They offer me that long-sought glimpse into the daily life of a man about which I know so little.

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