

The Windswept Journal

Radio Edition

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Escape from East St Louis

by Pat Bunsold, WA6MHZ

It all started with an eBay bid. Always looking for old manuals, I put in a bid on a box lot and waited for the auction to end. The ad stated "This box of manuals came from the filing cabinet of my late husband. He worked in a Garage Door Factory in the 50s and they used a lot of equipment to test the stuff with. He retired in 1958 and the cabinet hasn't been panned since. I see Clegg, Heatkit, Johnson and Hallicrafters manuals. Must be 100 or more. No Paypal, Money order only!" I hate money orders. Have to go to the bank and get it, it is so much easier to just write a check. And the widow wanted \$30 shipping as well. What? Was she delivering it in a LIMO??!! The days slowly passed and finally Sunday night the auction was due to end. My \$17.76 bid had been outbid by some "LUNKERHEAD"

clown, who probably didn't even know what a Heathkit was. Some of the names people use on Ebay are so Smug and annoying. Like "WinningBid" and "MelonBrain" I just use my Callsign, I have nothing to hide. With 30 seconds to go, a K4 put in a bid which raised the pot to \$23. OH OH, looks like I would be paying dearly for this! I counted down the clock and with 21 seconds to go, I punched in a \$37.78 bid. Yay! I was the high bidder!!! But as 3 seconds came, some sneaky rat bastard tried to snipe me with \$36.03. HA!!!!He missed!! I won the lot for \$37.03 plus the 30 bucks shipping.

The next afternoon I went to the bank and had the Money Order cut for \$67.03 Ouch, that was a lot to spend for an unknown box of manuals. Weeks passed and no box. Another week, and then another. I emailed the widow and asked if she had sent them. She replied she had gone to the hospital for some bladder problems and would get them sent out shortly. That told me she probably forgot about it all! But sure enough, the next Tuesday, a UPS box arrived and awaited me to get home from work. I lugged the very heavy box into the shack and cut it open. Yep, it was full of manuals alright. Here was a HW-100 manual, a Johnson Ranger manual, lots of articles cut from QST and a Hallicrafters S-40 instruction book. I was bummed. Nothing I needed, and a lot of money spent on the chance there would be something rare. There were a lot of non-Ham stuff too, including metal shop equipment and even some newspaper clippings. Finally there was a file called "GD-4000" which I pulled out. Inside was product announcements of a new Electronic Garage door opener for 1955 from the Albeit Electronics Company of East St Louis, Illinois. The Silent Key evidently had been project manager on this project and all the notes and data were in this file. It told how he had installed an RF Screen room in the factory basement for testing of the openers. I moved page by page where it showed the test procedure for alignment of the receivers and transmitters. Finally was a manual to a receiver used in the setup. I blinked and

dropped the file. The manual was labeled Hallicrafters SX-88.

The SX-88 was a spectacular shortwave receiver made from 1954 to 1955, and fewer than 100 are known to exist. It was a monster, weighing in at 75 lbs, but a magnificent radio which is universally acknowledged as one of the best ever designed. I thumbed through the manual and fondled the vintage pages, in perfect condition. \$67 for this haul too much??? This manual alone is worth Hundreds!! If not Thousands. I took the book to bed that night and read it over and over. The next morning I took out the last folder for the Albeit Company and found it had burned to the ground in 1968 during the Racial civil unrest period. A Photo was in the file showing the RF Screen room and showed the SX-88 on the table inside with various other O-scopes and meters. Wow! The Test station of a lifetime.

Days passed and I began to wonder about what ever happened to that radio. Was it still there during the fire, did it get burnt along with the rest of the building?? I sent an email to the widow, Margery, and asked her about some of the history of Albeit. A few hours later the phone rang.

We talked for quite some time, this charming lady in her 90s now and still doing well. She told me how after the riots, a warehouse was built on the building's spot She never knew what had happened to the radio. But as far as she knew, it was still there in the Screen room in the basement. She had known the owner, Marvin Albeit, well and he was crushed by the burning of his business. He sold the property to a car parts dealer who put up a flimsy warehouse to store stock for his store. That had gone under in the 70s and that was the last she heard of it. No mention of any sale of radios or equipment.

Thoughts of the SX-88 haunted my every moment.. Still in the Screen room after 50 years?? I just had to know. Could the room still be intact? Or was it toasted with the rest

of the fire?? With a vacation due me, I began to load the car with tools and equipment. Yes, it was Road Trip time!

