

## Mike Smith, VE9AA

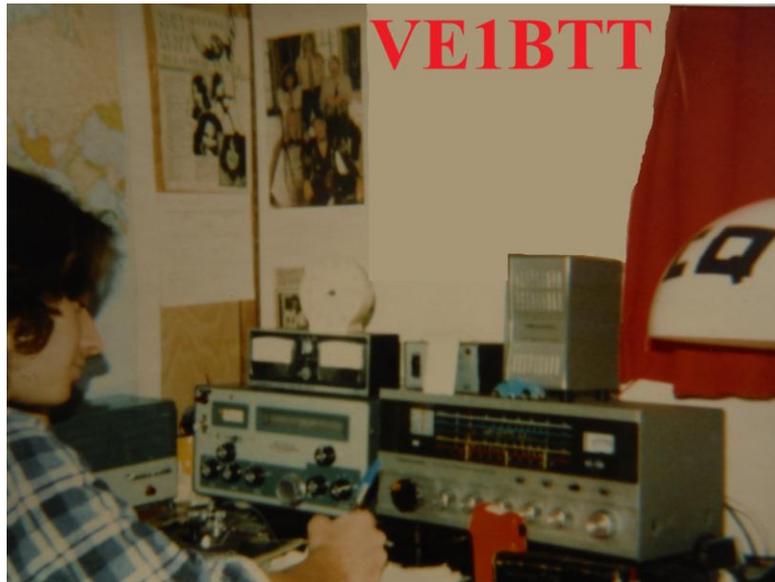
### The Early Days

As an announcer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), my father always had a shortwave radio in the house. From as long as I can remember in VO2, where I was born, and later living in VO1, I tuned in the BBC, Radio Moscow etc. and when I finally realized around the age of 6 or 7, that these signals came from across the ocean, I was smitten! When we moved to VE9 in the mid 1960s I started bugging Dad for my own shortwave radio and at one time had quite a few of them -- mostly from garage sales! I took them apart and sometimes was able to get them back together. Some of them actually worked afterwards.

When I was about 10 or 11 years old, my father bought me a 4 watt AM CB Radio. A fellow he worked with at CBC (Al, VE1AKT) put up my first antenna for me: a 5/8 wavelength CB ground plane on the roof of the family house. It didn't take me long to discover that you could work summer "skip" and suddenly I was a DXer. The second CB radio I got had a funny detent below channel #1 and soon I was working DX just slightly out of band (don't tell anyone). My next CB radio had SSB capability and I worked some DX between channel 22 and 23 (as I recall). When I was age 14, Vern VE9VS taught me CW over the course of a few months and with additional help from classes put on by the Fredericton (NB) Amateur Radio Club, I passed my license in 1978 and received VE1BTT as my first call.

### From CB To "Real" Radio

I loved CW DXing with my \$40 Heathkit Cheyenne Transmitter Dad bought and a new R/S DX-160 Receiver I got that Christmas from Mom. I even worked some AM DX on 10 meters into EU and elsewhere. Only today do I realize how poor the pair were, but how I loved them at the time!



Dad gave me lots of leeway and before long I had wires strung all over the yard, sometimes practically at strangulation levels. I am pretty sure I qualified for the Work All TV Sets award in the late 1970s.

I got my SSB endorsement in 1979 and converted the CB myself to wide “channels” on 10 meter SSB and cut down my ground plane for 10 meters. I worked 178 DXCC entities with a 10 meter 8 watt PEP CB radio and a modified CB antenna during that cycle peak. The one QSO I remember best was a VP8. I only wish I knew about 6 meters back then. I could have gotten a real start on my 6 meter DXCC award, but that would have to wait 15+ years.

I dabbled mostly in DXing in those days, stumbling across the occasional contest and worked a few QSOs for new DXCC entities or running a pileup for an hour but I never sent in a log, as I abhor paperwork – a personal flaw. In 1980, I upgraded to Extra class, did lots of Field Days, IOTAs, camping operations, etc., but again not sending in any logs for credit.

### **The Mobile Contesting Bug Bites**



In the late 1980s I finally qualified for a 2-letter call (VE1MQ) and began to do some serious HF and VHF contesting with much bigger antennas, amplifiers, etc. Rick, VE9HF, who was licensed the very same day as me back in 1978, introduced me to K1EA's CT for computer logging, so occasionally

I'd send in a paper log which I printed out for the sponsors. But it was still a PITA (to me) and so that didn't happen very often.

