

THE JAMES MILLEN AUCTION STORY

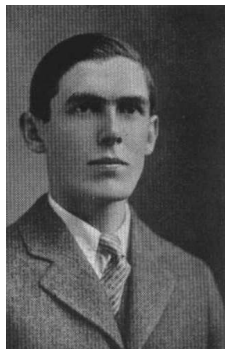
Merrill's article came to us with no less than 21 pictures, documenting several of his priceless acquisitions at the Millen auction. We've selected eight of them for display on these pages—mfe

James Millen's interest in radio began in high school, and by 1921 he had station 2BHP (later the well known W1HRX) on the air. After graduating from Stevens Institute as a mechanical engineer, he began advertising electrical devices and receivers in the local New York newspapers and in *Radio News*. He also became a prolific author of articles for the radio trade magazines.

During his 13-year sojourn with the National Company he rose to the position of Vice President and Chief Engineer. Under his influence, the company began manufacturing high quality amateur radio equipment. When National branched out into the consumer market in 1939, Millen resigned and started his own company.

For the next 38 years he continued manufacturing high quality equipment for the amateur radio fraternity, of which he was a respected member. To quote John DiBlasi at the time of the 25th anniversary of the James Millen Manufacturing Co., Jim was "a man of integrity who never yielded to conformity at the expense of business and ethical principles and an inventor who has contributed to the electronics industry many ideas and products."

Jim closed his factory and retired in 1977, becoming an AWA member



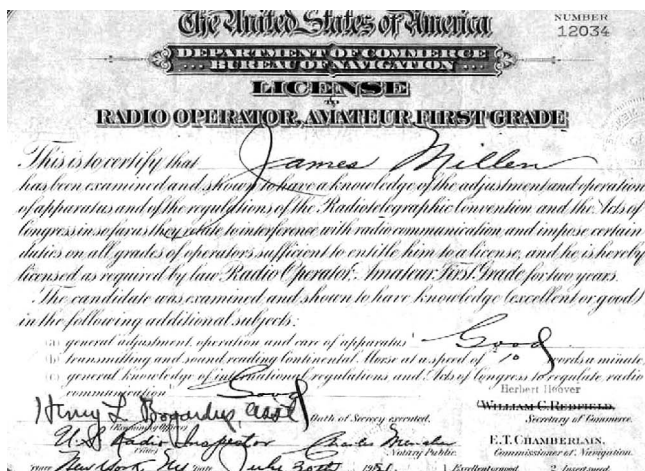
Millen's College Yearbook Photo.

shortly afterwards. He lived in North Reading, MA until his death in 1987.

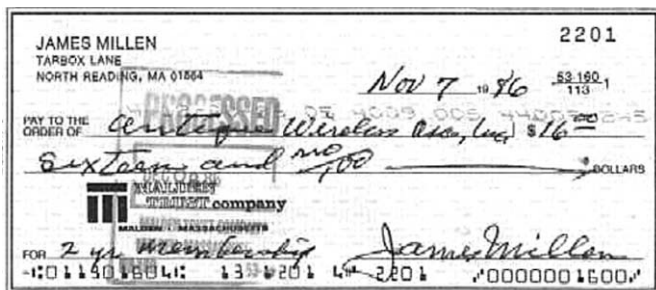
In conjunction with the demonstration of the restored W1HRX transmitter a few years ago at the AWA annex, I had decided it was an appropriate occasion, after a wait of about 20 years, to show some of the material I had "rescued" at the James Millen auction at his famous (to Radio Amateurs at least) home on Tarbox Lane in North Reading, MA. As we all have read in various ham publications, this had been a long-time meeting place of a select group in the amateur radio fraternity during

the 1930s, until Ross Hull, a noted amateur who was part of the group, was killed in an accident.

Most of items I acquired were obtained as a result of incredible luck and, yes, dogged determination. I showed some of this material at the conference in Rochester in 2001 and was pleased to receive the Display Award in the Old Equipment Contest. (Google the James Millen Society web pages if you want to see a picture of my dis-



Millen's Early Ham Licence.



Check made out to AWA—\$16.00 for a 2-year membership!

play.) Many members may not have attended the conference that year or for other reasons didn't get to look over the display. This article offers at least a partial glimpse of the artifacts.

I have been an AWA member since way back when one could go to the annual conference and talk with old time radiomen who were present in the dawning of our hobby. They came up in the spark era and remembered the sinking of the White Star liner *Titanic* and the Cunarder *Lusitania*, and some did duty as lone wireless operators on other ships we have only read about. Attending the conference was the high point of the year for me in those days—even more so than now.

