QSLing in Cyberspace - CQ magazine - April 2001 Pages 46 -50

What does last year's presidential election have to do with the QSL card you might not have received this week from that DX station you worked a year ago? Perhaps, says AF1US, quite a bit.

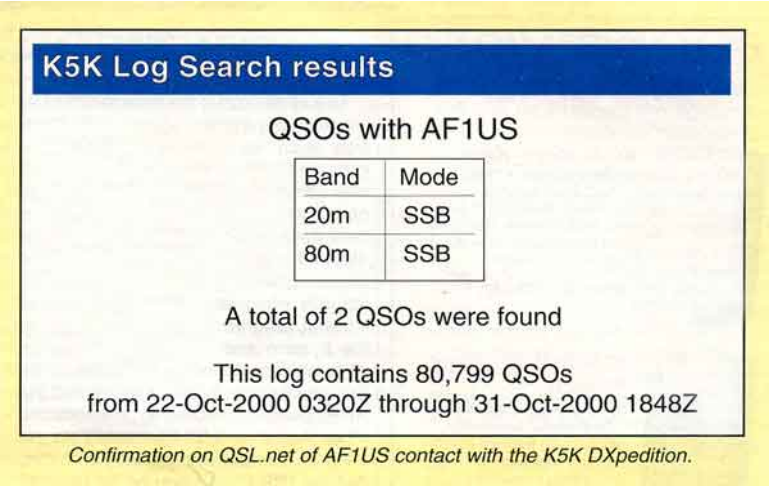
QSLing in Cyberspace

BY GARY PALAMARA*, AF1US

Electronic QSL card sent to AF1US from Saint Pierre and Miquelon via eQSL.cc

Following a heated presidential campaign, the 1960 election night totals were close, with a comparatively few votes separating the candidates. Widespread rumors of voter fraud and abuse in several areas of the country were reported. Mercifully, the apparent loser conceded defeat and the country moved onward. After the election there was talk of reforms to improve vote tabulation and new systems were devised to make voting faster and more accurate. In 1964, the Georgia counties of Fulton & De Kalb became the first jurisdictions in the United States to adopt the use of the newest technology on the market, voting by punch card ballot and computer tally machines. Now, 40 years later and in light of recent events, a technology that was state of the art for the 1960s looks flawed and outdated.

If an amateur radio operator from 1960 could magically travel through time and space to visit our new millennium, (a la the movie, “Frequency”), what would he or she recognize about the hobby today? CW, although alive and well, has lost some ground to other forms of digital communications. AM phone, which is still cherished by many, has given way to the more power- and spectrum-efficient mode of single sideband. In 1960, practical communications via satellite was only being talked about (Telestar 1, the first orbiting communications satellite was launched in 1962 by A.T. &T.). Who would have imagined that computers would have become a real part of almost every ham shack? Paper station logbooks have all but disappeared. Shiny silver disks holding millions of names and details have replaced the “telephone book” size directories of the past. And searching for related information about our hobby on something called the “Internet” would probably push our time traveler over the edge.



Confirmation on QSL.net of AF1US contact with the K5K DXpedition.

The QSL Tradition

One staple of the amateur radio hobby that has remained virtually unchanged since it began is the sending and receiving of QSL cards. I was not a ham in 1960 but over the years I have spoken to countless folks who were. While QSLing today is viewed as a courtesy, in the "old" days it was more a matter of fact. Everyone sent QSLs back then, and almost all the time. It's unclear when the first QSL cards were made and when the custom of sending cards back and forth became established. Humans, being both competitive and exacting, probably wanted to keep track of their geomagnetic conquests in the form of logs and country totals. In 1935 an article by the late Clinton B. DeSoto W1CBD, appeared in the pages of *QST* entitled "How to Count Countries Worked, a New DX Scoring System". The article spoke of "entities" not countries, when describing geographical or political boundaries. Those general guidelines still hold true today for counting totals.

With the counting of entities came "bragging rights" and the inevitability of award programs. I have run into any number of amateurs who do not participate in the awards process by saying, "I know I worked a country, state or zone; I don't need a QSL card or an award to prove it." If you're one of those folks, this article will be of little value. But for the rest of us, QSLing and the awards process add value to the amateur experience.

