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The Hero of Hallettsville

How a QSL-40 Transmitter Helped Bring Aid to a Flooded Texas Town

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Several years ago I acquired an ugly transmitter from a guy that said it came out of a defunct radio museum in Houston, TX. It looked like it was built from parts scrounged from a variety of places including the kitchen trashcan. The broken and repaired panel, hacked tin can chassis and hasty paint job all said function before beauty. Interestingly it came with a label, "The Hero of Hallettsville". Hallettsville is about 100 miles west of Houston. The Lavaca River runs through it. Could this transmitter

have belonged to some Ham struggling to stay on the air as a hurricane roared around him? Perhaps he provided the only communication with the outside world as roads flooded and telephone lines went down. The true story behind this transmitter is close to exactly that.

Early Saturday morning June 29, 1940, 4 inches of rain fell at Hallettsville, Texas. A downpour of over 10 inches followed that night. In addition, 16 inches of rain fell in the area up stream from Hallettsville. The Lavaca River at Hallettsville, normally crossable on foot, started to rise. By 2AM Sunday morning people living near the river were being evacuated. By 5AM the river was flooding



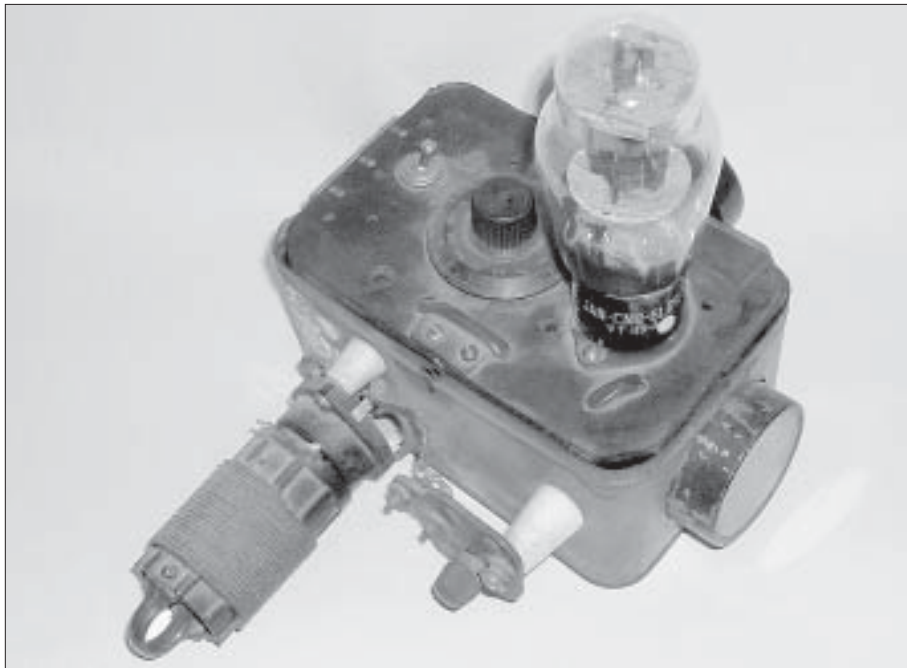
Downtown Hallettsville, Texas on Sunday, June 30, 1940

the town. Several houses were seen floating down the river beyond the reach of anyone. Cries could be heard in the darkness but nothing could be done. Shortly after 7AM water was 6 to 10 feet deep in the town square and several feet deep over the highway itself. The highway approach to the Lavaca River Bridge was washed away. Around 9AM the railroad bridge was washed out after being struck by a floating house. That day seven people died in the Lavaca River at Hallettsville. Property and crop losses were estimated at more than \$1 million.

