

VANITY AND CALL SIGN HISTORY

The recently enacted Vanity Call Sign program is not the first time dormant call signs have been reissued.

Did you know that call signs were commonly reissued as early as the 1920s. Many call signs have multiple owners who had their own unique QSL Card. Some call signs in the "QSL Cards from the Past" collection have more than 5 different owners.

Department of Commerce

Prior to 1927, radio was regulated by the United States Department of Commerce. Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover played a strong role in shaping radio. His powers were limited by federal court decisions, however; in particular, he was not allowed to deny broadcasting licenses to anyone who wanted one. The result was that many people perceived the airwaves to suffer from "chaos," with too many stations trying to be heard on too few frequencies.

The Radio Act of 1927 Federal Radio Commission

The five-person FRC was given the power to grant and deny licenses, and to assign frequencies and power levels for each licensee. The Commission was not given any official power of censorship, although programming could not include "obscene, indecent, or profane language." In theory, anything else could be aired. In practice, the Commission could take into consideration programming when renewing licenses, and their ability to take away a broadcaster's license enabled them to control content to some degree.

Federal Communications Commission

In 1934, Congress passed the Communications Act, which abolished the Federal Radio Commission and transferred jurisdiction over radio licensing to a new Federal Communications Commission, including in it also the telecommunications jurisdiction previously handled by the Interstate Commerce Commission. Title II of the Communications Act focused on telecommunications using many concepts borrowed from railroad legislation and Title III contained provisions very similar to the Radio Act of 1927.

Thirty five years ago it was possible to be assigned a preferential ham radio call sign if you knew the right people. Ham clubs, “deserving” amateurs ...even FCC officials who were licensed radio amateurs were able to get a specific call sign or format. Back in those days call signs could be assigned manually. A phone call to the right official frequently resulted in a “good” call sign being issued at no charge. It was this way for years. It all came to a screeching halt in the mid-1970's when an FCC licensing official (who ended up going to federal prison) crossed the line by accepting money in exchange for granting a 1-by-2 call sign.

The FCC responded to the scandal by eliminating all past station call sign policies and adopting a new Group Call Sign Assignment System. Effective March 24, 1978, all Amateur Radio call signs would be assigned “systematically” ...that is, in strict sequential order from predetermined call sign groups and blocks.

Extra Class amateurs were entitled to Group “A” call signs which contained all 1x2, most 2x1, and most “A” prefixed 2x2 call signs. Advanced Class got Group “B” call signs containing most K, N, and W prefixed 2x2 call signs. Generals and Technicians were entitled to a Group “C” call sign; all 1x3 call signs beginning with K, N or W. The Novice Class (Group “D”) contained most K and W prefixed 2x3 call signs. Group “E” call signs were to contain WC, WK, WM, and WT prefixed call signs for Races, Club, Military recreation and Temporary licenses. But Group “E” call signs were never implemented and to this day, these prefixes are not issued in a 2x3 format.

All amateurs were allowed to keep their existing call sign ...a change would only be made if requested by the licensee. Anyone upgrading or changing their radio district could either keep their present call sign or be assigned the next sequential one from the appropriate group. When all call signs are assigned from a specific group, the next assignment is made the next lower group.

These rules applied to the contiguous (lower 48) United States. States and territories located in the Pacific (mostly Hawaii and Guam), Atlantic (mostly Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands) and Alaska had different rules. They got assigned call signs with 2-letter prefixes. AH, KH, NH and WH were allocated to the Pacific area; KP, NP, WP to the Atlantic area and AL, KL, NL and WL to Alaska. The Group “A” 2x1's went to the Extra Class. AH, AL and KPx2 were allocated to Group “B” (Advanced). And KH, NH, WH, KL, NL, WL, NP and WP-by-2 went to Group “C” (Technicians and Generals.) Group “D” (Novices) got 2x3 calls beginning with KH, WH, KL, WL, KP and WP.

Vanity Call Signs

In June 1990, retired Texas Extra Class amateur, Jim Wills N5HCT, filed a Petition for Rule Making suggesting that radio amateurs be allowed to choose a dormant station call sign upon paying \$30. The petition was denied. But that did not stop Wills. He wrote his Congressman concerning the reassignment of unused call signs. On December 9, 1991, Congressman Ralph Hall wrote Wills back saying that he had contacted the FCC and that they were determining whether such a fee would collect enough money to pay for itself.

This was all happening at a time when a system was being developed to have the FCC's budget basically paid for by the various beneficiaries of their services. This was finalized when Congress added a new Section 9(a) to the Communications Act authorizing the Commission to collect annual regulatory fees to recover its operating costs. Neither the ARRL nor the FCC had advance knowledge of the short four-word "Amateur vanity call signs" that was added to the Schedule of Regulatory Fees at the last minute.

President Clinton signed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (the official name of his Deficit Reduction' Plan) into law on Tuesday, August 10, 1993 and with it, the provision for Vanity call signs became law (Public Law 103-66). A year later (December 23, 1994) the FCC Commissioners adopted final rules implementing vanity call signs in the Amateur Service.

On June 14, 1995, the FCC adopted a revised Schedule of Regulatory Fees for Fiscal Year (FY) 1995. The fee, which is reviewed and adjusted annually, also takes into consideration the total amount of funding that the FCC needs for its upcoming fiscal year. The first Vanity call sign was issued on May 31, 1996. The cost: \$3 a year ...or \$30.00 for a ten year term, just as Jim Wells had proposed.

The ARRL suggested gradually implementing Vanity call signs through a system of "starting gates." Gate One allowed a previous holder to apply for that call sign or, where the holder is deceased, a close relative could apply. Gate Two would allow Amateur Extra Class operators to apply. Gate Three allow Advanced Class operators to apply. Gate Four opened the system to any licensee. A club station license trustee could also apply for the call sign of a deceased former holder. A Vanity call sign is valid for a ten year term after which time another regulatory fee must be paid.