



## Conserving a Rare Collins 4A

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Editor's Note: This story is a bit different than most Service Lines. It is a story about two men and a radio – not just one. And . . . if we listen, it tells us a lot about why we do what we do and how we do it. Please see his more detailed story on our website.

About two years ago, late in the evening, an eBay listing caught my eye. It was a Collins 4A Transmitter. I studied the piece until the early hours of the morning, but was unable to make the decision to purchase. After a good night's sleep, I checked the listing and found it had been cancelled, re-listed at a much lower price, and sold. Something didn't

seem quite right, so I sent the seller a message indicating I was interested in purchasing if it might still be available. As the day ticked on, and I heard nothing, and I lost hope. Late that evening my phone rang - it was the seller. The next day I was on my way to Grants Pass, Oregon from Seattle, a 1000 mile roundtrip.



Upon arriving at Steve and Starla Clarke's home, I learned that this radio belonged to Starla's grandfather Nino Sunseri. Starla told me that Nino was the original owner, and that it had been his shack centerpiece for as long as anyone in the family could remember. In the short time I was there, I got quite a glimpse into this man's life. Driving back to Seattle that same day, thoughts of this man and his relationship with this radio were foremost on my mind. I arrived home after midnight that same day and was thoroughly exhausted from the long drive. I placed the 4A on the kitchen table and decided to post my adventure on our reflector prior to retiring for the night.

The next morning I awoke to see a flurry of posts on the CCA reflector regarding my purchase of the 4A. Soon, my wife and I were sitting at the kitchen table having our morning coffee. The 4A was sitting proudly on the table as we were discussing the previous day's activities. As I began sharing my thoughts on the 4A, I found myself choking up as I told my wife this was a national treasure and that Nino, the original owner, was an early amateur radio pioneer.

Nino Sunseri was born on October 5, 1902, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His parents were immigrants from Sicily. At some point the family moved west and settled in Pasadena, California. Nino graduated from Pasadena High School in 1920. This was also the year Nino's first amateur radio license is listed in the June 1920 United States Department of Commerce, Radio Division's manifest. His call is shown as 6LW. Nino would go on to hold five different amateur call signs over the years. 1920 was also the year Nino enlisted in the U.S. Navy. After boot camp, he entered the Naval Radio School in Great Lakes, Illinois. His first shipboard duty assignment was to the USS New Mexico, a new class of Battleship. The New Mexico was the first naval vessel to have electric-turbine engines. The radio room aboard the New Mexico would have had the latest spark-gap transmitter for worldwide CW communications. In 1921 Nino transferred to the USS California, another Battleship of distinction - remaining aboard the California until his discharge from active duty in 1923. He remained an active member of the Naval Reserves until his retirement in 1946. Listed in his continuous service certificate, he also held a special qualification as a US Weather Bureau Operator. Upon leaving active duty in 1923 Nino went to work for the Bureau of Commerce as a meteorologist. He retired from this vocation in 1957 and settled in Grants Pass, Oregon. Later Nino would work for the local school district in Grants Pass as a janitor, retiring from this position ten years later. At this point, the 4A's owner was finally retired and he spent his remaining years tending his beautiful gardens and enjoying his hobby in amateur radio.

It is easy to see that Nino remained active in amateur radio his entire life. Being that he held a good steady job with the government during the midst of the Great Depression, he would have had a little extra to indulge in the latest offerings from a new startup company, Collins Radio. Home brewing was the natural way for these early amateur pioneers, so this acquisition of the 4A was undoubtedly something Nino would have thoroughly researched prior to its purchase. Nino reportedly operated the 4A in his shack up until just prior to his passing on January 8, 2000. That would make about 60 years of operation – allowing for the WW II timeout. The only repair ever made was the replacement of one electrolytic in the power supply.

As I studied this piece prior to any restoration, I got the real sense that this piece was always well cared for. The dirty chassis and corrosion in all likelihood was from the piece being stored in an outdoor shed for some ten years after Nino's passing. The 4A was only removed from this shed just prior to the family's decision to sell it.

My decisions made in executing what I believed to be a proper path towards restoring this piece, were made so with the utmost respect for the legacy of both Art Collins and Nino Sunseri. The path I choose was to restore only what was needed to bring the piece back to its original glory and nothing more. I wanted other amateurs and collectors to see what a 4A would have looked like as it was made in 1934. Nothing about this restoration was easy. My decisions were painfully deliberate and required more time simply pondering solutions than actual work towards that end. I second guessed every decision up until executing any work performed.

