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## 60 Years of Lafayette Radio



**In this issue:**

- Rise of Seed-Selling Radio Stations
- The Antique Wireless Association Museum
- MT Reviews: Quatum AM Loop Antenna



## Sixty Years of Lafayette Radio

By Richard Post KB8TAD

If you're new to the radio hobby you might not have heard much about Lafayette Radio and Electronics, a company that gave better known Allied Radio and their Knight-Kit products a run for their money throughout the decades of radio's golden years.

From its inception in the early 1920s as Wholesale Radio Service Company, what would later be known as Lafayette Radio led the catalog radio retail business even through the depths of the Great Depression.

Lafayette had a knack for anticipating home electronics fads while pioneering the mail-order electronics business, dodging accusations from the Federal Trade Commission and coping with company in-fighting.

Rich Post KB8TAD, a lifelong collector of Lafayette brand radios, among many others, shares the inside story of the remarkable rise and fall of this important company in radio's long and colorful history.

### On Our Cover

An impressive array of seven Lafayette Radio shortwave receivers. Bottom row left to right: HA-350, KT-200, and HA-800B. Middle row: KT-320, HE-30 and Explor-Air Mark V. Top: HE-60. (Photo by Richard Post KB8TAD)

# C O N T E N T S

## The Rise of Seed-Selling Radio Stations ..... 11

By John F. Schneider W9FGH

There's no better illustration of the magic of emerging technology than the story of a handful of Midwestern, low-power, AM radio stations from the 1920s and 30s. John Schneider W9FGH follows the birth and astonishing growth of competing seed companies that were among the first to understand early radio's powers of entertainment and persuasion.

Just as radio was taking hold in American households, companies were trying to figure out how to make the new medium work for them. Amid regulatory hurdles and the challenges of a new technology, the great seed-barons of Shenandoah, Iowa battled it out on the airways across the entire Midwest from studios that were just blocks apart.

Millions tuned in to hear fiddle contests, gospel tunes, preaching and a pitch from the owners of the seed companies themselves. The result was a phenomenon that brought hundreds of thousands of curious radio fans to the small Iowa town just to see what it was all about.



## Meet the Antique Wireless Association ..... 14

By Marc Ellis N9EWJ

MT's Radio Restorations columnist, Marc Ellis N9EWJ, invites readers to learn about the Antique Wireless Association, the premier vintage radio club in America. The organization, which began in 1952, publishes the quarterly publication *AWA Journal*, and will open a new, expanded museum next summer. Marc explains all the activities of this energetic group that includes auctions, swap-meets and on-air amateur radio contests featuring vintage radio gear.



# R E V I E W S

## Quantum QX v3.0 AM Loop Antenna ..... 56

By Loyd Van Horn W4LVH

As has been well documented in this magazine AM DX has been harder and harder to chase. Is there anything that might help? Yes, says Loyd Van Horn. Find out why he likes the Quantum QX v3.0 amplified loop that pulls in the stations you want and nulls the ones you don't.



# Sixty Years of Lafayette Radio

By Richard Post KB8TAD  
(All graphics courtesy the author)



An all-Lafayette test-bench: Equipment from left: TM-16A field strength meter; LC-4 Capacitor-resistor checker; Model 174 VTVM; KT-208 signal generator and tracer; 30,000 ohm/volt VOM model 99-5004.

The year was 1921. Radio broadcasting was still in its infancy and experimenters were building radio receivers; mostly crystal sets. Those with a bit more money were buying or building radios with vacuum tubes that ran off batteries. All entertainment broadcast stations were assigned to a single frequency of 833 kHz causing stations from different cities to interfere with each other. And, since frequency control was also in its infancy, stations would drift down to 820 or up to 840 or in between, allowing listeners to sometimes hear 3 or 4 stations in one evening.