It took nearly 3 days to cross the US West and make it to St Louis. I crossed the Mississippi with the giant Arch in my rear view mirror. I had found the location of Albeit Electronics Company was at 8th St and St Louis Avenue, and quickly made my way off the Freeway to that part of town. OHH!!! I don't want to be here, the feeling came over me quickly. I had seen run down, seedy parts of towns before, but this area was chilling. Most of the buildings were burnt out shells, never rebuilt after the 60s unrest. Many were just vacant lots where they had been bulldozed. Trash filled the lots and very disheveled transients stood around burning barrels warming their hands. I drove up and down the streets until I found the building, which had obviously been abandoned for the last 30 years. It was a 2 story warehouse, with a chain link fence around the front of it. I drove down the alley and pulled into a loading dock area. No one seemed to be around.

Stepping out of the car, I looked carefully around to make sure no one had noticed the tan Town Car with California plates. I worried about coming back to find it stripped. Removing a crow bar from the trunk, and a metal detector, I broke open a small access door near the dock and went inside. It had been raining and the roof leaked badly. I stepped in many puddles as I moved around inside, looking and listening carefully for any sign of life. Where would the screen room had been? The metal detector was turned on.

Aside from registering when I neared pipes, it showed no activity where ever I checked. Up and down the inside of the building I went, scanning the floor for some trace of metal below. It was a large plant, with an all cement floor. Where could it have been?? Margery had only been to her husbands plant once, but she vaguely remembered it was near a restroom as she had to go why

visiting. I saw no access to any underground rooms. The place was filled with Rats and droppings. Remnants of boxes of car parts were strewn about, vandalized and robbed of anything valuable. A brake shoe here, a muffler there. But mostly the building was empty. I saw some offices over on the back wall. Those needed to be checked out. Putting down the metal detector, I used the crow bar to force a door open. Inside was a desk and a few file cabinets. A couple of doors were in the back, maybe they were restrooms. I opened one and several rats ran out. It was very dark inside and my flashlight's batteries were getting weak. The next door was locked, so out came the crow bar again. This had a Stairway going down!!!!

The flashlight showed the stairs had been burnt in the fire and were mostly gone. I returned to the Town Car for some rope. I would have to climb down into the basement. I was getting very grimy now, with the 50 year old wet burnt wood blackening my clothes. Slowly I lowered myself down, hoping I could get out. This rope climbing was meant for young stronger men, not an old codger like myself. Down I went, into complete darkness, knowing not what lay below. Spiders for sure, and more rats. But soon I found the floor, and out came the flashlight. This was terrible down here. Knee deep in muck and debris from the fire, along with trash and anything else people threw down here. It was like this was the garbage pale of the plant. It was a small area under the cement floor above, and at one end I could see a large steel door, corroded with rust.

Wading through the debris over to it, pressing on the door did no good. It was very rusted shut. I looked above and could see a steel beam, maybe I could get a torch down here lowered to cut it open. I hurried back to the rope and climbed up, a monumental task in itself. But soon I was up topside again and went back to the car.

I toured around East St Louis looking for an

auto parts store to get more equipment. It was soon decided to look in St Louis city, a much safer part of town. There was a NAPA store on the south side of town, and I bought a portable torch. I also acquired a battery powered winch as the torch tanks and assembly were very heavy, and a car battery to run it.. This was all taken back to the warehouse, as darkness began to set in. The torch and tanks were wrapped in chain and lowered down to the basement floor, along with the crowbar. I could operate the winch from below with the long remote cable. Into the night I worked, cutting away at the steel door. Sparks flew everywhere, but it was too damp and musty to be a fire hazard. The torch cut a nice hole through the door, a rectangle about 3ft by 4 ft. I pried the last of it out and shined the light inside.

There was a table, and I could see some test equipment remained. I could make out an Eico scope and signal generator, and various subassemblies around. But no SX-88!! Rats! This was a miserable wild goose chase!!! I was just sick! Come 2000 miles, go through all this and come up empty. OH, there was a Collins R-390 on the table, but those are quite common. What happened to the Hallicrafters radio??? Maybe someone took it home. I wanted to cry. The box I was sitting on began to fall apart as the cardboard dissolved under my butt. It had a wooden crate inside and I looked closer. What in the world??? I could make out a large H on the box. Frantically, I pushed the debris off it and pried open the lid. It was the SX-88!!! wrapped in a plastic bag, it had been protected against the damp environment of the basement and was in perfect condition. Evidently, the work crews had replaced it with the Collins and it was just "put under the table". I danced around the room, as much as I could in the yeechy muck, and began to plan how to lift it out. A trip to a Home Depot netted some more chain and eye bolts, and soon I was ready to lift the crate out of the basement. Climbing up, I winched out the torch and tanks first, and then the R-390. Might as well nab it as well. With the Collins packed away in the trunk as

well as the Welding tanks, I went back with my airport cart for the Hallicrafters. However, all my activity in the area had not gone unnoticed. Entering the building I was met by with a couple of burly gang members each packing some heat. They gave me a “Your MONEY or your life. I handed over my wallet and the keys to the Town Car, as disheartened as could be. They put a bullet in my side anyway, and I fell to the ground writhing in pain. On the way out, however, they were met by an opposing gang and the bullets began to fly. The Town car was peppered with slugs, and one hit the Fuel Tank. It exploded with a tremendous fireball, spreading parts of it all over the loading dock. The gangs continued to shoot it out, until someone won or was left, I don't know. I had blacked out by then and lost a lot of blood. When I came to a short while later, I tried to get up, but could barely walk. The bullet had pierced my side, doing unknown damage inside before it left my back. I could still breathe OK, so it must have missed my lung.

