

When Tubes Glowed And Cocktails Flowed

It's a springtime day in 1963 and you're driving north on the Strip.

Just south of Sahara, off to the right, you are caught off guard by a sight as startling as the jolt of a rare DX station coming back to your CQ.

Because you're an amateur radio operator, you often keep an eye out for antennas when you're driving around. But an antenna behind one of the hotels on the Las Vegas Strip?

What's this all about?



You pull in to The Thunderbird Hotel, park and stroll around back for a closer look.

(You can see the antenna off to the right in this photo, courtesy of the UNLV Special Collections and Archives.)

It turns out to be an array of Hy-Gain beam antennas.

“A rotor is clearly visible about 6 feet down from the top of the tower,” says Fred, K5LX, who eyeballed this picture for us.

“It’s located inside the tower and turns both beams and the discone antenna on top. There is a long mast which has all the antennas on it and sits on top of the rotor. Also, there is probably a thrust bearing right at the top of the tower which bears the weight of the antennas, mast and cables.

“You can’t see it, but there’s almost certainly one there because it takes most of the weight off of the rotor and puts it on the tower. This is common practice in big antenna installations.”

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How did this come to be? How did antennas that would be the envy of any amateur operator of the early 1960s wind up on the Las Vegas Strip?

We can thank Joe Wells, who ran the Thunderbird Hotel. Joe reached out to our club, told us he was interested in building a complete amateur station and asked for our guidance. Joe then pulled out the Thunderbird’s checkbook and ordered top notch equipment.

The Thunderbird station was set up inside the hotel for guests to admire. It served as an attraction for our hobby, whetting the appetites of Vegas visitors with an interest in getting involved with amateur radio.

But this was not just a glittering display. The station, anchored by Collins S-Line equipment, was regularly operated by LVRAC members.

In 1963, Collins S-Line gear was widely admired and acclaimed. The S-Line replaced the A-Line, fondly known as “The Gold Dust Twins” in 1958.

“The initial S-Line consisted of the 32S-1 transmitter and the 75S-1 receiver,” says LVRAC member Steve, K7EAU.

“In the post-World War II period, Collins was established as the premier manufacturer of amateur radio equipment. Although quite costly, Collins equipment excelled in both quality of construction as well as performance.

“The Collins mechanical filter offered selectivity unattainable with conventional circuitry. The Collins permeability tuned oscillator (PTO) provided for a very stable and linear VFO. The dial readout had a one kilocycle (as it was called back then) resolution. A number of companies tried to offer a lower cost alternative to the S-Line, but none could approach Collins quality and performance.”

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Gone are the days of Collins transmitters and receivers as state of the art equipment. Gone are the days of hotels such as the Thunderbird. And largely gone are creative entrepreneurs such as Joe Wells who enjoyed the freedom to bring his widespread interests to life at a Strip hotel without countless corporate signoffs.

(As an aside, Joe was the father of the *Gilligan's Island* actress Dawn Wells, who played the role of Mary Ann.)

In the days when LVRAC members operated from and met at the Thunderbird, the hotel was a favored after-hours haunt for Vegas hotel employees.

Many a night, dealers and bartenders, cocktail waitresses and showgirls would gather at the Thunderbird. Most hotels in town had their own unofficial table. While Collins equipment purred away behind the glass of the station's dedicated shack, the nearby Turquoise Room and The Topaz Lounge sizzled with glamour and excitement.

Today, the Las Vegas Radio Amateur Club pays tribute to this once magical hotel with our Ten Meter Thunderbird Net, every Sunday night at 7:00P Pacific Time on 28.420 kHz. You're more than welcome to join us.

Here at the LVRAC, we look back fondly on this era of Vegas history, a charming time when tubes glowed and cocktails flowed.