

# FEATURES



## Radio's golden era: goat glands and the Hindenburg

By KETA STEEBES  
OF THE ADVOCATE STAFF

"Lum and Abner," one of the countless radio programs John Enigl has collected over the years, is on the air, but he is listening with only half an ear. He is recalling two of the most memorable moments in radio history: Orson Welles' fictitious but terrifying "War of the Worlds" in 1936, and Herb Morrison's dramatic reporting of the *Hindenburg* disaster in Lakehurst, NJ, in 1937.

"I missed them both," Enigl says ruefully. "But I did get an interview with Herb Morrison 50 years later. Herb was working for WLS in Chicago in 1937, and when WLS wouldn't send him to Lakehurst to report the *Hindenburg's* arrival, he went on his own. All WLS gave him was some basic equipment, but he got WLS the scoop of a lifetime. When I interviewed him at his Morgantown, West Virginia, home in 1987, he was living in an old farmhouse, in far from affluent circumstances."

A radio buff since 1932, when his father brought home a secondhand, battery-operated 1928 "Fada," Enigl has been collecting radio shows and the radios that first played them with a vengeance. The never-to-be-forgotten Morrison and Welles recordings are two of his favorites, but other golden-oldies come close. The "Edgar Bergen-Charlie McCarthy Show," the program that made Enigl miss "War of the Worlds," is one of them.

A 1925 home-built model, the oldest of Enigl's vast radio collection, shares shelf space with about 200 other square-shaped "tombstones" and curved-top "cathedrals" in his crowded, cramped and utterly fascinating Egg Harbor workshop. Watching Enigl's eyes sparkle as he talks about the Lone Ranger-Tom Mix-Jack Armstrong era, one can see him, lunchpail in hand, rushing home from school at a breakneck pace to tune in his heroes. He doesn't say it in so many words, but one gets the impression that that secondhand Fada, balky as battery radios could be, was his much-used passport into a magical world.

"We couldn't afford to buy any-

thing new," Enigl says. "But in 1940, the year we got electricity, we moved up to a 1936 single-battery AM Sears Silvertone that played a long time on one battery. What I remember best about that year were the goat-gland ads for aging men made by a certain Dr. Brinkley, putting his training to use, which is why his shop is a magnet for collectors. When FM radios came in in the 1950s, AMs became obsolete; so John, who keeps an eye out for obsolescence, began collecting them.

He is presently eyeing (as possible collectibles) VCRs, eight-tracks, cassette players, cellular telephones and small television sets with round picture tubes. Today's fax machines, which he says date back 60 years and were first used by newspapers, are also on his endangered species list.

If this had been a summer month, chances are Lum and Abner would have been at rest, and Enigl would be spending part of his morning chatting with 10 to 15 fellow amateur radio operators who do not, he says with a grin, find the term "ham" acceptable. As the founder of Door County's small but active "Amateur Radio Club," John makes good use of a low-powered transmitter and receiver given him by a former member. It is capable of receiving a signal and rebroadcasting it at greater power all the way from Washington Island to Green Bay.

"People with scanners can pick us up and often do," he says. "We're usually on the air from 8 to 8:30 a.m."

A great many of Enigl's prized radios are picked up at swap fests, where he and his friend John Juleen are familiar sights. Ads in the "Antique Radio Classified Magazine" let people know what he has, and bring him, he says, "a lot of mail-order business." Classified ads and word-of-mouth are doing a good job bringing in local business.

A Green Bay customer, for example, had looked long and hard for a rare 1941 Zenith AM-FM radio, which Enigl just happened to have. He says this model is highly sought because it is one of few radios made before World War II with FM (fre-



—Advocate photo by Heidi Hodges

### Enigl: 'All my training in electronics was for naught—but I still had a great time'

quency modulation). FM was used exclusively for wartime communication during the next four years, and civilian use was prohibited. This pre-Pearl Harbor Day AM-FM model, therefore, operates only on AM.

Enigl's radios are almost all tube types (he finds them easy to fix) and sell for \$15 to \$150. His goal is to sell enough of the ones he has on hand to buy a few really choice specimens. The long-discontinued Catalin cabinet model, he said, is the first thing that comes to mind.

Enigl retired from teaching in 1987 and gave up his part-time TV

repair job when solid state came in. Radio repair, a fairly steady sideline for 23 years, is also a thing of his past, unless "a very special request." These glands were supposed to restore vitality, but the FCC didn't believe him. They made him stop advertising in the United States.

"Well, it wasn't long before Dr. Brinkley's goat gland ads starting coming in from Radio Station XERL in Via Cuna, Mexico. He had built himself the most powerful radio station in North America—it's the same station Wolfman Jack got his start years later—and we could easily pick it up in Door County.

When the Mexican government said all broadcasting had to be in Spanish, we couldn't understand Dr. Brinkley's ads anymore. But they sure were fun while they lasted."

Far too young himself to be concerned with the effects of goat glands on vitality, Enigl spent his formative years learning everything he could about radios. With no one else in the Carlsville school sharing that interest, his only knowledge came from encyclopedias. Catalogs specializing in crystal radio kits were another source of pleasure, as

were the instructions on the do-it-yourself kits he ordered.

Poor eyesight kept Enigl, a 1943 Sevastopol High School graduate, out of the Army, but it didn't stop him from reading about radios and how they worked. This interest flourished during his normal school and college years and became even more keenly honed at night school.

"The Milwaukee School of Engineering gave me a test that showed I already knew a lot about radios, so they put me in a TV class," he grinned. "I didn't know as much as they thought I did, so I ended up studying both radio and TV at the Milwaukee Area Technical College two nights a week.

"This was in the mid-1950s. Everything was tubes in those days—transistors were still experimental—so everybody figured TV-radio repair would be a steady, lucrative, long-lasting career."

Enigl's "day job" was school teaching, and most of his teaching career was spent in Brookfield. The day the "lucrative repair business" bubble burst was the day a student walked into the Brookfield school carrying a little black object with three protruding wires. The student's uncle worked for Philco, and the black object was the company's newly developed transistor. It soon would take the place of radio tubes.

"All my training in electronics, everything I had learned, was for naught," Enigl says in mock dismay. "But I still had a great time learning it."

Enigl is still having a great time comes in. "I had to find a different hobby," he says with a twinkle. "So I took up radio collecting and newspaper writing." He contributes often to the DOOR COUNTY ADVOCATE.

As one of 10,000 radio memorabilia collectors in the United States, and half a dozen or so in Door County, John Enigl wants to make one thing perfectly clear.

"I collect ONLY old radios," he says, glancing at his overflowing shelves. "I do NOT collect radio-phonograph combinations. If you have one you don't want—don't call me."