

## In Fondest Remembrance

Tom Kneitel, W4XAA (ex-K2AES), SK  
Editor, *Pop'Comm*, 1982–1995

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*“[Tommy Kneitel] left behind a prodigious body of work, not the least of which is the magazine in your hands, a living monument to his fertile mind and great energy. And so, in these pages, we celebrate both that work and the man behind it.”*

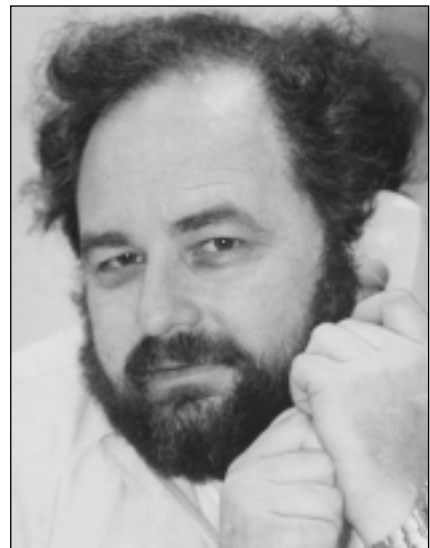
Many, perhaps most, of you have already heard this sad news. *Pop'Comm's* founding editor Tom Kneitel, W4XAA (ex-K2AES), passed away on August 22, 2008, at age 75 after a long illness. On that day he left behind his wife of 54 years, Judy, seven surviving children (one son died tragically young), 10 grandchildren, a multitude of friends, and us—the countless radio hobbyists who are indebted to him. For many, perhaps most, of us, he was our introduction, our inspiration, our guide, literally defining the radio listening hobby. He also left behind a prodigious body of work, not the least of which is the magazine in your hands, a living monument to his fertile mind and great energy. And so, in these pages, we celebrate both that work and the man behind it.

To most who knew him, he was Tommy, a witty storyteller, a sometimes-mischievous rascal, and an exacting professional who cultivated a slightly gruff demeanor that was belied by almost everything else about him.

As well known as Tommy was to everyone in the radio hobby, very few of his readers knew he had contracted polio at age 14, which left him with a permanent limp and led to his requiring a wheelchair in later life. It was to help him through this early convalescence that relatives gave him his first radio, igniting the lifelong passion that influenced so many people. He was a workaholic with a steel-trap memory who always had a short-wave receiver, scanner, or some other kind of radio on while he labored at his typewriter, sometimes for 18 hours a day.

Some of his other loves, according to Judy, were junk food, radio history, playing with words (once criticized for negative comments about the venerable ARRL, he famously responded, “I don’t care when they were founded, I just want to know when they will be losted”), and his family. He sang frequently (“His voice was good, but he sang such *terrible* songs,” said Judy).

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1933, Tommy hailed from a creative family. His grand-



father was animation pioneer Max Fleischer who, along with his brother Dave, developed and patented the rotoscope, a mechanism used for transferring live action film into animated cartoons through tracing, a technique still used today. Fleisher was also the wellspring for cultural icons Betty Boop, Popeye, and the “bouncing ball” sing-along aid. Tommy’s father, Seymour Kneitel, was also a prolific animator, best known for his work with Fleischer Studios and its successor, Famous Studios.

Tommy was equally imaginative and found inspiration everywhere, coming up with ideas for inventions, gadgets, and silly gimmicks, including “pet crystals” during the pet rock craze (they were actually marketed and sold by a brother of CQ’s first publisher, bringing in a decent buck, according to Judy).

But Tommy’s special talent was the written word, and he wielded it with wit and dexterity—and often very strong opinions. By the 1950s and ’60s he was writing for *Popular Electronics* and *Electronics Illustrated* and started the *Popular Electronics* registered shortwave monitor pro-

gram, which issued unofficial “WPE” call signs to active SWLs. Over the years, he authored of a multitude of books on CB, scanning, and other radio-related topics. Among the best known (and controversial) were *Tomcat’s Big CB Handbook: Everything They Never Told You* (“Tomcat” was his CB handle); *Tune in on Telephone Calls* and *The “Top Secret” Registry of U.S. Government Radio Frequencies: 25 to 470 MHz*. Willing to try his had at seemingly anything, in the 1960s he even wrote training films for the U.S. Army.

His association with CQ Communications began in the early 1960s when he became the founding editor of *S9*, a CB magazine launched by then-CQ magazine publisher Cowan Publishing, Inc. According to Dick Ross, K2MGA, CQ’s (and, of course, *Pop’Comm*’s) current publisher, he was “one of the most creative people I’ve known in my life...He came up with the name *S9* and created the whole editorial package.” When *S9* closed, he and Dick launched *Pop’Comm* in 1982. (Dick shares his own memories of Tommy here; see “So Long, Tomcat.”)