Until now, your options for QSLing another station were limited to two choices. After the contact is made and recorded in the logbook (paper or computer), a paper QSL card is sent to confirm the exchange. Some stations send the majority of their cards "direct," which means they send the card to the address of the station they worked or to the station's QSL manager. In most cases, either domestically or internationally, return-postage is included for a QSL return request.

This makes sense. After all, the station you worked may not need your card as much as you need theirs, so why burden them with the postage? The expense becomes particularly onerous on "rare" DX stations whose cards are in great demand. Partly in an effort to reduce the costs involved with this "direct" card system, somewhere along the line a second option arose to aid the exchange of cards. A worldwide network of QSL bureaus was created.

Although there are some domestic QSL bureaus, generally bureaus exist only for contacts between countries. Stations who participate in the bureau system send cards in bulk and depend on volunteers at both ends to sort and direct the cards. According to the ARRL, its outgoing QSL bureau alone handles more than 2 million cards per year. The bureau system, while slow, can save money. It would not be unusual for a bureau card to take as much as a year or two to make its round-trip journey.

With the two forms of QSLing (direct and bureau) still in widespread use today, there is now a third, long-awaited contender entering into this mix, ***QSLing via the Internet***, or what I will call "QSLI."

While using the word “Internet” for many in the amateur radio community would appear to be blasphemy, there are some real advantages lurking in cyberspace. For some time now, such Internet sites as QRZ.com, QSL.net and others have been offering a variety of services to the amateur radio community.

One great advance for DXers is a ***logbook verification service*** offered by QSL.net. If you work a DXpedition and want to make sure you are in their logbook, simply go to the QSL.net web site, find the listing for the DXpedition, then search for your callsign. In that manner, you can “instantly” verify that your call appears in the DXpedition's own logbook. I did this with the recent K5K DXpedition and found that my call sign appeared for the two bands on which we worked. This service greatly relieves the anxiety associated with working those “rare ones”. After the QSO verification for K5K was made via the Internet, all that remained was the sending and receiving of the paper QSLs.

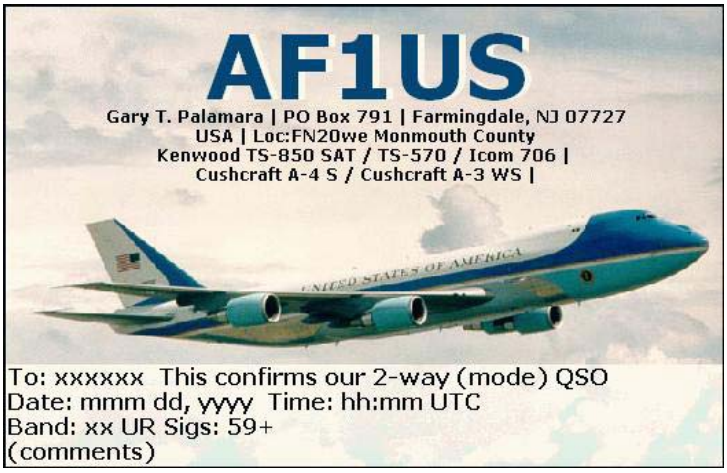
Now, if you can make an electronic verification right from the DXpedition's own logbook, the next logical step would be to download the entire transaction electronically, saving both time and postage. Using the Internet you could include much more information than would be traditionally found on the average QSL card, such as biographical information about the DXers and their equipment, or even a full color photo of the DXers standing on some far-off atoll. Sounds pretty far out. Doesn’t it? Well, before you think this is all pie in the sky, let me introduce you to the future.

Introducing "eQSL.cc"

At this writing I am aware of only one website which makes the promise of QSLI a reality. This site is called “eQSL.cc” and can be found by typing < http://www.eqsl.cc > into any web browser. I was introduced to this website by Jim Matis, K2TL.

After logging onto the eQSL site you can search for any QSL cards left for you by other amateurs. Once you are registered with eQSL (and amateurs in more than 175 countries have done so), you may begin to use the service. The first time I checked into the site I found that six other hams had already left QSLs for me to download. One of these offerings was even a *new* entity (for me), FP/N8KR on the islands of Saint Pierre and Miquelon. I had not yet received the paper QSL but the electronic card was there, on the screen, and all I had to do was print it!

