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In Love with Radio Since President Hoover

We Talk With E. Noel Luddy, 93, About His Eight Remarkable Decades of Broadcast Engineering

BY TOM MCGINLEY

E. Noel Luddy is without doubt one the longest-serving and most revered senior statesmen of our industry.

ENGINEER INTERVIEW

Beginning with ham radio in 1930 at age 13, Luddy fell in love with both the hobby and profession of radio, and has stayed in love. His career began at a small AM station in Kentucky. He worked in the military as a radio officer for the Army during World War II, and eventually took a position at the Radio Corporation of America during the years of explosive growth in the radio industry following the war. Luddy finally decided to retire in 2008. His distinguished career included a span of more than 50 years working for RCA and Dielectric.

Luddy celebrated his 93rd birthday in December. He resides in Columbia, Pa. Radio World chatted with him via e-mail.

You've been working in and associated with broadcast engineering for longer than probably everyone who reads this interview, Noel. Tell us how you got the "radio bug" as a young lad and decided to make it a career.

My grandfather, Diddy, was very mechanical and got me interested in cars and working on equipment. I shifted to radio in my early teens. It was exciting to talk on ham radio to people hundreds of miles away. People from the neighborhood came to our house to hear me talk to

people far away. It was a very big deal in the early 1930s.

Tell us about your educational background.

We moved around some. I was in Kentucky and Ohio. I was always interested in radio. I attended the University of Toledo and the University of Kentucky. I did well and completed seven semesters, but I couldn't wait to actually work full-time in radio. I was given a chance to work for radio station WLAP in Lexington, Ky., and I bolted out of college to take the job.

You studied electrical engineering but did not finish a degree and instead went to work as a radio engineer. If you could roll back the clock, would you change that decision and how would you advise others now facing a similar choice?

I always regretted not getting my BSEE degree. I could have gone back after the war, but with a family and a full work schedule, I didn't do it.

I didn't finish my semester at the University of Kentucky, but I did meet my wife at the radio station. So I was glad to meet the girl of my dreams and have a job that I loved. If I could roll back the clock, I would have gone back after the war to complete my degree.

You served our country with distinction in World War II. Tell us how you used your radio background in the service as well as some of the highlights of your military experience.

I went in as a private in the Army and

went to Camp Crowder in Missouri to begin with, but it didn't take long for them to recognize that I had special skills and education that was needed in the war effort. I joined the Signal Corps and was transferred to Fort Monmouth, N.J. I taught a course in electrical engineering at Camp Crowder and assisted the radio instructor at Fort Monmouth.

I received orders to go overseas and left for San Francisco on my birthday, Dec. 1, 1942. We took a Norwegian freighter on Christmas Eve, not knowing our destination. I was sent to the headquarters of the South Pacific command, headed by General Halsey. I was appointed radio officer for all of the Army communications in the South Pacific.

I quickly rose in responsibility and in rank. I was honored to be promoted from private to major while setting up many communications stations for the U.S. forces in islands such as Guam and New Caledonia, Fiji, Tahiti, New Hebrides and Guadalcanal. I was part of the communications team that coordinated the attack that helped end the war.

When the Japanese surrendered, I organized about 11 planes of equipment to be flown to Japan to set up communications there. By that time, with the victory in hand, I was given the opportunity to go home. And I took it.

After getting back home, I was in the Army Reserves for 5 years.

After the war, you jumped right back into commercial radio as a station engineer. Tell us about radio during that period and what a typical day was like as the station's chief engineer.

It was difficult to get a good job after the war. A lot of soldiers were returning at the same time. I was fortunate that the Lexington station had an opening in their Amarillo, Texas, station, KFDA, and I packed up my family and took the job as chief engineer. It was an exciting time.

After the war, things were changing pretty quickly. There was always something to do. We did a lot of remotes, where we broadcasted from the advertiser's facility. As station chief engineer, I needed to be part repairman, part installation crew and arrange equipment and facilities for broadcasting in Amarillo.