## Service Line (Cont'd)

The first order of business was to determine the 4A's electrical condition. Fortunately, Jay Spivack, W7PJS, lives close to me and I had been acquainted with him from a local annual ham-fest. Jay has written numerous technical articles for Electric Radio and graciously agreed to help me in any way he could. Thus, we set up a rendezvous at his place. We then met weekly for several visits as Jay methodically tested the 4A's running legs. Other than the electrolytic capacitors, everything measured well within tolerance and Jay issued a clean bill of health. Our last visit consisted of substituting electrolytic capacitors under the chassis and running it up. A slight antenna coupling issue was resolved, and with Jay at the controls, we ran it up as per the manual attaining a little better than twenty watt output at the antenna. The only solder connections disturbed were those for the capacitors, and these leads were dressed for future replacement of same.



In a nutshell the restoration involved stripping the radio of everything that could be removed without disturbing any original wiring or solder connections. After clearing the chassis of all possible components, I was left with the two transformers in place, the solid wire leads to the variable capacitors including the ceramic standoffs, the AC power cord, two key line wire leads, and the two wires connecting to the Westinghouse meter. The chassis was then restored to its original appearance and then protected for the next step in restoring the transformers in place.



Restoring the chassis and transformers in place was tedious and tricky. The chassis end plates and topside exposed screws were all restored using original finishes which were a combination of nickel and cadmium plating. All of the other components were simply carefully cleaned with no other enhancements. Upon reassembly, every move was carefully calculated to ensure no damage to any surface. The nitty-gritty details of this restoration are a story all in itself.



A little about myself, I retired from the U.S. Coast Guard as a Radioman in 1995 after twenty years of service. As a Radioman I gained experience in operating complex communications systems aboard ship and shore stations. My technical abilities were limited to troubleshooting equipment failures and work-arounds to ensure reliable communications. The technical responsibilities of component failures were left to the electronics technicians. We broke "em", they fixed "em". I never had any real interest in amateur radio during that time. After retiring, I became interested in classic cars and motorcycles, eventually performing several total restorations. Approximately six years ago, I decided I wanted to get back into CW and get my first amateur license. As I explored this new hobby, vintage equipment became a passion. I went about collecting and learning what was what in vintage gear. CW being my main interest, I choose gear which had a reputation for solid CW performance. I have yet to set up my first shack and get on the air. I've actually given up the idea temporarily to concentrate on other projects, but I will have more time for this after my retirement in a couple of years.

The receiver I choose to display with the 4A is a National FBXA, vintage 1934. This receiver came out of the collection of Greg Gore, WA1KBQ. Greg is a very active member in the AWA, and a leading expert on National radios. The FBXA is a beautiful, all original piece complimenting the 4A quite nicely. The 4A is now referred to as "Little Nino" and will be paired with the FBXA and the history of the set and its previous owner.

A number of people went out of their way to assist me on this project. I am very grateful and must acknowledge that I could not have completed this project without the wisdom afforded by these individuals.

**Bill Carns** - I must have driven Bill nearly insane during the process of a photo shoot. The superb photos are a direct result of Bill's efforts in defining to me what a "good shot" really is supposed to look like.

**Brian Harris** - Having been the previous owner of another 4A, Brian offered great insight from his personal perspective.

**Gary Halverson** - Gary copied everything paper he had on the 4A. The operator manual and schematic were invaluable.

**Jim Stitzinger** - Jim gave me the personal contact information needed to obtain information and talk to the experts. Jim also sourced a "needle in the haystack" for me. He located an original, yes original, complete Operators Manual for the 4A. Bless you Jim!

**JB Jenkins** - JB and I spoke often on the telephone and had some pretty long chats. JB's insight into the 4A and just about anything pre-war Collins is legendary. JB listened to my "ideas" and tempered them with a good dose of reality. JB's approval of the finished project meant the world to me. Thank you my friend!

**Pete Varounis** - NL7XM - Call Sign Research.

**Profections Metal Polishing, Inc.** - Owners, Albert Malgarin and Michael Gotowka, the best metal men in the business. Michael and I spent a Saturday performing some miracle work on the 4A's chassis. My hats off to you guys!

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