

# History of a Hobby: The Perfect Storm, 1971 – 1975

by  
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The 1971 covers of Time and Newsweek were grim: ongoing war in Southeast Asia, environmental degradation, recession. Week after week there was little good news in sight. No wonder, then, that the time was right for a nostalgia boom, just as there had been during the dark days of World War II. A commentary in Time magazine wonders about “The Meaning of Nostalgia” (May 3, 1971). Twenty-five thousand copies of Dick Tracy cases and twice as many copies of the adventures of Buck Rogers were sold to a weary public. Liberty magazine, which had gone under in the 50s, was reborn as a “nostalgia magazine.” Three hundred radio stations were broadcasting old time radio reruns. October 16, 1972 Newsweek hit the newsstands with a photo of film icon Marilyn Monroe and the caption “Yearning for the Fifties, the Good Old Days.” The youth of the 30s, 40s, and 50s had come of age and didn’t necessarily like what they were finding. Is it any wonder that the old time radio hobby exploded in these years?

While there is no shortage of groups and individuals researching the old time radio era, little if any attention is paid to the history of our hobby. This has become a research area of special interest to me over the past couple years. My first piece on this topic was published in the March, 2007, issue of the Old Radio Times and covered the earliest days from 1959 to 1971.

Now I want to look at the period from 1971 to 1975 when the OTR fan hobby matured and developed into the hobby we still enjoy today. The hobby was not brand new: by 1971 fans had a few publications to choose from including Jim Harmon’s The Great Radio Heroes (a fanzine, apparently, in addition to a book), Epilogue, Radio Dial, Stay Tuned, and of course the legendary Hello Again. There were trading circles that had been around since at least the mid-60s. There was also an organization called the Radio Historical Society (RHS) founded by Charles Ingersoll in 1956 that boasted 600 members by 1970.

During the first half of the 70s enthusiasts saw the growth of what I consider the twin pillars of the hobby: fan clubs (in addition to the RHS) and conventions. The “clubs n’ cons” brought listeners together, solidified the fan base, and created an overall structure for the hobby that has endured for 40 years. The RHS is clearly the oldest fan group but my digging (and that of friends) has not led to any information beyond that provided by back issues of Hello Again and the RHS publication Radio Dial.

The first club of the modern era was the Golden Radio Buffs of Maryland, founded by Gene Leitner and Owens Pomeroy. It organized in February 1972 and registered as a nonprofit with the State of Maryland. Gene relates that the club just took off. He and Owens started playing old time radio on local station WBJC, first on Wednesday morning at 10:30, then at a more friendly spot on Sunday mornings for two hours. The college students fell in love with the shows, never having heard anything like it. The success of the program led Gene and Owens to start a club for local enthusiasts. Thus was born the Golden Radio Buffs.

That same year the group held its first awards program and Owens soon began publishing a newsletter. Monthly meetings featured local radio broadcasters, many of whom worked professionally through the golden age of radio.

The Society to Preserve and Encourage Radio Drama, Variety, and Comedy (SPERDVAC) was founded in 1974 in Southern California. According to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of their magazine (issue five), the three founders were Kevin Stern, who was airing an OTR show called “Don’t Touch That Dial,” James Coontz, a listener of the program, and Jerry Haendiges, who supplied shows for the show (and who still supplies a show or two to old time radio fans). With proximity to so many former radio stars, SPERDVAC has been one of the premier old time radio clubs over the decades.

Soon after, on the other side of the country, came the North American Radio Archives (NARA). This organization was chartered in California in January, 1973, though the work that led to this chartering started months before in 1972. Roger Hill was their first president (later editor of their magazine NARA News). Like the Maryland club NARA had a prosperous run with an active membership into the 21<sup>st</sup> century before fading away.

1975 saw the birth of two long-running clubs, the Old Time Radio Club (New York) and the Radio Historical Association of Colorado (RHAC). Interestingly, the OTR Club was birthed a mere two months before RHAC. Could a founding member of RHAC have been inspired by a friend in the Buffalo club? The New York Club was founded in May, 1975, with ten members. A year later they had grown to 16. Peter Bellanca was elected president and Ray Oliveri vice-president. The club’s newsletter, the Illustrated Press, premiered in February, 1976 and is still published today, 33 years later.

Just as the NY club was finding its legs, RHAC was bursting upon the scene. In a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary reflection (Return With Us Now, vol. 20, no. 12) John Adams notes the group’s first meeting in July, 1975, at the home of one Herral Peacock. Each attendee “was asked to bring one reel of his best old radio shows to the next meeting to form the beginning of a library.” In September of that year Mr. Peacock was elected president and John Adams vice-president. John Dunning was an active early member. By 1978 their membership had reached 100 and they had a monthly magazine, This is OTR (later changed to Radio News, then Return With Us Now). Their magazine, too, continues to be published to the present day.

Alongside the clubs, which allowed fellow fans to meet and share programs with each other and enjoy club publications, full-scale conventions began to bring fan and radio star together. Pinpointing the earliest conventions, however, is a tricky proposition. No literature or promotional materials seem to survive from the events; the only record of their existence is the scant notes in various publications - primarily Hello Again - that make mention of them.