After your KFDA stint, you took a job with RCA in Camden, N.J., in 1950 and became manager of broadcast transmitters. You spent many years there and are perhaps best remembered in that role. What was it like working at RCA?

At that time, RCA was certainly a recognized leader in the broadcast business. There were significant equipment improvements and new technology to keep things busy. Now, my area responsibility didn't just cover Amarillo, it covered the U.S. and parts of the world. I loved working and talking with the engineers, both with RCA and our customers.

Later, I was named as RCA's liaison engineer for the consulting engineers near Washington, D.C. I really enjoyed talking and interacting with the consulting engineers and helping them by providing equipment that met their needs.

After "retiring" from RCA, you started a second career of sorts with Dielectric, which had been building antennas for



An early Dielectric antenna is packed for delivery via truck.

Images courtesy SPX Communication Technology



Dielectric antenna manufacturing facility of the 1950s.

RCA. I remember buying a Dielectric FM antenna from you and Wally Warren back in the mid-1980s.

Dielectric is a wonderful company to work with. The people were very friendly and helpful. They have a great product line which helped my job also. I had the honor of representing Dielectric to the consulting engineers and the FCC. They had a first-class product line and the organization to back it up.

The other long-time association many of us remember about E. Noel Luddy was your long service with the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers and Association of Federal Communications Consulting Engineers.

The time I spent with IEEE and AFCCE was a labor of love. I enjoyed the people so much. I really enjoyed helping to organize the program and line up the speakers. It kept me on the cutting edge with technology and I felt that I was helping people in the industry stay current and connected.

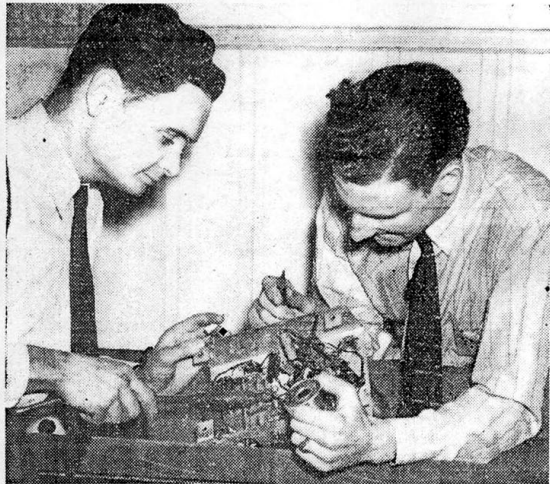
I'm not sure, but I think I got to almost 50 NAB conventions. We had a special reunion time with the ex-RCA folks. The people were great but I don't miss standing on my feet during those long NAB days.

Reflecting on your 76 years working in our industry, what is your assessment of where we are headed next and what advice would you give to a young aspiring engineer who wants to make broadcast engineering his lifelong career?

Things are moving so fast now, but the basic principals of technology and of business are the same. People need to be open to change, even into their '60s or '70s. I

Education Gets a Fourth 'R':

Radio School Will



Noel Luddy, left, and Chester Stratton, chief engineer at University of Kentucky radio station, work on one of the receiving sets which will be placed in Lee County mountain schools to receive broadcasts over WBKY, the new station operated by the U. of K. at Beattyville.

Making news: In the Louisville (Ky.) Courier Journal

would recommend that engineers pursue getting their P.E. licenses. Continuing education is important.

It is also important that engineers conduct business in an ethical and honest fashion. Honesty is important in your dealings with everyone. We live in the greatest nation on earth and have incredible opportunities for personal growth and prosperity.

Tell us more about the E. Noel Luddy scholarship award and fund for students studying radio. Where can interested students find out about this program and apply for it?

Dielectric has established a scholarship for undergraduate students who are majoring in engineering or other fields associated with the broadcast and telecommunications industries. Details about the scholarship and an application form can be found at the AFCCE website at www.afcce.org/enlsclrshp.htm.

This interview would not have been possible without the assistance of Noel's son, Bill Luddy, who transcribed the answers. Thanks also to Sally Dixon, director, marketing and communications, SPX Communication Technology, for her assistance in arranging the interview.