If there were several stations in a city they would have to agree to share the frequency so most broadcasters were only on the air for an hour or two each day. As a result, the prime-time early evening hours were most in demand. A bigger broadcast band would not come until 1923 when 550 kHz to 1350 kHz would be set aside for broadcast. The “short waves” above 1500 kHz, including what is now part of the broadcast band, were considered relatively useless and were the domain of amateur radio and experimenters.

## Growth of Parts Manufacturers

Radio parts and tubes were expensive by 1920s standards, however, manufacturers had sprung up to offer tube sockets, galena crystals, headsets, “amplifying” (interstage) transformers, coils, variable capacitors (called “condensers” back then), and of course, rheostats, to vary the filament voltage on “audions,” as an early form of volume control. The term “triode,” used to describe the tubes of the day still had not fully caught on.

For the most part, teenagers were the radio experimenters; they were the geeks of their age. It was in this time period that small stores selling radios and parts sprung up in major cities. Wholesale Radio Service Company was founded by 21 year-old Abraham Pletman in New York City. Did Pletman have help setting up Wholesale Radio? That is likely. Just a few years later not only was Wholesale Radio Service doing business as a New York store but it had developed mail-order sales. A 1924 ad in *Wireless Age* magazine offered a free copy of their catalog, proclaiming “We Sell Retail at Wholesale Prices.”

The following year, Wholesale Radio advertised an 80 page catalog in an ad in the April 1925 issue of *Popular Radio*. The full page ad also offered a complete set of parts for a superhet that *Popular*

*Radio*'s Technical Editor, Lawrence Cockaday, had designed and written up in the January 1925 issue as the “Cockaday Improved DX Receiver.”

In addition to a kit of parts for that particular radio, Wholesale Radio Service also offered a fully-built version complete with tubes and a Korach tuned-loop antenna for \$132, serious money in 1925; more than \$1700 in today's money. That superhet was an exceptional performer in 1925. The ads for a complete set of parts or a custom-built version avoided the sticky issue of patent royalties. The superhet was a closely-held patent in the 1920s. Wholesale Radio placed more ads in subsequent issues of *Popular Radio*.

Patents helped create a strong market for parts kits for radios that originated in magazine articles. The experimenter could build a set and avoid the expense of royalties. Cockaday would continue to introduce a radio of his design in *Popular Radio* magazine and its successors for each year. Cockaday's LC-27 and LC-28 bore his initials and the year following the article, a bit like the way automobiles were sold. New radio sets for the following model year were introduced each fall, just in time for the holiday buying season.

Catalog sales for Wholesale Radio Service continued throughout the 1920s although few catalogs seem to have survived from those years. A 1927 catalog flyer was 26 pages and included radios, parts, and kits by well-known names of the era such as Hammarlund, Loftin-White, Remler, Silver-Marshall, and of course, Cockaday.

## The Lafayette Brand is Born

Radios sold directly by Wholesale Radio were trademarked “Lafayette” in July of 1931. The company also registered Trutest, Sym-



Lafayette “Music Mates” Hi-Fi amplifier and tuner along with Lafayette LA-23 broadcast receiver and microphones.

phonic, and Duo Symphonic as trademarks. The first radios manufactured for or by Wholesale Radio as listed in Volume 1 of *Rider's Perpetual Troubleshooting Manual* are AC-operated screen-grid TRF (Tuned Radio Frequency) types typical of the times.

Some radios were manufactured for Lafayette by other companies such as Wells-Gardner. The same chassis was often used for a number of different models. The 1934 *Rider* Volume 4, in its miscellaneous section, makes the first mention of the name Lafayette Radio and Television Corporation. Four superhet models are listed, three of which are the lower-end “hot chassis” AC-DC versions and one a transformer-operated version. Those again were typical sets for the time, in the middle of the Depression.

Wholesale Radio grew during the tough times. An ad in the *New York Sun* in November, 1931 touts “Replacement parts of every description for all model receivers are available at lowest Wholesale prices,” adding, “Write for big Tenth Anniversary catalog.”