After downloading and printing my “cards,” the next thing was to electronically create an eQSL card of my own. Creating an eQSL is simple; you may use stock images from the eQSL library or create your own card from scratch. You can even upload your present QSL card for use on the website. I decided to create my own card.



Being sentimental about my days in the military, I wanted to use something that really represented my call sign. So I briefly left eQSL.cc to download a photo of Air Force One from a public domain site provided by the Boeing Corporation.

Next I typed in all of the appropriate information. The font, color, and size of the type can all be chosen, along with the position of the text on the card. When all was completed, I simply sent out my new eQSLs to the six stations that sent theirs to me and it was done. From start to finish within about 20 minutes, QSLI had become a reality for AF1US. I had received six QSLs and all were returned via the eQSL.cc web site. Postage bill: zero!

While the bureau system of QSLing was created to reduce the cost of mailing hundreds of individual cards back and forth, QSLI would seem to be the next logical advance in this regard. QSLI replaces the post office or bureau system with an "electronic bureau." It allows QSO information between two amateur stations to be exchanged via the Internet. Nothing else about this system would appear to be different.

Currently, I can create a QSL card on my home computer and print it out either on heavy card stock or even plain paper. After printing the card it may be sent by mail to a DX station across the globe. That DX station then takes my "card" and sends it to an awards manager for verification. With QSLI, the DX station would simply "download" my card off the Internet, print the card himself and then send it to the manager for verification. The only difference is the time and costs involved with the method of shipping the cards. Eventually, an electronic transfer could even save the effort of printing and transporting the cards for awards manager consideration.

To further bolster the case for QSLI, let me point out that even regulatory agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission have no problem with using the Internet to conduct business. Changes of address, requests for new call signs, license renewals and other information on upgrades and rules all take place via the Internet. The FCC actually encourages licensees to use Internet filing as a way of speeding up the system and reducing costs. Even such venerable institutions as the Radio Society of Great Britain (RSGB) and the ARRL permit membership renewals and other business to be transacted via the Internet. So in the face of all this, can the QSLI revolution be far behind?

It would seem a hard case to argue that you may conduct business with a regulatory agency while not being allowed to download your newest QSL conquest via the Internet.

Hanging Chads

As with changing from paper voter ballots to the "new" punch card system, any advance in QSL technology offers both improved features and potential pitfalls. On the plus side, QSLI is virtually instantaneous.

From the moment a QSO is completed a DX station (or even a domestic contact) can be confirmed via QSLI. In fact, entire logbooks may be uploaded into sites like eQSL for the benefit of all that need or want the information. While this sort of transfer of information has been possible for some time now, recent postage rate hikes for domestic and overseas surface mail have made QSLI even more attractive.

On the negative side I must admit there is something nostalgically pleasurable about receiving a QSL from some far off place with all those interesting stamps and postmarks.

Professionally printed QSL cards look far better than the ones that come from my inkjet printer (black ink only). But until now perhaps the largest issue standing in the way of electronic QSLing is the concern about verifying the authenticity of these exchanges and the resulting QSL cards. Awards managers have a right to be skeptical about QSLs that look less than authentic or which have been altered in some way.

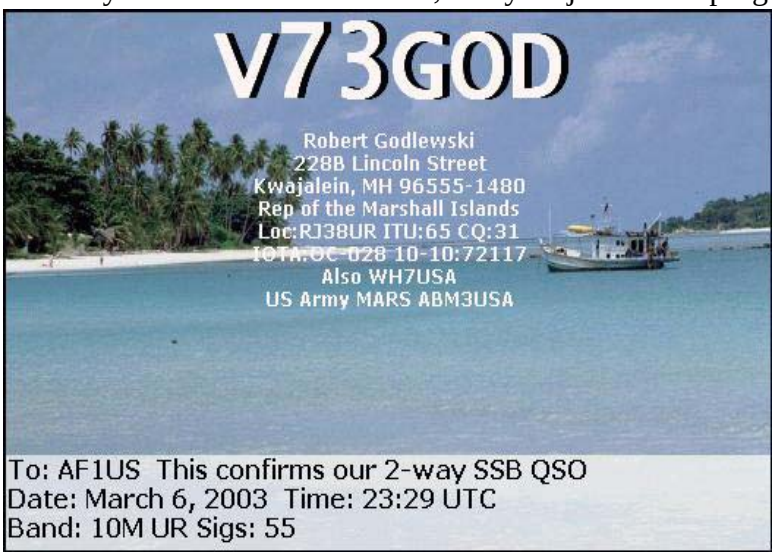
One of the other things an amateur from 1960 wouldn't believe about our brave new world is the proliferation of desktop publishing. Using a computer, I can create my own cards for shipping to a DX station, and I could just as easily create the DX station's card for myself (whether or not I worked him)! One thing that was probably just as true in 1960 as it is today: If it is possible to beat the system, there are those folks who will do their best to do just that.

