

Radio History - Modern Radio Laboratories

by Dick Mackiewicz

Here's a question for all you radio historians. What is the oldest United States mail order company, still in business, offering mostly crystal sets, crystal set parts, and handbooks on such things as crystal detectors, headphones, coil winding - information most of you thought was no longer available?

Well, our introduction gave away the answer - Modern Radio Laboratories. I became acquainted with MRL through their small ads in Popular Science back in the late 40's. I sent away nickels, dimes and quarters for hundreds of feet of double cotton covered wire, which I used to wind countless coils on toilet tissue tubes, oatmeal boxes - virtually any round piece of cardboard I came across. I bought tap switches, switch points, crystals, cat's whiskers and MRL's famous Radio Builder Handbooks. I made one crystal set after another. I remember seeing MRL's ads, probably through the 1970's, and then lost track of them.

MRL was started in 1932 by Elmer G. Osterhoudt. Elmer was born around 1899, and here is a brief history of his accomplishments since 1915: Radio Operator, RCA Marine Service. Radio Mechanic, Maximum, U.S. Navy. Technician, Electrical Products Corp., Southern California. Edison, Majestic Electrical Products, U.S. Motor Co., Manchester Radio Elec. Shop, MRL - amateur radio 6NW, licensed 1919!

Elmer served as a shipboard radio operator in the age of the spark gap transmitters and crystal detector receivers. He really got a strong start in radio in the early 1930's, when he borrowed \$640 from his father, a carpenter, who built Elmer's first Manchester Radio Shop! Elmer went on to own and operate six more radio shops in California.

He once thought of a different career - pharmacy, and completed many of the courses necessary for this profession. While studying pharmacy, he learned a great deal about crystalline structures, which, when combined with his general radio knowledge, made him an expert in crystal set construction. MRL's #2 crystal set is often looked at as the "benchmark" of home constructed sets.

Elmer returned to school during the war in the 40's, and may have been a radio instructor for other wartime radio technicians and operators. He subsequently sold all the Manchester Radio stores, and devoted his time to the mail order business, Modern Radio Laboratories. He moved the business several times, and historians may find as many addresses for MRL as they do Philmore. (I understand there were 17 moves in 56 years).

I thought MRL, as other crystal set suppliers, had simply disappeared until a few years ago, when I started corresponding with Richard Spratley, (NEARC Member #713) in Virginia. Richard told me that MRL was now being operated by a Mr. Paul Nelson. I have corresponded with Paul, and discovered the following: In 1978, one of Paul's friends, a young girl (!!!), brought a crystal set to school. Her father had made it for a science fair project. Paul immediately became interested, but found crystal set parts difficult to find at local radio stores. Another friend told Paul about MRL, and Paul, like myself, began buying parts from Elmer, and developed correspondence with him.

Elmer was involved in a severe auto accident in 1986, and never recovered. Paul visited Elmer during his convalescence and expressed interest in carrying on Elmer's business. Elmer and his family liked Paul a great deal, and when Elmer passed away in 1987, Paul bought Elmer's business and moved it to its present location in Minnesota.

Where else can you still buy a crystal set kit to build on an oatmeal box? (You furnish the box!) How about mounted crystals - galena, silicon, iron pyrites, carborundum? Variometers, busbar, eyelets, cotton covered wire - AND the famous #2 crystal set kit!

Don't try to order a hundred of these things. You will wait in line. Paul still does business as Elmer did. The young boys, the beginners, the hobbyists who order one or two at a time will get their orders filled first.

You may have to wait for coil sliders. Paul still makes most items very carefully and painstakingly, by hand! But, when you receive these items, you will go back in time and wonder, as I did, how anyone can still make such faithfully reproduced parts.

Modern Radio Laboratories is now in their 60th year of continuous service to those of us who still enjoy Real Old Time, no batteries, no tubes, challenging, and satisfying "I made it work" radio!

Write to Paul Nelson at: Modern Radio Laboratories, P.O. Box 14902, Minneapolis, MN 55414. Please send Paul a dollar or two to cover the cost of his catalog and postage.