For my part, with the enthusiastic encouragement of friends Ed Gable, Bill Fizette, Bruce Kelley (now a silent key) and others, I've decided to relate the story of this auction for the entertainment and edification of fellow collectors with the hope that they will give some thought to the future of their own collected artifacts. These Millen items could very easily have ended up on the trash heap or otherwise lost had not a serious historian/collector been present. (Yes, me.)

In the 50 years that I have been a radio collector and a person fascinated with all aspects of radio history, I had never made a major find or had a piece of luck comparable to that experienced by others of my acquaintance. That was to change one Sunday when, for no apparent reason, I purchased the Boston Sunday Globe, a paper that I almost never read.

An auction ad for the James Millen estate in North Reading MA immediately jumped out at me! However, on the same day, the Merriams were having one of their always fun meets at the Wireless and Steam Museum in East Greenwich, RI. I had made arrangements to head down there and

sort of stop in on the way to Rhode Island even though it wasn't really "on the way." Well, it was actually in the opposite direction...

The day had dawned very hot for New England, in the high 90s as predicted, so I figured I would take my 71 Olds convertible. And I had a hard time getting the car up Tarbox Lane (Jim's private road to his home), which was in poor condition.

It proved to be a big auction, with lots and lots



W1HRX QSL Card.



of antiques outside all over the property and with several auctioneers working simultaneously at different sections. My interest was first and foremost in Jim's famous magazine collection as described in the paper. However all I could find was some more recent *QST*s that had been tossed into a building that was the original W1HRX ham shack.

I regret that I couldn't take the time to find a tall stepladder and remove the rows of QSL cards, which were tacked around the upper walls of the ham shack, just as pictured in the *CQ* article of June 1967. My understanding was that the shack had remained unused since the 1930s, so they had probably been untouched for fifty years or more. The auctioneer later said they could have been mine for the taking.

participate in spite of the 95 degree temperature predicted. What to do?

I figured, as anyone would have, "Everyone would go to the James Millen auction including the AWA people and the bidding competition would be fierce and prohibitive to a conservative collector like me." Well, I finally decided I would

The room looked exactly like the picture in *CQ* magazine except that the famous W1HRX transmitter had been removed by AWA personnel earlier as described in the March 1986 *OTB*. It is now in the AWA annex and on the air again.

Soon after arriving, I did spot Jim's engineering degree from Stevens leaning against a tree with some other framed items such as his ham license, and WOS certificate (a tongue in cheek "Worked One State" award signed by George Grammar). I asked the auctioneer if he would put them up directly and I was able to purchase them since nobody seemed to know their significance. I remember thinking "At least I got something!" Just then, however, an announcement was made by a runner that the magazine collection was soon to be auctioned off in an area some distance from where I was.

I grabbed my winnings and hurried to the lower level of the house where there were box after box of bound and loose magazines, all numbered by groups. Lists of the scheduled lots were handed out to the interested group and the auction finally got underway. As soon as I arrived, I noticed two things: 1. There were more radio magazines, mostly bound, than I had ever seen anywhere up to that time except in Alan Douglas' library. I didn't recognize anyone there!

The bidding was starting just as I walked in. First up was a complete set of *QST*s with perhaps fifty extra pre-1920 issues as well as *CQ* magazines from the first issue up to 1970, most in binders and looking good. I started the bidding at 25 dollars for that lot and guess what? The bidding for that group ended right there at \$25.00!

Now I knew I had come to the right place and it was the right time! This trend continued until the magazines were all sold, mostly to me, four hours later and in piles divided up by winning bidders. I ended up with the complete sets of *Radio News*, *QST*, *CQ*, *Popular Radio*, *Radio Broadcast*, *Short Wave Craft*, *Wireless Age*, *IRE Proceedings*, most of *Radio* including *Pacific Radio News* and lots more.

Many other items of significance to radio collectors were also put on the block with little interest shown by the onlookers. There were boxes and boxes of miscellaneous magazines, one of a kind books, and Jim's stock certificates for each Millen Company corporate name.

There were personal papers relating to the Millen Company, including Jim's thoughts on the company's future written in notes to himself and scrapbooks that showed the yearly product lines and advertisements. Other nice items were

April 17, 1939

The Board of Directors
National Company, Inc.
Malden, Massachusetts

Attention: Chairman of the Board

Dear Mr. Hopkins:

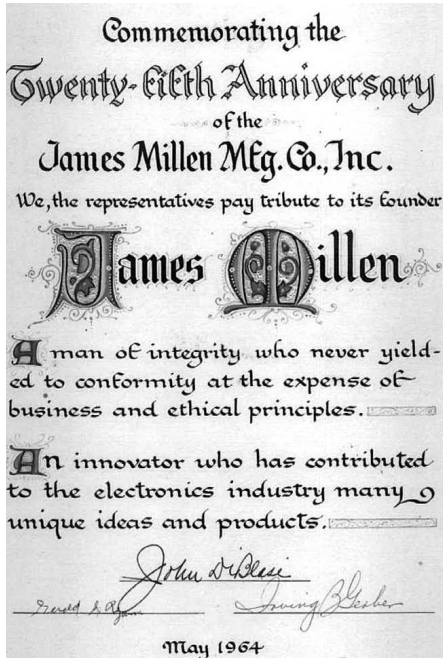
I wish to resign as Vice President of the National Company, Inc. effective April 30, 1939 and to be relieved of all executive duties as of this date in order to give my full time and attention to the organization of my new company.

