

THE W.I. A.'s FIRST INTERNATIONAL DX CONTEST - 50 YEARS AGO

A 1984 article by G. Maxwell Hull, VK3ZS Federal Historian

The State of Victoria celebrated its centenary in 1934. The event was generally referred to as - The Melbourne Centenary Celebrations - but according to more recent historians, Melbourne was founded in 1935. It was generally believed that John Batman founded the colony; yet others say it was founded by John Pascoe Fawkner or the Henty Brothers.

But who really cares after all these years. The main fact is that centenary celebrations were pursued with great vigor by the community in general. The Government of the day printed a special series of commemorative stamps in denominations of two-penny (Red), three-penny (Blue) and one-shilling (Black). These depicted an aborigine of the Yarra Tribe standing on the south bank of the Yarra River gazing across, spear in hand, at the growing hundred-year-old Melbourne skyline.

Amateur radio was well established in Australia at the time, with strong representation by the Wireless Institute of Australia in every State of the Commonwealth. A decade had passed since amateurs considered the only way to send their signals around the world, was by 'relay' from station to station.

Shortwave propagation had been developed significantly and the two major countries whose governments supported amateur radio experimentation, had, through their respective representative bodies of the A.R.R.L. and the R.S.G.B., already organised overseas DX contests. Until this time Australia had participated in these events but had never run one of its own.

The Melbourne Centenary seemed a good time to do something about it and so the Council of the Victorian Division of the Wireless Institute of Australia formed a committee under the management of Bob Cunningham, VK3ML. Rules were drawn up and circulated world wide so that all countries were aware of the - **MELBOURNE CENTENARY INTERNATIONAL DX CONTEST**.

In launching the contest rules in the March, 1934, issue of *Amateur Radio* magazine, Bob Cunningham said, "*This will be the first time in history that any Division, or even the Federal Headquarters, of the W.I.A. has staged such a magnitudinous undertaking. We have all been the guests of the W's and the G's often enough and have thoroughly enjoyed their tests. Now it's our turn to offer one in return.*"

For a first effort the committee put a lot of forethought into setting out the rules, many of the basic clauses still being utilised in other contests run by the W.I.A. today.

The general concept of the contest was for the world to work VK. Basically the rules were a combination of B.E.R.U. and A.R.R.L. ideas except that Bob Cunningham and his committee included one or two encouraging extras. To add to the fun of the contest the VK's were to multiply the total of their points score by the number of countries worked, and those outside Australia by the number of VK districts contacted. One point was scored by each contacting station for every 1000 miles between the capital cities of the states of the competing stations, measured by a Great Circle Line.

"*What scores are possible with nearly 100 countries to work*", Bob Cunningham said. "*And don't forget that the QRP merchant will get his 'kick' out of the contest too, because the world will be listening for even the 'squeakiest' signal from VK*", he added.

A section for shortwave listeners was included in the contest. A separate test for receiving stations in all parts of the world was provided for and all were eligible for the awards for that section. This was an encouragement for shortwave listeners to 'go for their ticket'.

In 1934 there was keen interest in the newly developing 28 Mhz band. To encourage operation in this area of amateur experimentation bonus points were given for contacts on this band. A lot less was known about the phenomena of sunspot cycles in those days!

Australia - like all other countries - was recovering from the great world depression. Jobs were not easy to get and the pay did not leave much to spare for the high cost of 'wireless' components. It was therefore with great pleasure that the committee announced the generous donation of valves and meters from Amalgamated Wireless Ltd., Philip's Lamps Ltd. and Siemens Ltd. Valve types 800, 852, TC05/25, QC05/25, MC1-0 and F-124 were indeed worth competing for! And top quality panel meters were a 'must' in the 'home brew' rigs of those days.

A special Centenary 1934 Contest certificate was printed and the winners in every section received one of these in addition to the coveted prizes. As a bonus, each contestant in each Division of the WIA who returned the highest score for his District (now called Zones), also received a certificate.

The Victorian Division of the WIA provided a prize from *Amateur Radio* magazine for the outstanding station description accompanying a contestant's log. This was finally awarded to VESBI and details were published in the March, 1935, issue of "AR".

The pre-publicity was excellent. By the time the commencement date was reached the world was agog with expectation. The period of the contest was over the four weekends in October and was the forerunner of the VK-ZL Contest which started in October of 1935 as a result of the success of the Centenary Contest. Details of the contest by Bob Cunningham occupied two pages of QST magazine for October 1934, some achievement for Australia in those days.

It wouldn't be amateur radio if someone didn't have some complaint. Many of the letters of praise written to the committee before the contest included some from would-be contestants pointing out that the 'high power' stations were going to have an unfair advantage over the 'low power' operators. Nothing daunted, Bob Cunningham and his committee soon fixed that one! "There will be two 'first' prizes" Bob said, one for the winner of the open event - that is, with unlimited power - and one for the handicap event which is to be awarded on the point-per-watt basis obtained by dividing the points won by the power input in watts. Everybody was happy.

As anticipated, Australia's first ever DX contest was an outstanding success. The world certainly went after VK, Considering the amateur population of the time the participation would have made any entrepreneur more than happy. Letters came in from all over the world congratulating the W.L.A. and looking forward to a repeat the following year. Space does not permit listing all the place-getters. Suffice it to say the outright winner was VK3MR, M.R. (Snowy) Campbell with 100,320 points.

The presentation of prizes was carried out in the studios of 3DB Melbourne - the "Herald & Weekly Times" station - by Mr. J. Malone, Superintendent of Wireless at that time. The attendant publicity was a great step forward for amateur radio in Australia.

The council of the Victorian Division during the months of preparation for the contest was composed of the following -

Captain A.E. Payne	VK3PP	Patron
Harry Kinnear	VK3KN	President
J. Winton	VK3XR	Secretary
S. Bennet		Treasurer
Bob Cunningham	VK3ML	Traffic Manager

MAGAZINE COMMITTEE,

Harry Kinnear	VK3KN	Editor
Vaughan Marshall	VK3UK	
Jim Marsland	VK3NY	
Len Moncur	VK3LN	
Bill Gronow	VK3WG	
Bob Cunningham	VK3ML	

And so at the end of the first and greatest contest Australia ever held its Manager - Bob Cunningham, VK3ML - had this to say to the world through *Amateur Radio* magazine -

"CQ DX CENT" - "CQ VK CENT", have ceased flashing across the world, to lie dormant for 100 years. Never again during our stay on this ethereal surrounded planet of ours will we be able to witness another gigantic and mighty successful Centenary contest run by the W.L.A.

When we recline in the old lead box, keying horizontally with the left foot, perhaps those will-be hams of tomorrow, a few feet above us, will be viewing one another's faces per the medium of television and microwaves.

"But why worry about the next age? We lived for the moment during those thrilling four weekends in October and got the 'kick' of a lifetime!"

And so they did! At a time when transmitters (and many receivers) were home built. When a lot had been learned about 'wireless' but there was still a lot of progress to be made. Has it ever changed?

[OCR from original 1984 article with minor edits. March 2014 PAW]

Subsequent additional information:

- Over 50 countries entered the 1934 Centenary Contest.
- The Centenary Contest went onto become the VK/ZL Contest, commencing in 1935.
- Bob Cunningham, VK3ML stated that the contest was an obvious success and claimed at the time that it had been “the biggest contest in history”!
- Note the typographical error in the date on the bottom of the certificate! 1914 is shown, it should have been 1910! How did that happen?!