Peering outside to see who or what was left, all was quiet except for the burning hulk of the Town Car. I could see the one gang creep who had robbed me was laying in a pool of blood, so I checked him for my wallet. Phew! It was in his pocket and I placed it safely back in mine. Another guy had a Saturday night special and some bullets on him. Seemed like a good idea to recover that in this neighborhood. I went back inside to check on the SX-88. Though each movement was very painful, I unboxed it and wrapped it in an old blanket I had found on the floor. Too bad about the R-390, it had been in the Town Car trunk and now was a mess of molten metal. Pulling along the covered 75 pound radio on the cart was really stressing it. Down the street I walked, hoping no more miscreants would be encountered. But I had not gone a block before one stepped out of the shadows and demanded my wallet. I buzzed out the gun and he took off. Good thing I had brought that along! Up St Louis Ave I walked, just barely, with no place to head towards.

Maybe it would be safer in the daylight, so I ducked into a burnt out building. I found a dark corner and sat down next to the SX-88. Pulling away the blanket, I began to twist the knobs and rotate the band switch. What a beauty, so precision, so perfect in every way. Soon I had nodded off, hoping tomorrow would be better.

It was raining fairly hard when I awoke, but at least it was daylight. I peeked out the door looking for a way to go. In the distance, I could see the Freeway up a few blocks.

I arrived there without incident, though a few transients glared curiously at this person towing around something very big and heavy, I found no stores or restaurants. Just more burnt out buildings and trash along the sidewalks. Nothing that way, so I headed East on what looked to be a main street.: Collinsville Avenue. After many blocks of desolation and devastation, the neighborhood began to brighten up and I soon ran into a 24 Hr diner.

Cold, muddy, bloody and not having a shave in about a week, I was expected to be just another Homeless and given the Bums rush. But I flashed my Visa card and mentioned I was from California. That opened the door and I was seated. I dragged in the hidden radio and parked it next to the booth. The waitress, a cute 25ish brunette, was very curious what a West Coaster would be doing in a place like this. “Where is your car?” I had to reword the truth. “It is broken down several blocks back, I need to find a car rental place.” She served me some much needed hot coffee and a BLT sandwich. At this time of day, it was slow, so she sat down to chat awhile. The nearest car rental establishment was at the Airport, a good 4 or 5 miles away. And it would require going right through the worst part of town. No, I wasn't up for a walk like that, and my last bit of cash was used on this lunch. She was very curious what was in the large wrapped up blanket. After eating, I took it into the back room and took it out of the covering. She had no idea what it was, just some very very

large radio with no speaker. "Can we listen to the Cardinals game on it?" "Yes I suppose you could, but it needs some work first" I tried hard to make friends with her and talk her into taking me to the airport. But soon her husband arrived and she disappeared. The first friendly face I had seen in East St Louis was gone. It was time to move on. The SX-88 was packed up and I left.

I wondered if any motels were around. I might be able to use my Visa card there. Looking up and down the street, I squinted, and then chose to walk South, along St Claire Ave, hoping one would turn up. The daylight began to wane as the terrain turned back into deserted burnt out buildings again Block after block I walked along swiftly, trying to find an oasis in this sea of despair. We were getting into residential areas now, so I turned Southwest on 16th street, hoping it would lead to the airport. Much of the houses were in great disrepair too, and no one seemed to want to venture outside after dark. Occasionally I would see a plane coming in for a landing, so I knew it was the right way. Night was terrifying in this city. When I would see a car approaching, I would duck into the shadows until it passed. Most were gangs hunting for prey. But suddenly, out popped a young boy with a knife. "Your wallet, Mista!!" I reached for the gun, but how could I shoot this boy of only 10 or 12. Maybe it would just scare him. The sight of the Piece did little to deter him, and he charged me. I dropped the gun and he grabbed it and took off. Guess a gun was worth more to him than the wallet. On I walked, with the heavy radio in tow. Up ahead I could see a group of teens or young adults gathered around a street light. That didn't set well, especially now that I had no gun. I saw an alleyway and ducked down it. There was a dumpster and I hid behind it, hoping daylight would come soon. But the hours were long and tedious, I had to check if the coast was clear. Peering out, I could see them still there, only more of them. But just beyond them was a Holiday Inn sign. I had to find a way to that hotel!!

