

Gene Gregory Interview – February 11, 2016

VRCM: I'm interested in a brief overview of your background, how you got interested in telephones and how you got involved with the radio museum.

GG: How I came about to become a... Well, my introduction was kind of by accident. Years ago I stopped at the triple AAA diner in East Hartford. And I was pulling in to find a place to park and in the window of the building next door was the back side of a Strowger telephone switch. Well, I knew what that was! So I went in for my cup of coffee and toast and I come back out and wandered over into the building and got greeting by John Ellsworth [museum director]... "Good morning! How are you?" And Paul was there too, remember Paul? [Paul Weigold] And he got to show me the museum and asked, "Do you want to become a member?" And I said Gee Whiz, why not? That's how it all started.

VRCM: Had you worked in the telephone industry?

GG: No. It was always a hobby of mine. My father was a mason contractor – always been in the building trades. When I was a little guy growing up, I would find a discarded old radio or telephone, take the thing apart and put it back together trying to figure out what made it work – and things like that (laughs). It was a sideline, kept me out of trouble (laughs). I had a couple of benches set up down in the basement. Mother would say, "What the heck are you doing? You take up more room than I do laying out the lawn chairs!" (Laughs) But I'd take things apart, save all the parts, put them all back together with nothing left over. But sometime I'd scratch my head and say why doesn't this thing work?! And my father would yell, "Why do you think they tossed it out? It didn't work and you're trying to fix it!" (Laughs)

VRCM: The building next to the AAA diner; that was the IHOP building, right?

GG: Yes, they shared the same parking lot

VRCM: What year was that?

GG: If I knew the car or truck I was driving, I'd know the approximate year. But I don't remember what I was driving then...

VRCM: mid 1990s I'd guess

GG: Probably. I wasn't involved in the move from the IHOP to the hardware store – I missed that. That would have been interesting; the stories I heard!

VRCM: Did you grow up in Connecticut?

GG: Agawam, Massachusetts. When I got out of the army, I worked on the Mass turnpike for a couple of years; maybe three years. And I stayed with that company and they were out of Southington Connecticut and I did my stint in heavy construction. Then I got a real job (laughs) – a steady job as an inspector; a job site inspector, called “clerk of the works”, for an architect. He kept me busy for 20 years; always had a job waiting for me.

VRCM: Residential?

GG: No. He did churches, he did school buildings... small industrial buildings, renovations, things like that... conversions: I know we did an A & P in Palmer, Massachusetts; made a library out of it. It was very interesting work because every job is different and the crew is always different. Some contractors are out and out crooks and other contractors are beautiful, wonderful people. I never worked for the contractor; I worked for the architect, because my architect said, “My name's on the

drawing. I want my guy on the job, not some political appointee.” It’s a very competitive business. If a job comes up in a town... say the building committee is interviewing architects for a new school building. So he has to go through that process. If he’s selected, okay, fine, that’s great. Meanwhile you have to draw up a set of plans, go back and forth with the building committee and the school committee...”This room’s too big, that room’s too small, and so on”... By the time you get plans and drawings finalized and town or city gets grant money from the state or other funding, you know.... But I was fortunate in that when my architect employer put a project out to bid and got a general contractor with the lowest bid. When that job started, I was finishing up another job. So I didn’t see all of his jobs, I didn’t work on all of his jobs, just some of them. But he kept me busy for around 20 years; never had to look for work.

VRCM: How many museum moves were you involved with?

GG: How many moves? Actual? Physical?

VRCM: Different locations.

GG: I wasn’t involved with the move from the IHOP to the hardware store in East Hartford; I missed that for some reason. But I did help move from the hardware store to 33 Mechanic Street in Windsor and from 33 Mechanic Street to 115 Pierson Lane, where we are now.

VRCM: So the telephone interest was strictly a hobby.

GG: Telephones always fascinated me. When I got out of the army, of course I had to go to work; you know... bills and that. When we lived in Agawam, we lived on a small farm and if I remember right we had a magneto phone in the kitchen; one in the garage; and one way out in a chicken coop out in the field. And it spanned a

brook we had – in Agawam we had a little brook going through our property to another building on the other side of the brook (laughs) and that had a magneto phone. I ran all the lines and poles... a regular magneto phone system! My mother didn't have to yell, "Hey, it's time to eat!" She could get on the phone: "Dinner's ready." Of course, the real reason I did that was so she didn't have to holler and not because I was interested in telephones (laughs). At the time it was a great necessity. And the funny thing about it, our next-door neighbor was a... a fellow who worked in the paper mill but his son, when he got out of the navy or the army, he went to work for the telephone company. He commented that I must be smart to be installing telephones (laughs). His son worked as a lineman, not installing. But I installed, [worked as] lineman and everything (hearty laugh). I figured it all out.

VRCM: Anything else?

GG: I currently belong to two telephone collector's clubs: ATCA: Antique Telephone Collectors of America, and the other TCI: Telephone Collectors International. They're people all around the world – a bunch of nuts, just like I am.

VRCM: Write articles, swap information...

GG: Well, we have meets similar to the radio meets. It wasn't until very recently that I suddenly realized and it dawned on me that other people have the same affliction I have (laughs) we like to collect telephones. As I sometimes say, I can't walk by a telephone and (begins to mentions names and models). I can tell if it's an F3 vs. a F4 handset (laughs)

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