Sincerely yours,

Letter announcing Millen's resignation from the National Company.

a TV scrapbook Jim put together in the 1920s, early sketches for potential National products and dozens of other papers and manuals related to the National Company.

There was Millen's correspondence, about the HRO dial, with Clarence Tuska in Tuska's role as patent attorney. And there were the Millen Company corporate seals. These were all included in a



Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Tribute.

group of about 25 cartons that I was able to buy for about thirty dollars.

As the auction finally wound down, I had a pile so big I felt guilty. At the very end, still hyper, I was able to purchase the contents of Millen's cellar/workshop for \$15.00. Included were tools, jigs, a bench vise and lots of personal items and parts.

Two partial DFP ham receiver prototypes, sold while the magazine auction was going on, were offered to me at the end of the auction. I unfortunately turned them down because I was getting overwhelmed with items. These pieces were of such high quality that it was not economically feasible to produce them for the postwar amateur market as planned. My two regrets were not acquiring these two prototypes and the *QSL* cards in the ham shack. I guess the heat had finally gotten to me.



James Millen in later years.

Jim Millen died on June 8th. A memorial service was held at the Union Congregational Church in North Reading, MA. Jim was born in Norfolk, VA. He founded his own electronics manufacturing company, James Millen Manufacturing Co. in Malden MA. He was a former director of the Malden Cooperative Bank, a member of the Winchester Country Club and a former member of the Quarter Club, and also a life member of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers. He evidently had no close relatives.

Millen's obituary from Stevens Institute alumni magazine.

By the time the auction was over I was exhausted, but here I was with the huge pile of stuff to get home. I loaded up my car and, scraping the bottom on Tarbox Lane, I made it home. Swapping vehicles with my patient wife Rita, I came back with my pickup and loaded it up—by myself of course. This scene was repeated seven more times with no outside help. Finally, in a stupor, I started home with the last load.

But when I was within ten miles of home it started to sprinkle. We all know what rain can do to 60-year-old books. My luck held out though, because just before it REALLY rained I came to a restaurant with a big overhang and was able to keep things dry. I celebrated by having a chocolate sundae, no less, but of course I felt guilty about that too.

When I got everything organized at home I found that not a single bound volume was miss-

ing from the sets although most of my pile had sat unattended at Jim's house all day while I lugged the items home in eight trips—a total of more than 60 miles per trip. I had finally fulfilled my ambition to have large collection of radio magazines; I've always have felt that having documentation about a radio was as significant and important as having the set. These books have certainly earned their keep.

Significantly, when Millen closed his factory in Malden, MA, another Townsend, MA resident and collector was instrumental in saving a lot of hardware and equipment that would otherwise have been lost at the factory auction. We had met just once back in the early 1970s not knowing then that we had similar interests.

Jim evidently had no living relatives and it is conceivable that this priceless collection of literature could have been destroyed if I hadn't had the luck of being at the right place at the right time. As it stands, the collection, Rita and I have been living happily ever after.

Car trouble had delayed the only other dedicated radio person who seemed to have had any intention of attending this auction. He was the late John Nagle, who would have been a serious competitor. As most of us know, John was a big fan of the National Company and its products. Most of us have attended John's well-researched presentations at AWA conferences over the years, starting at Canandaigua.

Luck was still with me even after this momentous auction. I had wanted to find Jim's obituary notice somewhere to round out my display of his company artifacts and the events of his life. My boyhood garage in Chesterfield, MA used to serve as a place for the Boy Scouts to store papers for their paper drives. The last time I was up there, before the Bancroft estate was sold and the house went on the market, I visited the old garage for what turned out to be the last time. Among the out-of-date Hampshire Gazettes and Springfield Unions, there sat an alumni magazine from Stevens Institute with, you guessed it, James Millen's obituary!

I still occasionally see the Millen auctioneer at antique shows, and he tells me that the former Millen property is now the site of a number of million dollar homes. However my memories of that place, and the mechanical engineer and manufacturer who was so significant in the history of amateur radio, will live on.

P.S. I never made it to Rhode Island that day. ☹