The 1932 catalog claims, “Our business runs into millions of dollars per year,” quite a statement during the height of the Depression. A 1934 catalog notes that, “12 years have passed through good times and bad times.” During those years some major radio manufacturers went under. Their excess inventory could of course be made available through catalog sales.

Not all investments worked out. In 1932, Pletman and Leonard Welling purchased the CeCo Manufacturing Company from Ernie Kauer. CeCo was a tube manufacturer licensed by RCA. Apparently, the purchase did not prove profitable. According to Henry Davis, author of *Electrical and Electronic Technologies: a Chronology of Events and Inventors*, “they moved their company to France where it was soon taken over by their attorney, leaving them nothing.”

Leonard Welling, Pletman's partner in the deal, had in 1930 headed a syndicate that purchased Temple of Chicago, a loudspeaker manufacturer. Welling is described in an April 1930 note in *Radio Broadcast* magazine as formerly a New York-based distributor for Majestic Radio.

How long Welling remained in business with Pletman is not clear. However, in 1935 he is not mentioned in an action

brought by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) against Wholesale Radio Service. Apparently the FTC disapproved of advertising radios at “lowest Wholesale prices” for a retail organization.

## The FTC Steps in

In the March 22, 1935 issue of Georgia School of Technology’s (now Georgia Tech) weekly newspaper, *The Technique*, the Wholesale Radio Service Co. Inc. Atlanta store advertised a “Swell Little 4 tube AC-DC midget. ... List price \$18.90. Our wholesale price: \$9.45” The ad notes “Wholesale Radio Service Co., the largest Radio Organization of its kind in the world, now has great modern sales rooms in Atlanta. TECH students are invited to avail themselves of the opportunity to buy at our lowest Wholesale Prices – kits, sets, parts and experimental equipment always in stock. Big section devoted to ‘Ham Stuff.’ All nationally advertised lines. Say, ‘I’m from Tech,’ and get our wholesale prices.”

The FTC brought action against the company in June 1935 for “misrepresentation as to radio prices.” Named in the action were Pletman, Samuel Novich and Max Kranzburg. It took Wholesale Radio a while to get the message. A small ad in the February 1937 *Boy’s Life* magazine is headlined, “Buy Wholesale. Free 156 page catalog. Save money on radio sets, electrical appliances, tubes, parts, tools, accessories, etc. Thousands of bargains in our Big, Free radio catalog. Buy from Wholesale and compare.”

The FTC action dragged on until May 1941 when the *New York Times* reported “FTC DROPS RADIO CHARGE; Had Accused Wholesale Radio Service of Misrepresentation.”

By the time FTC charges were dropped, Wholesale Radio Service had changed its name. A note in *Printer’s Ink* in 1939 mentions that “Radio Wire Television Corp. of America is formed at 160 E. 56th St, New York, embracing the former holdings of Wire Broadcasting, Inc., Wholesale Radio Service Co., and other subsidiaries of these enterprises.”

An ad in the October 1939 *Popular Science* magazine announced,

“And so today, Wholesale Radio Service becomes Radio Wire Television, Inc. Here is why the name was chosen, word for word. RADIO: With radio broadcasting this company has steadily expanded. It was and is the backbone of our business. Naturally, radio will continue to engage our interests. WIRE: We believe the new technique of broadcasting by wire will one day encompass the transmission of both sight and sound. Every current technological development points toward this end. TELEVISION: Whether tomorrow’s televised programs be received by radio or wire, it is our aim to offer the finest services anywhere. Our new name thus embodies those important factors which, in the very nature of things, comprise our business.

“Already several associate enterprises in control of patents relating to the communications field have been merged with this company. Conscious of our great responsibility, plans are even now under way to expand the number of Radio Wire Television Inc. retail outlets.”