Going down the alley found me at a dead end. I returned to the street and crossed, hoping I could pass them. I was moving fast, but it took only a few moments for them to spot me and begin the pursuit. There were 15 or more of them by now, and they surrounded me. OH NO!!! This would be it for sure! A Tough opened up a knife and pointed it at me, shouting obscenities. I had hidden my drivers license and Visa card in my sock, and left only a few Dollars in my wallet as bait. They seized that and were not satisfied. No one paid any attention to the wrapped up radio. The knife guy began to cut on my chest, just deep enough to scar me, demanding more money. The blade reached my throat. Just as he was ready to slice it, a Police car pulled up. The punks scattered and I was left there alone. The patrol unit followed them as I quickly dragged the radio into an alley and hid. The Police might take the Radio too! With the police in the area, it seemed safe enough to travel on to the hotel.

Imagine the look on the hotel receptionists face when I walked in: Bloody, soaked with mud and soot head to toe, and completely exhausted. But a Visa card and drivers license bought my way into a room, and I had a nice shower and a good nights sleep. The Hotel had an airport shuttle to take me to the airport. I bandaged the wounds with some cut up sheets and enjoyed some HBO before dozing off. The SX-88 just about broke the hotel table as I let it sit out, enjoying its first daylight in over 50 years. But then it hit me the next morning. I could never take this radio on a plane. Unboxed, it would arrive back in San Diego in shambles. I had to protect it at all costs. I abandoned the airport idea and headed back to the street, looking for a way to buy a car. Any car would do, as long as it would drive 2000 miles. The hotel told me about a car lot 6 blocks North, right back in the part of town I had tried to escape from. It was a long long walk, pulling along that radio. My shoulders ached from the load it put on them, and the airport cart was creaking bad. If it gave out, I would be shot! North by Northwest I walked, past more decrepit warehouses and

sleazy characters looking me over good. Even passing police cars would slow down to give me a once over. But at Mission and 6th street, I found the car lot.

Looking over the selection, I found a 68 Plymouth they let me have for \$500. The muffler was shot as were the seats, but the trunk locked well and had room for the giant radio. This behemoth would get about 7 MPG at best, but most of all, it would get me out of town. I handed them the Visa card and they passed me the Pink slip. This was a disposable car! I was so relieved to sit in the drivers seat and have transportation back to California.

I was just about ready to hit the Freeway ramp back to freedom when I remembered I had left the SX-88's speaker in the warehouse. There was room for it in the Plymouth's trunk and maybe for some of the other equipment in the basement. I turned off and went back to 8th & St. Louis Ave. This car more blended in with the typical autos that you would see here now, and I made a few trips around the block to check out the locale. Seemed like it would be safe, so I pulled into the loading dock area. The Town Car was still smoldering and I took off the plates, can't let those remain here. I hurried into the warehouse knowing time was of the essence and nabbed the Speaker. OH, there was a vintage signal generator by Hickok, that would be nice. And an Eico VTVM too.

Might as well take it all. Trip after trip back to the Plymouth, and the trunk was fairly full. I remembered some manuals on the test station desk and went back for them. But upon returning to the Plymouth, 7 very mean looking gang boys stood around it, with chains and bats in hand. "What you coming to this town for, California boy?" I didn't have an answer, and there was no place to run. One pulled out a large gun, looked to be a real Smith & Wesson. "Lets see what you got in this trunk!" They popped it open with a crowbar and looked over all the equipment. "What the \$#%* is all this stuff?!!!"

"It's just test equipment, for my business" One of them picked up the Eico VTVM and looked it over. "NO CDs? Boom boxes?? VCR'S???!!" "No, its for industrial testing, nothing that anyone would want." Another pulled the blanket off the SX-88. "What the hell is this?!!!" I knew he had never seen one before, or anything like it. Another pulled out the WA6MHZ California license plates. "California?!!!" They were ready to finish me off when one of the boys stepped forward. "Wait!!! Are you a Ham?" I had to smile a bit now. He knew something. "My Granddad is a Ham, WB9 LC something. I know what this is, its a radio receiver." OH OH, I've been made. But the boy was good. He pleaded with the gang leader to spare me, and move on. "That radio is no good to us, no one will want it. And the rest of it, it is just Tube stuff. We need equipment with IC's and transistors!" The leader slammed the trunk closed. "OK, California, you get a free ride this time! But don't even think of coming back here again. I jumped in the Plymouth smiling, and fired it up. The boy walked over to me. "That was a Hallicrafter's SX-88 wasn't it?" I wondered how he knew. "Yeah, I think so. Tell your Granddad 73 for me!" I stomped on it and took off. But as I neared the freeway exit, I remembered I thought I saw a Johnson Matchbox under the table. "NO!" I said as I joyfully crossed the Mississippi River and headed towards the St Louis Arch. "I got the best radio of all time, the Matchbox can wait"

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