Incredibly driven, he’d get up at 5 or 6 in the morning and, according to Judy, “go into the office, put in a couple of hours, by 9 he was socializing, and by 10 he was on his way home.” That was where the real work began, hunched over a typewriter in a home brimming with children.

“He liked noise in the house, having the kids around, but he didn’t want to be disturbed when he was working, so he hung a sign on his door that said ‘knock or in any way disturb me and I’ll rip your arm right off and beat you over the head with the bloody stump,’” laughed Judy.

Whenever the family needed additional money, for a kid’s braces or a summer at camp, “Tommy would sit down at the typewriter, and he’d do some freelance,” said Judy, who also served as his sounding board. “Every single thing he ever wrote he read out loud to me. It was a way of editing and also seeing how it was going to read.”

Tommy helmed *Pop’Comm* until 1995, when he gave up day-to-day editorial responsibilities. “He didn’t want to retire from *Pop’Comm*, but his health was not good and he just couldn’t keep up with those deadlines anymore as editor,” said Judy. He postponed stepping down as head of the magazine he started as long as he could, however, and through various illnesses, including a heart attack,

he’d work on it from his hospital bed.

Of course, he never really left *Pop’Comm* at all. His impression is stamped on it forever, just one of the legacies of his brilliant and tenacious mind.

I asked Judy a while ago if she knew the origins of the name Kneitel. “It’s German-Austrian, I think, and means ‘lit-

tle knot,’ she told me. “Apparently his family were candle makers and ‘Kneitel’ refers to the little knot you tie at the end of a candle when you’re going to dip it.”

Givers of light. How appropriate. We will miss yours.

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## So Long, Tomcat

Tommy was an amazingly prolific writer, one of those people whose fingers seem to have a direct connection to his imagination. It’s little known among the readers of Tommy’s publications that he was sometimes a magazine’s sole contributor. That’s right, he sometimes wrote the entire magazine...everything from the editorial to the features to the columns to both sides of the letters to the editor! He could have masterful “arguments” with himself, complete with name-calling!

His repertoire of pen names numbered in the dozens, each with its own style, its own quirks, and its own point of view. Along the way he created characters and personas that survived for years and which drew fan mail from around the globe.

Personas were very important to Tommy. He (as well as his younger brother Kenny) was stricken with polio as a teenager, and he walked with a serious limp for the rest of his life, at least as long as he was able to walk at all. For his own reasons, Tommy chose never to reveal his condition to his audience. Quite the opposite, he adopted a persona of an adventurer, an Ernest Hemingway of the airwaves, so to speak. He almost never appeared anywhere in person, choosing to relate to his followers through the printed word or the radio.

Long-time followers of Tommy may remember the photos, though, that showed up occasionally in *S9* or *Pop’Comm*. He’d appear wearing a bush jacket, or holding a rifle, or leaning casually against a dusty Range Rover, seemingly in the African plains somewhere. Yes, he owned a rifle or two (never fired by him!), and he owned a bush jacket, but usually the shots were taken at a shopping mall somewhere by his wife Judy, using someone’s personal vehicle as a prop. For over 40 years he carried it off perfectly, and only those closest to him ever knew the truth.

His amazing creativity helped us lesser editors out of many a jam over the years. More than a few times, as editor of *CQ* or as the poor sucker charged with the responsibility of seeing to it that words appeared on every editorial page of any number of magazines, I’d find myself walking into Tommy’s little office lamenting the column that never showed up, or the feature article that ran two pages short, or the full page ad that dropped out at the last moment before deadline. He’d ask, “What would you like to fill the space with?” Radio history? Humor? Something controversial? It was always hard to fathom that I was being offered a choice of great material that didn’t even exist yet! He’d then say, “Give me a half hour” or “Give me 20 minutes.”

Sure enough he’d come limping into my office with a few hundred words of super copy cranked out on his manual Royal typewriter, and bearing one of his amazingly plausible pseudonyms. Need an illustration to go with it? No problem. He’d rummage in a bottom desk drawer and come up with the perfect clipping from an old magazine or newspaper, or an ancient postcard or QSL scavenged from flea markets throughout the Northeast.

I’m ashamed to say that the seat-of-the pants filler from Tommy was sometimes the best-received piece in the issue! But that’s what Tommy did best: He was the wordsmith of wordsmiths. He was the best! Our world is poorer without the Tomcat.

—Dick Ross, K2MGA, Publisher, *Popular Communications*