*Author’s homebrew Hi-Fi audio amp made with a Lafayette chassis and parts.*

The ad lists locations in New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Boston, Newark, Bronx, New York, and Jamaica, New York. Note that “wholesale pricing” is no longer part of the description. The choice of “Wire” as part of the name is interesting. If Pletman were around today, he might have said, “We predicted it. Cable-TV and the Internet now brings ‘sight and sound’ by wire.”

Despite the FTC action, the company continued to grow in the 1930s, keeping up with the electronics industry and typically distributing two catalogs per year, Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter as well as bargain “flyer” catalogs.

The Lafayette-branded radios advertised in the catalogs represented both the low-end, like the four-tube advertised in the Georgia Tech ad, and the very top such as the Wholesale Radio Service 12 tube model L-1 in *Riders* Volume 3, and the 24 tube set shown on the cover of the 1937 catalog and described inside. *Consumers Union Reports* reviews of radios and consoles including those from Lafayette had some “Not acceptable” (due to bolts from the hot-chassis AC-DC set protruding from the bottom of the cabinet) and a couple of “Best buys.” This was the norm for Lafayette, marketing sets from the low-cost end up to the much higher quality level.

## Lafayette and Amateur Radio

Lafayette developed its own ham radio division. One example is a transmitter that was written up as an article by Frank Lester W2AMJ\*, Chief Engineer for the Transmitting Division of Lafayette Manufacturing Co., in the December 1936 *Short Wave Craft* magazine. The article, titled, “The 25 Watt Junior Transmitter,” notes that the Trutest transmitter uses the same circuit as the “now-popular Lafayette P46 transmitter. The circuit was chosen for simplicity of construction and operation, as well as its sure-fire performance. The circuit consists of the Les-tet oscillator buffer or doubler...” The “Les-tet” circuit was named after Lester himself. A type 53 tube was used as oscillator, a 56 as buffer/doubler and a parallel pair of 46 tubes for RF output. For more on the Trutest 25 watt Junior, see K2TQN’s excellent column in the May 2010 *QST* magazine.

The 1937 catalog has a complete description of both the 25 watt Junior and the larger P46A, a handsome rack-mounted 30 watt output transmitter which sold for \$49.50 plus cabinet, tubes and crystals. A matching modulator, the B46, was available for \$39.50 plus tubes and an

antenna tuner, model 46A sold for \$19.95. The catalog notes that the transmitter is conservatively rated and was tested at higher outputs.

For television, the company sold a simple mechanical TV in 1932 called the “See-All” Television Kit advertised as, “The Most Successful Low Priced Televisor on the Market.” Just six years later, Wholesale Radio is named as the distributor for the all-electronic, 16 tube TV kit with a 5 inch CRT (cathode ray picture tube) produced by Garod.

## Still more Name Changes

The 1933 catalog cover is headlined, “Lafayette radios and Trutest parts.” Despite the longer corporate names at the bottom of the catalog covers, the name Lafayette Radio was prominently featured on the top of most of the catalogs. Lafayette Radio Manufacturing Company is listed as the manufacturer of the ham radio transmitters just mentioned. The 1939 Spring/Summer catalog has both Radio Wire Television Co. Inc. and Lafayette Radio Corporation named on the cover.

The New York-area based Lafayette Radio apparently split off from its Chicago and Atlanta partners during World War II. The Atlanta-Chicago part of the organization had the name Lafayette Radio Corporation while the New York area (including Boston) kept the Radio Wire Television name. There were two distinct catalogs in 1942, both numbered 87, one from Radio Wire Television Inc. naming New York, Bronx, Newark and Boston as locations. The other 1942 catalog lists Lafayette Radio Corporation and only the addresses in Chicago and Atlanta.

Things apparently came to a head in 1945 when the Chicago and Atlanta sides of the organization announced they would no longer be named Lafayette Radio Corporation but would be changing their name to Concord Radio Corporation.