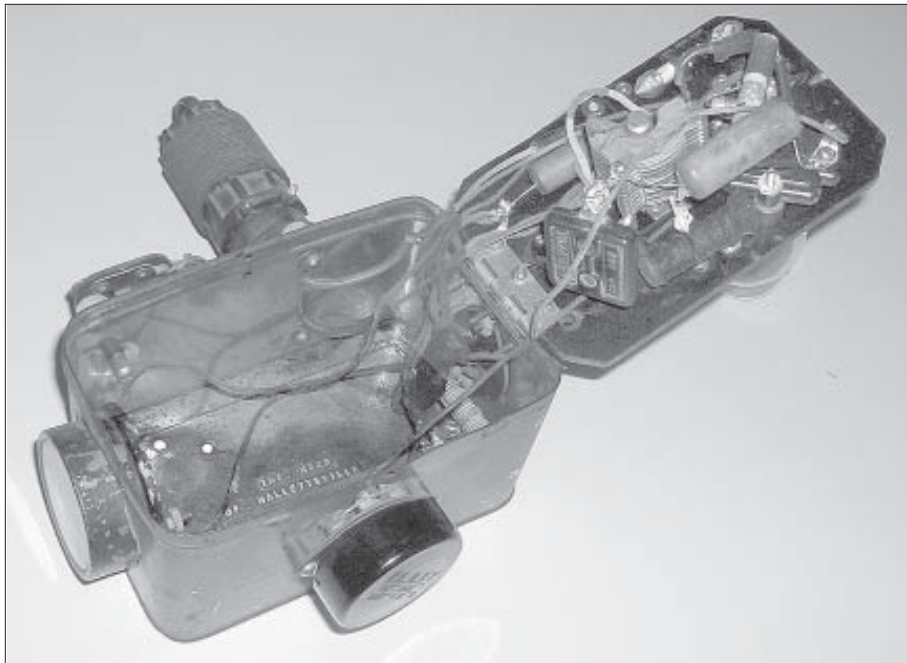
An article in the September 1940 issue of QST (page 60) reports details from the Ham perspective.

On Sunday morning Hallettsville put out a plea to hams for help. The town was completely cut off, flooded, needed boats

and doctors and had no outside communications. Houston hams responded by gathering emergency equipment and heading for Hallettsville. Along the way water was over the running boards of their borrowed Texas Highway Department truck. At one point the hams found the road gone. Locals attempting to cross were stranded in trees where they stayed until the water receded. There the hams stopped and got on the air. One of their rigs was W5CVQ's 6L6 transmitter made up like a QSL-40 but with a padding condenser that could be switched in for 3.5MC. Eventually the water went down enough that the Houston hams managed to get across and into Hallettsville to set up in City Hall. They were on the air for 24 hours handling requests for help and supplies, broadcasting flood reports and



The Hero of Hallettsville is a crystal-controlled 6L6 oscillator. The antenna is coupled into the output tank circuit via the compression capacitor just to the right of the output coil. A crystal socket is on the side opposite the output coil. Also visible is the plate tuning adjustment, the 80-meter padding condenser switch, and a plate current meter.



The top of the Hero of Hallettsville is hinged for access. This is a minimal design. About a dozen parts make up the entire transmitter.

warnings and sending “personal messages of safety to relatives of the marooned populace”. The QST article reported that the little 6L6 rig proved to be a valuable help.

This ugly little transmitter is certainly that 6L6 rig that helped save Hallettsville on June 30, 1940. It is built along the lines of the QSL series of CW transmitters described in QST before WWII and has an extra padding condenser that can be switched in via a toggle switch.

The QSL-40 name comes from the transmitter size and the power. It is about the size of a QSL card and includes one tube, a crystal, plate current meter and a plug-in coil. The design claimed 40 watts from the single 6L6. The QSL series of compact 6L6 transmitter designs appeared in QST starting with the QSL 40 in February 1938 and ending with the QSL 25 in April 1941. The QSL Push-Pull (June 1940) ran 600 volts on the 6L6

plates and could light a 100 watt light bulb to full brilliance. The 5 watt version described in December 1939 was at the other end of the spectrum. It was a transformerless design using a voltage doubler off of the 110 volt AC line to get 220 volts B+. That particular article mentions that the operator should avoid touching the metal frame of his key. The 6L6 (and its big brother the 807) appeared in transmitter article after article for two decades.

I’ve never tried fixing the Hero of Hallettsville and putting it on the air. Any repairs would destroy its character and some of the history behind it.

Information Sources:

- QST, Sept 1940
- The Lavaca County Tribune, July 2, 1940
- http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2003/ofr03-193/cd_files/USGS_Storms/counties/fayette.htm
- Thanks to Brenda Lincke-Fisseler of the Fiench Simpson Memorial Library, Hallettsville, TX, for her research help.

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