MYSTERY KEY

By Paul Huff – N8XMS



Mystery Strap Key owned by N8XMS

The key shown in the picture above is an interesting mystery. This type of key is called a "strap key" because its arm is made from a strap of spring brass which also provides the tensioning for the key. It has both "make" and "break" contacts that appear to be made from nickel silver. The wooden base of the key is 5.5" by 2.5". Two mounting holes are drilled through the base in diagonal corners. Workmanship is of a very high "professional" quality. For a key that has absolutely no adjustable parts, it has a remarkably good "feel" and it makes almost a musical clackity-clack sound during use. I usually use this key for the *ARRL Straight Key Night* event on January 1st. The most interesting feature of this key is the little brass plaque that is attached to the base. It says…



Tag from the Mystery Key

So where did this key come from? Well, I purchased it from an online auction in 2006 for $17.49 plus shipping. It was being sold as part of the stock liquidation process at an old radio store on Hoover Street in Ann Arbor called "Purchase Radio." Some of you may remember Purchase Radio. It was a dusty old store that catered to the vintage radio and electronics crowd. The store was in the process of closing and some of its remaining old-stock contents were being sold on eBay. Purchase Radio was first opened by Roy Purchase, W8RP, in 1930. Roy's son-in-law Dan McCollough, WB8UXO, eventually took over the business. The person who posted the key on eBay on behalf of Dan said that it had been in the store since the late 1950's but no other information was available.



Purchase Radio – photo by Jim Rees, N7AHZ


West Engineering circa 1910

Obviously, the key was made in the "Engineering Shops" at the University of Michigan. These shops were located in "West Engineering", which is now called "West Hall", on South University. West Engineering was built in 1904 and housed both the school of engineering and the school of architecture for many years. It still contains some facilities used for naval and marine engineering research but the engineering shops no longer exist. The shops were a place where students and faculty could purchase supplies and have custom items fabricated for various projects that they were working on. It is my understanding that the shops were also open to the public for the same purpose and that they were still there in the early 70's.

I once showed some pictures of this key to noted key collector and author Dave Ingram, K4TWJ. (Dave is now a Silent Key.) He offered me an educated guess, based on the materials and style of the key, that it dated to somewhere between 1910 and 1920. Because of the "make" and "break" contacts he also thought that it might have been used by lineman to test telegraph lines. I was a little bit skeptical of this dating. I thought that the key was most certainly pre-WW2, but it seemed to be in too good of a condition to be almost one hundred years old.

Why would someone custom manufacture this key? There were certainly many commercial keys manufactured with "make" and "break" contacts for use by telegraph lineman. My first thought was that it might have been used for some kind of demonstration in an engineering class, but I did not have an actual answer to this question until just a few minutes ago, and what I now know still has plenty of mystery to it!

Quite literally, while I was typing the paragraph up above about the engineering shops at U of M, I received a phone call from Dan McCollough, the last owner of Purchase Radio. Dan told me that he thinks the key came into his store as part of the estate of a ham who had passed away. He didn't remember specifically who it was, nor could he remember exactly when he got it. Dan guessed that it was in the late 90's or early 2000's. (Or was it the late 50's as the eBay listing indicated???) He told me that it was his understanding that this key was custom made by some unknown person or persons and given as a presentation, possibly attached to a plaque, to some unknown recipient in commemoration for some unknown honor. He specifically thought that it might have been given to an engineering professor at U of M who was also a ham. This would explain the near perfect condition of such an old key – it was never actually used for anything other than a "show piece."

All of the "unknowns" in Dan's statement certainly adds to the mystery of this great old key. Here is my very imaginative hypothesis… I think that this key might have been custom ordered from the engineering shops by student members of the University of Michigan Amateur Radio Club (now W8UM but originally 8XA in 1913), probably before WW2. I think that it was mounted to a presentation plaque and given to their faculty sponsor, who was probably an engineering professor, on the occasion of his retirement. (Most people in engineering back then were males.) I think that somewhere along the line this plaque got into the hands of some geeky "radio kid" who trashed the plaque and kept the key. (This is something that I would have done!) It then found its way to Purchase Radio and the known history after that.

The true story of this key will probably never be known, but I do know one thing for sure. – This old strap key will have to be pried away from the cold dead hands of this U of M alumnus before it takes its next step along the path of history!