It was only a few years after I started driving cars that I put HF rigs in nearly every one I've owned. They were big rigs like an HW101 or FT101E, and even had some 160 meter antennas, partially inspired by W1BB's article in a QST magazine. I have Mobile DXCC (unofficially) on all bands from 10-80 meters and about 50 entities on 6 meters & 160 meters. I did lots of gridhopping as VE1MQ.

I've had many thousands of mobile QSOs since licensed but two of my most memorable were with 9N1MM and OH2BH. A few decades ago very late one night running my HW101, a Russian station alerted Father Moran (9N1MM) that I was calling. More recently, perhaps 6-7 years ago Martti, OH2BH was in the Azores running a 20 meter SSB pileup on a weekday afternoon when he finally heard me and asked the pileup to standby while he worked his "Canadian friend driving in his car"!

With the help from Chuck VE1RG (SK) in the early 1990s, I discovered 6 meters and became enamoured with working everything that moved on that band and to a lesser degree on 2 meters. Currently I am at 147 DXCC credits on 6 meters (unofficially) and I believe 27 states on 2 meters (all Ionspheric, CW/SSB). My best contact has been K5UR during the Perseids – a random QSO on 144.200 MHz SSB.

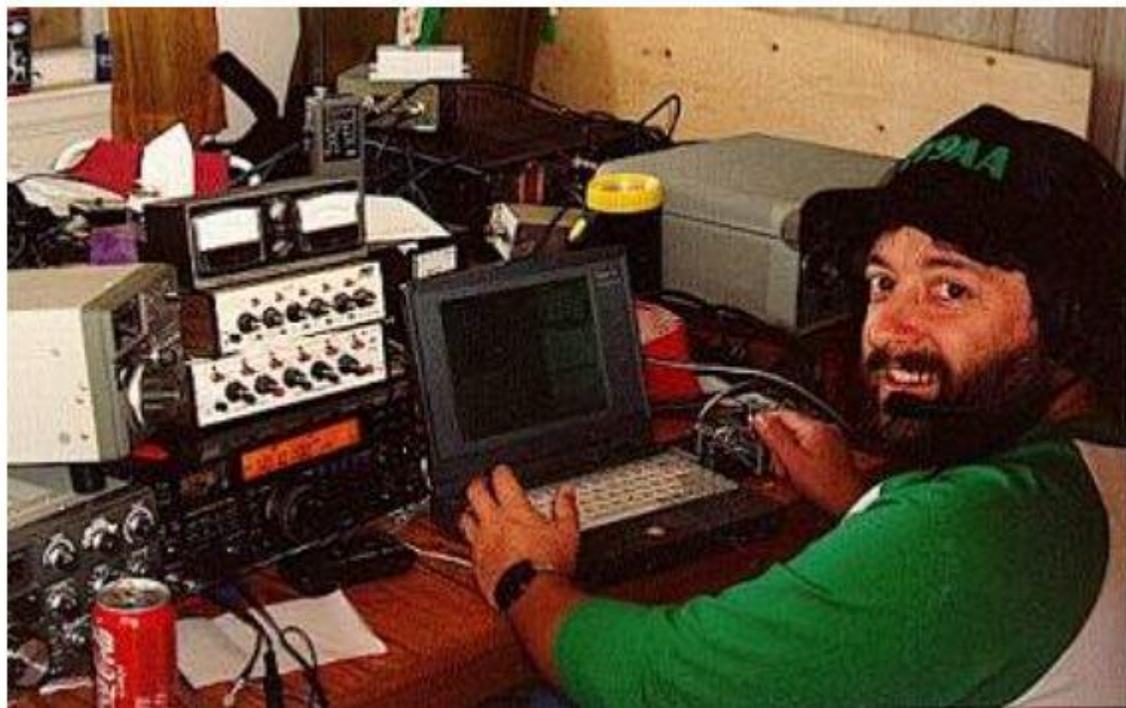
As I don't do well with paperwork, I never apply for awards like VUCC, DXCC etc., but I do keep track of everything in a book. And of course, plaques do go on the wall. : >)

## **Changing Gears**

In 1993, NB, NS and PEI separated from all being in VE1, and became entities of VE9, VE1 and VY2 respectfully -- and so I became VE9AA. For a few years I (and presumably other VE9's) ran busy pileups of zealous Europeans, who all wanted a VE9 QSO. I really loved the rush of that activity. During these next years I was a very busy taxi dispatcher at a large firm in the Fredericton area. I would talk nonstop for 8-10 hours, then come home and bust SSB (or CW) pileups. I couldn't get enough of it. Eventually we had all worked through the (VE9) hype and I needed another fix, so I returned to DXing, working them all except North Korea. So what would be my next challenge?