While it is a touchy subject to address, with the vast number of cards already in the QSL system, there must be some that, even today, are less than authentic. Security of the system and authenticity of QSL cards should be a prime concern to all who participate in awards programs.

There is a layer of protection with printed QSL cards mailed either direct or through the bureau. You have an actual card filled out by an individual on the other end. Each QSL card looks different from the others submitted in the same stack with an award application. The handwritten or printed QSO information could be scrutinized along with, in some cases, a postmark or manager's seal. To further authenticate the exchange, "check logs" are often provided to awards managers as a courtesy by

DXpeditions.

All of these checks are very labor intensive but necessary to maintain the integrity of the award system. On the other hand, many major awards programs today permit "field checking" of cards by volunteers and/or a certification by other hams that the applicant is in possession of the necessary cards. It is only at the top levels of these award programs that the manager generally sees any or all of the QSL cards.



In the electronic age, verification takes several forms. Let's take the eQSL site as an example. First off, you must register and establish a password prior to using the system. Second, after logging onto the system, all traffic must go through the third party

vendor (eQSL, in this case) who authenticates everyone's password each time they log on to the system.

Third, the entire database could be opened to awards managers for cross checking cards electronically. It would seem unlikely that any third party vendor would have an interest in promoting fraud involving individual amateurs. But for the ultimate in security, each organization offering awards will most likely want to control their own database. The ARRL is actively studying QSLI with the idea of offering it to the membership at some future date.

***CQ*'s** award managers are generally supportive of the concept but are waiting to be sure any system is secure and efficient. USA-CA Manager Ted Melinosky, K1BV, stipulates that the use of e-QSLs should be entirely voluntary on the part of both sender and receiver, and that he'd reserve the right to randomly verify electronic QSLs with the sending station. Worked All Zones Manager Paul Blumhardt, K5RT, says he'd support electronic QSLs if he could be sure the system was secure and that they wouldn't become an administrative nightmare. CQ DX Award Manager Billy Williams, N4UF, says "the principle of electronic QSL cards seems to be one whose time is fast approaching". He also says that he is "studying the possibility of allowing electronic QSLs on a limited basis for those applying for the CQ DX Award." However, one expert on secure Internet transactions notes that no foolproof security system now exists and "all it would take is one episode of hacking and the (awards') credibility would evaporate."

Is QSLI the Future of QSLing?

Will QSLI change QSLing as we know it? Only time will tell. We began this article with a look at a bright new technology that offered increased speed and accuracy to the voting machine industry in the 1960s. Now with 20/20 hindsight, we can see that technology needs to be continually assessed and upgraded to remain viable. In the future, we may use the tried and true paper method of QSLing or totally switch over to an electronic system, or use a hybrid of the two, or something else we haven't even thought of yet. The options are great.

QSLI presents us with the possibility of overhauling the global system of QSLing for the good of all. It can offer a quantum improvement in both speed and cost while providing similar or perhaps improved verification methods for awards managers. QSLI challenges us to look at old problems in a new light and to confront the issues at hand with bold leadership and forward thinking. The next step is agreeing on national and international standards needed for QSLing via the Internet. Welcome to the New World of QSLing in Cyberspace.

Footnote: In the late 19th century, an American inventor named Herman Hollerith devised a system of encoding data onto paper cards through a series of punched holes. His system was first used to tabulate the 1890 U.S. Census, and Hollerith's Tabulating Machine Company is still in business today, although with a newer name -- the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM).

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