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The Vibroplex Vibro-Keyer Turns 50

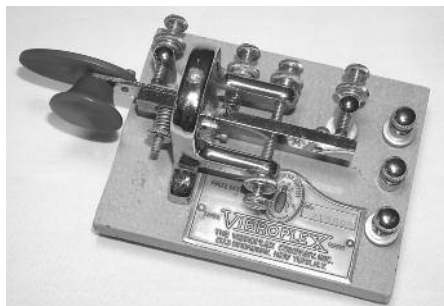
The art of CW operation for radio amateurs reached a turning point in 1960. The reason was the growing availability of commercial electronic keying equipment and keys. It was generally felt that the electronic keyer revolution was even causing a rebirth of CW activity.

Previous to this, any electronic equipment for automatic keying was generally built by the hams themselves. The keys they were using for these devices were also home-brewed. Designs ranged from highly modified bugs to simple dot and dash key levers such as two straight keys mounted bottom-to-bottom and turned on their sides.

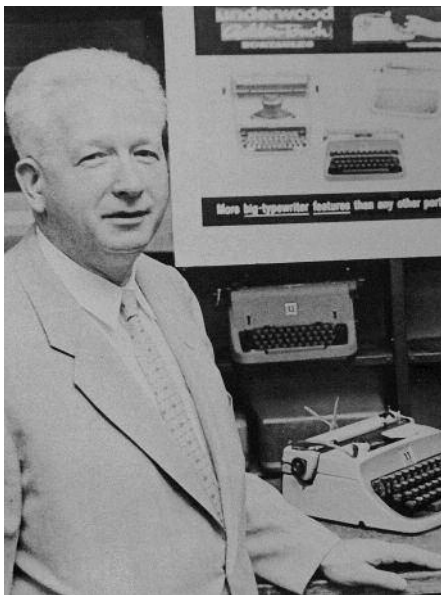
Vibroplex's Innovation

The Vibroplex Company, which was the dominant key manufacturer in the U.S. at that time, was aware of all the home-brewing efforts because of the many requests they were receiving for Vibroplex bug parts. Anticipating an emerging marketing opportunity, the Vibroplex Company introduced the "Vibro-Keyer" as their

first product to be used with an electronic keyer. It was originally advertised in the January 1960 issue of *QST* and then reviewed by the magazine the following month. The first ads stated: "The Vibro-Keyer supplies the answer to the demand for Vibroplex parts for the construction of



A 1960 Vibroplex Vibro-Keyer from the first production year.



John La Hiff, designer of the Vibro-Keyer, from a J.E. Albright & Co. advertisement.

electronic transmitting units." The inventor of the Vibro-Keyer was never mentioned in any of Vibroplex's ads over the years, but it was John La Hiff who actually designed it. In 1960, La Hiff was the General Manager and Vice President of both the Vibroplex Company and J.E. Albright & Co. At that time, both companies were operating in the same building located at 833 Broadway in New York City. J.E. Albright & Co. was a typewriter and office supply business that was founded by former telegrapher James Albright. The company initially sold typewriters to telegraphers during the era when operators were required to supply their own "mills" for the job.

Albright purchased patents from Vibroplex inventor Horace G. Martin in 1913 and, along with his brother William, started the Vibroplex Company in 1915. He hired John La Hiff in the early 1920s, and by 1939 La Hiff was the general manager of both companies. La Hiff had a talent for recognizing marketing opportunities. In 1940 he received a patent for a telegraph sending machine that included several improvements. One was the inclusion of jewel bearings that allowed the vertical spindle of a bug's lever to move with minimal operator effort. La Hiff created a new line of Vibroplex deluxe models

utilizing these bearings.

John La Hiff also designed the Vibroplex Champion and Zephyr bugs and re-named and marketed the Martin Vibroplex #6 as the “Lightning Bug.” In the late 1940s he introduced a “Super Deluxe” version of the original bug called the “Presentation.” It had an adjustable-length mainspring for dot speed control in addition to having the deluxe features and a 24k gold plated base. La Hiff’s Vibro-Keyer of 1960 (the name was changed to “Vibrokeyer” years later) used the “Deluxe” mainframe of the Original bug, $\frac{3}{8}$ " silver contacts and red finger and thumb pieces. The small frame was mounted neatly on a beige base that measured $3\frac{1}{2}$ " $\times$ $4\frac{1}{2}$ " and weighed 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ lbs.

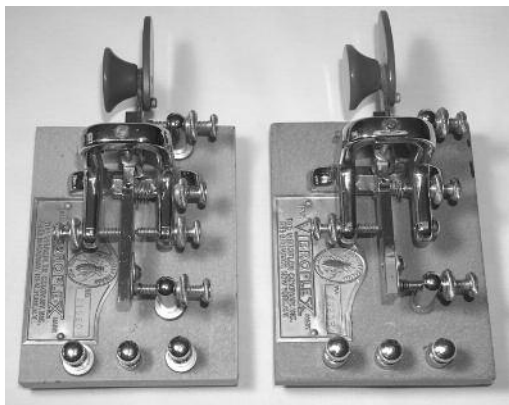
The attractive package proved to be very popular at \$15.95. Operators who were used to operating a bug could easily make the transition to the bug-like feel of the new Vibro-Keyer. The key could also be used as a stand-alone side-swiper by shorting out the dash and dot binding posts.