I tired of taxi dispatching and went back to school to get my Electricians ticket, but never quite finished. After 4 years as an Apprentice, I stopped short and changed gears. In 1996 I was part of a 3-man team to Sable as CY0AA— all hand keyed CW – a FB rush. In 1997 I spearheaded a trip to St. Paul's Island as CY9AA— again all hand keyed CW! We nearly froze, but it was fun.

## CY9AA - 1997



Wanting more, I went back to school again and in 1998 received my diploma in Computer and Electronics Engineering Technology (CET). For the last 20 years I've been employed as a Medical Equipment Technologist primarily based out of a large hospital, although we do look after multiple facilities in our Region in nearly one-fourth of the Province of New Brunswick. My position is Chief Technologist & Supervisor of Clinical Engineering.

I've operated contests increasingly since the late 1990s, starting out mostly on VHF and 160 meters – the ARRL June VHF and the Stew Perry being my favorites then (& now).

In 2010 I attended the Halifax, NS DX Forum primarily to meet VIP Martti Lane, OH2BH. I was happy to make his acquaintance and also fortunate enough to meet Tim, K3LR and Dick K4XU and listen to their presentations. I stumbled by accident upon them, but I credit the Maritime Contest Club (MCC) for rekindling my partially dormant contester's gene. After MCC took me under their wing, I learned a lot about what I was doing wrong in contests. I also discovered how much logging software had changed since I last used CT. No longer would I be burdened with paperwork. With just a few mouse clicks and an email (or an upload), I could be "done" with the contest and truly compete. I loved it. N1MM+ has changed my contesting experience 100% for the better. Since 2010 I have seriously operated in hundreds of contests and generated about 175,000 of (mostly) contest QSOs. Qso's from 1978 to 2010 are still on

paper or 3.5" floppies. Although I don't use LOTW – since I don't chase awards – I do QSL 100% via my QSL manager.

## **Stepping Up My Contesting Game**

Sadly in 2010 I lost both towers here in New Brunswick and soon became disillusioned with them, having lost a few others at my previous QTH, usually due to ice and wind. Two big home brew 8 element yagis and the tower went down into the woods and I was sick to my stomach. I scaled back the antennas here but never lost my contesting drive, so I scaled UP my activity levels, doing more mobile operations and more and more operations using an increasing variety of antennas in trees. For one 10 meter contest I built a Charlie Brown Christmas Tree ground plane antenna and when the dust settled, I believe I came in second behind VY2ZM in the contest. Sunspots were definitely my friend back then.

One day while perusing the Net for the next challenge, I discovered that Gary, VE1RGB (SK) did a lot of CW-only contests with wires and 100 watts and would often email me privately, providing valuable contesting tips. He was “old school”, preferring to send CW by hand. I videotaped him in a contest at his shack and uploaded it to YouTube. For a few years I did all my DXpeditions as portable operations and contesting by hand keying as well, but knew that to get those bigger scores I needed to become more efficient. Winkeyers and canned SSB messages on the computer were the next step. Scott, VE1OP (sk) was very helpful with software hints and contest techniques.

If you've worked NB in a contest since 2010 I am sure we've worked, or you've worked Andy/VE9DX, Rick/VE9HF, VE9ML or more recently Dave/VE9CB. In almost every SSB contest (and some CW ones) I get called “Andy”, but I'll take it as a compliment. I prefer to work CW, but I spend perhaps 30-35% of my time in SSB contests too. Often I'll get a friendly jab like “Mike, I didn't know you owned a microphone!” It's all good and I will very often take a moment to say a quick hello to some 6 meter or HF contesting friend. That's a very small downfall of mine. I do enjoy the camaraderie and personal relationships we build over time so if a “Hi Fred” on SSB or a “Hal-Dit Dit” on CW causes me to lose the contest at the end, so be it! Sometimes I'll take 30 seconds or a minute and listen to guys like N2IC or K5ZD run a pileup and try to see what they are doing right. YouTube videos of N6MJ blow my mind, although during the 2018 CQWW CW, I was texting my wife and running EU at the same time -- but was only SO1R. Hi Hi.

