QSL STAMPS

by Max C. de Henseler, HB9RS

For the stamps collectors not familiar with amateur radio communication a definition of the abbreviation (signals) QSO and QSL is needed. Already in 1912, to o117vercome the language barriers faced by radio operators of all nations as they tried to communicate with other operators all over the world a series of codes were internationally adopted, among them the " Q " code. What is a QSL ? a QSL is simply an acknowledgment of a contact established by radio between two amateur radio stations, which is called a QSO. (see figure 1).
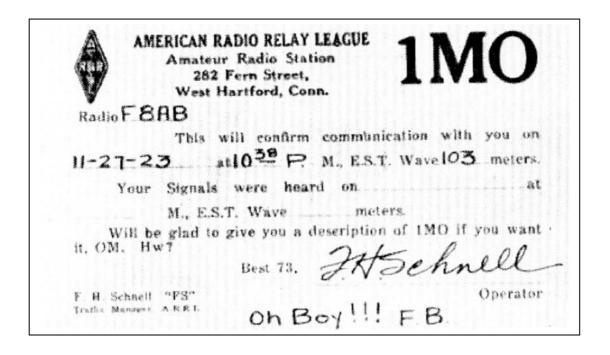

Figure 1 . A famous QSL card of an American amateur Fred Schnell (call 1MO) sent to the French Leon Deloy (8AB), confirming the first two-way transatlantic QSO made on the 27th of November 1923 at 10:38 p.m.

The most common form of confirming a QSO is a written card containing the name, call, geographical location of the station sending the card and the other station's call. The QSL will also mention the date, the time, the frequency and the mode of transmission used, and a report on the readability, strength and tone of the signal. As it is said among radio operators that " A QSL is the final courtesy of a QSO " , this QSL has to reach the operator you have contacted. This card is necessary as a proof of having established a QSO with an other station for obtaining various award, such as for having contacted all continents, all districts in a given country etc. Before seeing how this can be achieved, let us see the magnitude of this exchange of QSL cards. There are some five millions Amateur Radio Operators (hams as they are called) around the world which could make easily hundreds of QSOs a month. This exchange of QSLs can be achieved in two ways. The first and very expensive is the " direct " way , that is finding the address of your correspondent in special directories in which amateur radio stations are listed by country and by call sign, and then go to the post office ans mail your QSL card.

This way can become very expensive. Therefore a cheaper way had to be found and the QSL Service Stamps were introduced. Amateur radio operators already in the early days of radio had formed regional clubs or societies which grouped themselves into national societies and finally in Paris in 1925 the International Amateur Radio Union IARU was founded by some 25 National Societies. Today more than 200 societies are members of the IARU . From that date the contact and the activities between hams of different countries became easier and national QSL Bureaus were established and QSL service offered to their members. The QSL bureau is usually a national radio association office were hams can send a whole batch of their QSLs. Radio magazines with world wide circulation as the " Short Wave Magazine " in London also served as QSL bureau for their members, sorts them according to the country of destination, then sends them in bundles to the corresponding QSL bureau which will distribute the QSLs to its members (1). Most countries have QSL bureaus operating along the same line, providing by far the least expensive way of exchanging QSL cards. However the expenses are to be covered by the users, either by a membership fee or by the purchasing of QSL STAMPS which will be affixed at the back of each QSL, as a proof of payment of a certain fee allowing the operator to use this service. Today very few QSL Bureaus still use the colorful QSL stamps which have, if not completely disappeared, been replaced by ugly rubber stamps.

From the date of the QSO reported on the QSL one can approximately state that Switzerland, Netherlands, Belgium and Germany were among the very first countries to issue QSL stamps in the early 1930's, soon followed by Hungary, Czechoslovakia and France. More than three dozen other countries followed in the 50's, 60's and 70's un;i1 the end of their use in the mid 80's (see figure 2)

Most stamps have reproduced the emblem of their national society, i.e. a diamond shaped lozenge with usually a tuned circuit represented by the symbols used in circuitry for an antenna, a coil, a condenser and a ground, together with the initial letters of the name of the society. The American Radio Relay League (ARRL) was using already the diamond shaped logo when the IARU was formed, and as Hiram Percy Maxim, the president of the ARRL became IARU first international president, the diamond was adopted by the IARU, and then by most national societies. (sec figure 3)

Figure 3: ARRL and IARU emblems

(1) As an example in a small country like Switzerland, there are some five thousand hams. The QSL bureau handles about a million QSL cards a year: Just between Switzerland and Germany the exchange of QSLs amounts to two hundred and forty kilos a year.

Belgium and Switzerland appear to be the only countries of having, at one point in time, printed QSL stamps with a denomination value.

It might be interesting to know the story of stamps which became QSLs. In the 1920's, listener who wrote to American and Canadian Broadcasting stations for verification of listenership would receive one of the stations QSL stamp together with a confirmation card. The stamps were printed in various colors displaying the American Eagle perched on top of a globe of the world with radio towers either side. The Canadian stations printed a beaver gnawing a tree. Superimposed were the station call letters. These "EKKO" stamps, named after their publisher, could be placed in a specially printed album with spaces for "verified reception stamp" from all known stations. (see figure 4).
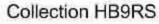

Figure 4: EKKO Stamp from the famous first commercial broadcasting station in East Pittsburgh Pa. Radio Station KDKA.

Selected QSL Stamps
Collection HB9RS

Argentina

Australia

Brazil

Germany

France

Israel

Czechoslovakia

Dominican Republic

Costa Rica

Colombia

Italy

Hungary

Belgium

Greece

Paraguay

Cuba

Fig. 2a

Selected QSL Stamps
Collection HB9RS

Netherlands

Portugal

Yugoslavia

Morocco

Sweden

Japan

Venezuela

Mexico

Mozambique

Poland

Switzerland

Spain

South Africa

Fig. 2b