The Hallicrafters HA-1

The same month that the Vibro-Keyer was introduced, Bill Halligan, W9AC, the founder of the Hallicrafters Company, wrote an “essay” in *QST* titled, “What Hath Jim Wrought?” The “Jim” he was referring to was Jim Ricks, W9TO, who had designed a keyer and was privately distributing his unpublished plans in the ham community.

Halligan wrote about the growing popularity of Jim Ricks’ electronic keyer and the noticeable increase of CW operators—leading potentially to a rebirth of CW communications. Like John La Hiff, Halligan recognized the new marketing opportunity and Hallicrafters arranged to market Ricks’ keyer. The keyer uses six tubes including two 12AU7s as multivibrators described then as “digital circuitry, similar to that found in computers,” to generate automatic self-completing dots and dashes.

The Hallicrafters Company began advertising the keyer as the “HA-1” in March of 1960. It was also named the “T.O. Keyer,” after W9TO, and referred to as “the Stradivarius of all keyers.” Jim Ricks filed for a patent on his keyer design in April of 1960 and assigned the patent to the Hallicrafters Company. Two of Hallicrafters’ New York City dealers at that time, the Harrison Radio Corporation and Harvey Radio Company began to run full page ads in the March and April 1960 issues of *QST*. The ads paired up the HA-1 Keyer with Vibroplex’s Vibro-Keyer as “a perfectly



The lever stop screw for dots on the 1960 Vibro-Keyer (left) was found to be unnecessary and was soon replaced with a Phillips-head screw as seen on this 1968 model (right).

matched sending team.”

Harrison actually advertised a gray-based version of the Vibro-Keyer that matched the paint scheme of the “T.O. Keyer” and the Hallicrafters line. This model is sought after by collectors today. In April of 1961, Vibroplex introduced a chrome-based version of the Vibro-Keyer calling it a “Deluxe Model.” It was priced at \$22.45 and the price of its original beige-based model was raised to \$17.95.

The 50th Anniversary Vibro-Keyer

Fast forwarding to 2010, the Vibroplex



The Hallicrafters HA-1 “T.O. Keyer” was advertised with the Vibro-Keyer as “a perfectly matched sending team.”

Company will soon have several versions of the Vibro-Keyer available. There will be a standard black-textured base version with conventional bearings as well as two deluxe versions with jewel bearings—one chrome and another with a 24K brushed gold-plated gold base. Also offered will be a Collins Collectors Association gray-based version. As their first new product from Tennessee (see below), Vibroplex plans a special “50th Anniversary Model” of the Vibro-Keyer. It will have a base paint scheme like the 100th anniversary Vibroplex Original Bug that was introduced back in 2004 with a “japanned-like” black base having a gold pin stripe border.

If you collect Vibro-Keyers, there will now be models with nameplates from four different Vibroplex Company eras: 833 Broadway, New York, NY; Portland, ME (no address shown on Maine era nameplates); 11 Midtown Park, E., Mobile, AL; and Knoxville, TN.

A Change of Ownership

There is some recent news about the Vibroplex Company. After fifteen years of ownership, Felton “Mitch” Mitchell, W4OA, has sold the Vibroplex Company to Scott Robbins, W4PA, effective December 21, 2009. Mitch stated: “I have thoroughly enjoyed owning Vibroplex. It is an amazing company, really an anachronism. The worldwide recognition and loyalty, in today’s world, is astounding.”

Regarding his selection of Scott Robbins as the new owner Mitch said: “He is young, a lifetime ham from a ham family, 15 years of industry experience with Ten-Tec, and he is a world-class contender.” Vibroplex moved its operation from Mobile, Alabama to Knoxville, Tennessee on January 5, 2010. All Vibroplex products will soon have a new Vibroplex nameplate with a Tennessee address.

AUTHORS, continued from page 6

the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he earned a Ph.D. degree in Interdisciplinary Studies in the School of Engineering. After graduating, he moved to Southern California, where he first worked at Gulf General Atomic for several years, and then moved to Jaycor, a defense company in Southern California, where he spent most of his career, first as an engineer and later as the President and Chief Executive Officer.

Upon his retirement in 2002, he set out to research the early days of wireless and document interesting historical vignettes based on original documents of the era. Eric has written articles for

SOURCES

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- “Recent Equipment, Hallicrafters HA-1 Electronic Keyer,” *QST*, November 1960
- “Birth Dates of the Vibroplex Keys,” by John Elwood, WW7P, 1996
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- Telephone Interviews in 2004 with Vincent La Hiff, owner/president of J.E. Albright & Co. and the Vibroplex Co., Inc., 1973-1978. (John La Hiff’s son)

ADVERTISEMENTS

- Vibroplex Company, 833 Broadway, New York, NY, *QST*, January 1960
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- Harrison Radio Corporation, 225 Greenwich St., New York, NY, *QST*, March 1960
- Harvey Radio Company, Inc., 103 W 43rd St., New York, NY, *QST*, April 1960
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the *AWA Review* and the *Antique Radio Classified*, and has recently published a critically acclaimed book, *Radiola: The Golden Age of RCA—1919-1929*, covering the early history of RCA—including the formative years of the Marconi Telegraph Company of America. For this work, he received the AWA Houck Award for Documentation in 2007. He is a member of the IEEE and the Antique Wireless Association, and is a past member of the American Physical Society. Dr. Wenaas resides in Southern California and continues to enjoy collecting and displaying radios, and researching the early days of wireless.