The first radio-related convention for which we have records is the Southwestern convention, held in a different city each year (Oklahoma City in 1970, Dallas in 1971, Oklahoma City again in 1972). Founded in 1967, Southwestern Con featured radio panels (including Jim Harmon) and dealers among other nostalgia areas. It was quite successful as Hickerson reports 900 in attendance at the 1972 edition (Hello Again, Aug. ’72). Interestingly, one of the attending radio fans, Don Maris, attempted in 1971 to establish the Radio Preservation Club which would buy and disseminate unreleased radio programs on disc (mimeographed multi-page pamphlet). His club preceded the Golden Radio Buffs by a year but seems to have been more a round-robin organization than a true general fan club.

It appears that the first convention primarily focused on old time radio debuted in

1971. The fall of 1971 saw the premier of the Northeast's old time radio convention. Held in a New Haven, CT, Holiday Inn, the Lo-Fi Radio Buffs - a local group of OTR fans - put on a modest celebration of old time radio with guests including Bret Morrison and Rosa Rio. The Society of American Vintage Radio Enthusiasts (SAVE) was formed shortly thereafter under the direction of Sal Trapani (who passed away about ten years ago). SAVE sponsored the next four editions in New Britain (1972), Meriden (1973), Milford (1974), and New Haven (1975), CT. The third and fourth conventions are reviewed in the 1973 and 1974 November and December issues of Hello Again. Presumably the earlier years were reviewed in Hello Again (issues of which are unavailable to me at this time).

Notable guests included William Spier (1972), Jackson Beck (1972, 1973), Peg Lynch (1972, 1973), Raymond Edward Johnson (1972, 1973, 1974), and Staats Cotsworth (1975). The William Spier Award was handed out in 1973 to Jac Pearl and Peter Donald, in 1975 to Hyman Brown and Sam Digges, and in 1975 to Anne Elstner, Staats Cotsworth, Rosa Rio, and Irene Wicker.

Trapani split with other backers of SAVE after 1975 and Jay Hickerson became convention chairman in 1976. After three years of the generic name Old Time Radio Convention the event was rechristened Friends of Old Time Radio in 1979 and continues as the largest annual event in the hobby. A deeper look at the post-1975 years, however, fall outside the scope of this piece and will be explored at another time.

The year after the Connecticut event debuted, the mid-Atlantic region got its own "convention" sponsored by the Golden Radio Buffs of Maryland. It ran for approximately 16 years. Dubbed the Golden Mike Awards, the Buffs gave the first award (1972) to the venerable Fred Foy. Also considered for the honor were Arthur Godfrey (who couldn't attend due to a book tour) and Gerry Moore (who also declined insisting he hadn't earned such an honor).

Another East Coast convention debuted in 1974 organized by Allen Rockford and Don Richardson. It was called the Sounds of Yesterday and held in Syracuse, NY and held for at least three years (Hello Again, March '76).

The West Coast got in on the convention action when NARA hosted its first tribute dinner on June 2, 1973, in San Francisco. It honored Carlton E. Morse and featured such guests as Les Tremayne, AFTRA president Bill Baldwin, and of course Mr. Morse. While perhaps not a full convention in the manner of its East Coast counterparts, the spirit was there. Unfortunately this gala event was not followed up in successive years as originally planned, for which original president Roger Hill took the blame (NARA News, Summer '97). On a similar but smaller note, California enthusiast Joanne Verigin had a "bash for collectors" in the Escalon, CA, area (Hello Again, Dec. '73). Sadly, the West Coast would be void of further conventions until the early 80s.

Clearly the old time radio hobby was on a roll by the mid-70s and gaining momentum every year. In looking back at that time period one might wonder why such an explosion of activity in a previously obscure and underground hobby. Maybe it was the perfect storm, many ingredients coming together at just the right time. A generation entering middle age, looking back fondly on a medium that recalled an era that seemed much more golden than the early '70s; a critical mass of circulating shows encouraging communication and trading between fans; new blood being introduced to the medium via reruns in markets across the nation.

It must have been an exciting time as collectors hooked up and discovered new shows, new friends, and new publications. Even now, nearly forty years later, one can almost sense the energy that pulsed through the hobby leading some to anticipate a new era in dramatic radio. The excitement was surely well-founded as new network drama was revived in the middle of the decade. The hobby crested through the rest of the decade and into the mid-80s with new clubs, new publications, new conventions, and of course the discovery of new shows, the lifeblood of the hobby. But those years - the maturing of the hobby - are a story for another day.

In addition to the magazines cited, the author would like to thank Jack French, Jay Hickerson, Gene Leitner, and David Siegel for their contributions and encouragement.

Records of our hobbies earliest years are scarce, memories fade, and those who were there pass on. Any information readers can supply to supplement this research is greatly appreciated. Ryan can be reached at [OldRadioTimes@yahoo.com](mailto:OldRadioTimes@yahoo.com).

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