Separate catalogs would continue from both until 1948 when the two sides produced a combined catalog under the name “Lafayette-Concord” billing itself as the “world’s largest radio supply organization.” That continued for a couple of years and then in August 1951, ads for the new 1952 catalog from Lafayette listed only the New York area and Boston addresses. It marked the end of the Chicago and Atlanta as mail-order addresses for Lafayette Radio. Concord Radio, as a separate entity, is listed in the *Sams Photofacts Index* as a manufacturer of radios right into the transistor era.

I personally became acquainted with Lafayette in the late 1950s. The 1959, 60 and 61 catalogs, typical of their catalogs of that era, had attractive futuristic space-age cover art. It was a true dream book for a school kid with an interest in electronics and I pored over the pages.

My first order was for a VOM meter (measuring volts, ohms, and milliamperes) for the price of \$9.95 plus postage for shipping. It was Lafayette’s Argonne brand that was made in Japan but worked very well.

I followed that with an order for a small four-speed turntable with plywood mounting board, a radio-phonograph adapter switch, and the cheapest stereo tone arm offered by Lafayette, also Japanese-made, all so I could listen to records through an old Philco console I had repaired. But I really wanted a separate audio amp.

A few months later, I ordered an aluminum chassis, knobs, a red-jeweled pilot light, some resistors, and a tube. That, along with other parts stripped from a couple of dead radios went into a homebrew hi-fi amp. The push-pull 6V6GT amp came from an article I had seen in a 1958 *Radio-TV Experimenter* magazine. I later built an Eico signal tracer kit ordered through Lafayette. My Lafayette catalog dreams-turned-to-reality were limited by the amount of money I could earn on my paper-route.

## Reliance on Japanese Imports

Lafayette relied on Japan for many of their branded offerings, much more so than their competitors such as Allied Radio. All seven of the Lafayette-branded shortwave and ham receivers in my radio collection are made in Japan. Fred Osterman's *Shortwave Receivers Past and Present*, third edition, lists 19 Lafayette radios, all of which were made in Japan with the exception of the KT-135 Explor-Air, a three tube regenerative kit.

My Lafayette KT-195 Wireless Broadcaster kit and 1957 vintage "Music-Mates" LA-40 amplifier and LT-40 tuner were also made in Japan. Even some items that Lafayette manufactured in the U.S. used Japanese parts such as the S-meter on my 1961 vintage HE-20A Citizens Band radio.

## Lafayette and CB Radio

Lafayette apparently foresaw the growth of CB radio in the 1960s and wanted to spur sales. It even offered free QSL cards for CB users. However, the FCC ruled in July 1964 that "A Citizens radio station shall not be used for engaging in radio communications as a hobby or diversion, i.e., operating the radio station as an activity in and of itself."

Lafayette wanted to sell CBs and petitioned the FCC for a temporary injunction on that rule on the basis of free speech, but in April 1965 the FCC denied the petition.

The 1971 catalog announced Lafayette's Golden Jubilee 50th anniversary. Abraham Pletman in "A Message from our Founder" states, "This year Lafayette has reached an important milestone – our 50th year in business – and we wish to share the celebration of this occasion with you who have helped make our success possible."

In August 1973, the *New York Times* reported the passing of Pletman. His estate held over 325,000 shares of Lafayette Radio Electronics stock. He did not live to see the beginning of the end for the company he founded.

In 1973, the federally-imposed 55 mph



1937 Lafayette catalog featured their 24 tube premium radio.

speed limit caused a sudden spurt in CB sales that began a national craze. From a total of fewer than one million CB users before 1973, the FCC suddenly saw half a million license applications each month. CB users also started to use "handles" rather than FCC issued call letters to the point where use of a license became unenforceable.

Over 10 million CBs were in use by January 1, 1977 when the FCC expanded the band to 40 channels. Lafayette, which claimed to have the world's largest selection of CB sets, and other manufacturers had made millions prior to that date in 23 channel CB sales. But all that came to an end. Exactly one year later, the FCC banned the sale of any new 23 channel sets that did not meet the tougher type-acceptance standards required for the new 40 channel sets.