Some of my CW-only contesting is out of necessity as my very small shack shares the end of the house where the bedrooms are and so screaming into a microphone at 2 AM isn't really conducive to an extended life span. Some of my favorite contests are the major CQ and ARRL events, the NAQPs and Sprints. I love the bigger QSO Parties too and especially enjoy handing out the NB mult to the deserving when Provinces are mults.

In the mid 2010's when I noticed Gary VE1RGB (SK) was pretty high up the WRTC ranks using only CW with 100 watts and wires I wondered what was possible for me, having just returned to contesting? I entered a few WRTC 2014 qualifiers (much too late to qualify) but I did see my call rise up on the list for the Eastern half of Canada. Then, for the WRTC 2018 qualifiers I went nearly full bore from home and also VO1 (family trips) and did surprisingly well, doing most of the contests using low power with an HF9V or low dipoles. Towards the end of qualifying in the last year, I installed wire 4-squares for 20-40-80 meters, a 2-element array on 160 meters and learned SO2R operation, but there was no beating the PEI superstations and the seasoned contesters behind them, nor some of the very experienced guys with bigger power and tall towers in the provinces just to my West hi ! I just wanted to see what could be done with an average station and a determined operator. I endeavoured to do my best however, and actually had a surprising number of wins in my class.

I guess I sometimes play the underdog mostly just to hone my skills and train harder, often running 100 watts and small to medium antennas (no towers here since 2010) but sometimes I put the small amps on (600w) and do SO2R to give it my best shot. I am sometimes in the top 10 for Canada or NA (or even World), but seldom #1, though I have found myself in that spot on the very rare occasion. It's very humbling. I never expect to win when going up against the best in the world and on those very rare occasions when I am lucky enough to do especially well, it's during weekends where I may mistakenly believe I am way behind due to lack of activity or poor conditions or maybe it's just all in my mind! Keeping the BIC is key.

I do many Wednesday CWTs in my modern MINI Cooper automobile, often in motion, just to push my skills, with about 50% of CW being hand-keyed. All of my paddles at home, in the shack, or on expeditions are now the N3ZN type. They are great!



With the exception of the internet I don't have any contesting mentors at all, having done the majority of my ham radio hobby (including contesting) by myself. I have zero M/M experience but I wouldn't rule it out someday. I do have one lone M/S event with Doug, VE1PZ in the 1990s in a CQ 160 meter contest and I think he still holds the record for that contest. It was just one radio, switching out operators every few hours.

## **Continuous Learning**

I like MINI Coopers (both new and Classic) and we have three: two modern ones and a 1987 Classic (right hand drive) which I imported from Wales back in 2005. Even though I work daily with computers, electronics and medical equipment, there's something very satisfying about working on a car with no computer, no onboard diagnostics or fuel injection.

Recently I've taken up motorcycles again and own a 2004 Harley Road King Classic which I ride from time-to-time during our short summers here in New Brunswick. My son Corey doesn't care for radio, but I did convince my wife Coreen to get her ticket many years back, when I taught part of a local radio class. She was one of the pupils, passed her test and received VE9AAA as a callsign. For a few years before we had modern cell phones, we'd both get on 2 meter FM but nowadays she is not active. She supports my hobby, but still doesn't truly understand it, often interrupting me during a big EU run on Saturday afternoon, to ask "What's for supper?" Who hasn't had their XYL do this?

I'm getting motivated to do a DXpedition again and perhaps incorporate a contest in it, just to see what it's like. I activate VO1TTT and VE1TTT from time to time, but would like to go to Labrador and get some QSOs under my belt as VO2DX. I've never been to FP, but it's relatively close.

It's my hope to keep on improving my SO2R skills and build some bigger antennas for the high bands to compliment my 4-squares for the low bands. Sunspots \*ARE\* coming back, right? Someday I hope to attend a WRTC either as a competitor or judge and meet some of these great fellas I seem to work dozens of times per year. It's cool to work them on the air, and hopefully read their 3830 reports and get to know them a little more though articles like this one. I have never been to Dayton or Fredreikshafen or Visalia so the number of contesters I've met (excluding locals) is minimal.



Thanks for letting me tell you all my strange little story of radio and contesting here as VE9AA.  
Dit Dit.