Those type-acceptance standards were also not communicated quickly enough. That meant a mad rush in 1977 to sell the 23 channel sets that were already in stock or in the manufacturing pipeline. The FCC-created "perfect storm" resulted in huge numbers of 23 channel sets being sold at well below cost combined with the reluctance of the public to buy the more-expensive-to-manufacture 40 channel sets. A number of CB manufacturers never recovered. Lafayette losses were reported to be in the millions.

## A Downward Spiral

During the 1970s Lafayette also invested heavily in 4 channel stereo sound. However, there were competing standards, none of which took hold and Lafayette again lost money. At the same time, a company called Radio Shack was expanding its network of local stores across the nation with electronic offerings very similar to those of Lafayette. In addition, Hi-Fi chain stores sprang up in major cities taking the high-end market share.

Lafayette started opening company-owned local stores but was late getting into that market segment. The summer 1965 catalog shows twelve company owned stores, all in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, except for a new one in Maryland just outside of Washington, D.C. They had the beginning of a national reach with 148 associate store locations in 42 states and Puerto Rico. The 1971 catalog shows 40 company-owned stores. The 1972 catalog shows 53 company-owned stores and notes that there are 260 associate stores, which were individually

owned. By 1975 the catalog mentions "over 100" company stores but does not indicate the number of associate stores. In 1965, you needed from \$10 to \$30,000 to open one and by 1975 the quoted cost increased to \$40 to \$75,000. In comparison to the few hundred Lafayette company and associate stores, Radio Shack grew to over 7,000 stores. Lafayette filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in January 1980.

Responding to an inquiry I made via the on-line Antique Radio Forum, Pete WA2CWA, who worked for Lafayette, supplied a first-hand perspective of the end of the company:

"When they went Chapter 11... roughly 60 stores of the now roughly 125 (company owned) stores were closed immediately. At our store, we had 48 hours to tear the entire store down, get everything boxed that had a valid and current stock number, and get it on a truck to take it back to Syosset (Lafayette's Long Island warehouse). Anything that wasn't on the official inventory sheets was to be discarded.

"Shortly after this (1981), Lafayette Syosset had a huge warehouse and tent sale on their property to dispose of all the inventory which included not only Lafayette finished goods, but all the parts and assemblies related to them; test equipment, warehouse equipment, fixtures, etc. Tons of stuff to grab and buy at below cost prices, but hours to wait to pay for the stuff. They were not prepared for their version of the 'electronic Oklahoma land rush.' During this final period, associate stores were not allowed to order or return merchandise back to Lafayette. The bankruptcy actions left them high and dry as far as Lafayette material was concerned."

The year 1981 marked the end of Lafayette Radio in Chapter 11 bankruptcy with subsequent sale of its New York area stores to a company that would soon become known as Circuit City. Now, whenever I see a piece of Lafayette gear, my mind goes back to those earlier years of drooling over their catalogs. Regardless of how good or bad the Lafayette device is, I have this desire to check it out and dream some more.

\*For a great read on Frank Lester W2AMJ (later W4AMJ), see his story in the summer 1997 *Quarter Century Wireless Association Journal* available on-line at: [www.qcwa.org/summer97.htm](http://www.qcwa.org/summer97.htm)

About the Author:

Richard Post's interest in electronics and radio started at age six when a friend showed him how to light a bicycle bulb using a worn lantern battery. As a teenager he repaired radios and TV sets. He passed the exam for a First Class FCC license when he was told he needed one to repair his CB. He later received his amateur radio license as KB8TAD. Rich now holds a University Emeritus title having retired from Ohio University as Assistant Dean and Director of the Instructional Media and Technology Services. One of his hobbies is collecting and restoring "boat anchors." He maintains the web site Boat Anchor Pix at [www.ohio.edu/people/posr/bapix](http://www.ohio.edu/people/posr/bapix)

