

THE LLEXINGTON LLAMA CAPER

by Marie Coady

The rhythms of the city of Woburn are different for everyone. Some sway to the beat of family, church, sports, school, or work. Some people's work is other people's play. That's the way it is with the police scanner crowd here in Woburn. Scanners crackle all over the city as listeners throb to the pulse of the seamier side of life and listen in as Woburn's finest earn their pay. Most calls to the Woburn dispatcher are routine, and "Scanner Sparkies" can tell by the tone of voice whether it's a routine call or an emergency. Breathless, rasping voices tell them a foot chase is in progress, a siren screeching in the background almost guarantees a car chase, and if you're one of the lucky ones who has someone to keep them up to date on the code for Tack 2, you can listen in on information that's not for public consumption.

Not all of the "Scanner Sparkies" world is seamy and desperate. Sometimes there's a lighter side. For example, on Sunday morning, the 21st of April, at 9:45 A. M., the following exchange transpired over the Woburn air waves:

Officer: "Uhm, can you call Winning Farm and see if they're missing a llama?"

Dispatcher: "A what?"

Officer: "A llama. You know, a horse with long hair and a long neck."

Dispatcher: "Is that a llama with an L?"

Officer: "No. That's a llama with two L's."

Silence reigned as "Scanner Sparkies" all over the city stood by anxiously to hear the outcome of the llama caper.

Finally, the response they all waited for:

Dispatcher: "You know that llama, the one with the two L's?"

Officer: "Yeah. What did you find out?"

Dispatcher: "That's not a Woburn llama; that's a Lexington llama."

Officer: "Is that Lexington with an L?"

Dispatcher: "In this case, it's Lexington with two L's?"

All through the llama exchange there was no indication that it was anything more than a routine call. Each exchange was delivered in the same business-like monotone. So professional is our police force, it is rare for there to be a deviation in the professional delivery of give and take between officer and dispatcher. That little, inside smirk hidden in the monotonous timbre of voices over a “Scanner Sparkies” receiver belies its content, but “Scanner Sparkies” pick up on every little nuance.

This little insight into the lighter side of a “Scanner Sparkies” world is only one of many that have transpired over the years. Although the events are few and far between, they're treasured and remembered by scanner devotees all over the city. It brightens a rather dour hobby by interjecting a little much needed humor and gives the police department a human face. It's hard to describe these little exchanges to outsiders, and Woburn's “Scanner Sparkies” don't have a club or a newsletter to exchange information. If they did, it would be full of these treasured lighter side happenings.

There was a time when “Scanner Sparkies” could only get one frequency on each radio, and the real dedicated ones among them would have three or four radios piled on top of one another. This way they could listen in on calls from more than one town or get the fire calls along with the police. Arthur Fiedler, our most famous conductor of the Boston Pops, was one of Boston's most celebrated “Sparkies”. He was a specialist though. He only responded to fire calls. Sometimes he would beat the fire department to the scene. He appeared with such regularity that the Boston fire department made him an official fireman and even gave him his own fire hat which he treasured more than the baton he conducted his way to fame with.

Now with the new digital scanners, purchasing a Bearcat can put an owner into the “Scanner Sparkie” world in seconds. All it takes is a quick read of the booklet that comes with it, and an owner can program in as many frequencies as he wants and change them at whim.

With the advent of these new electronic marvels, new Scanner disciples are added to the list of listeners every day. So, if you heard a neighbor having a good laugh about quarter to ten on Sunday the 21st of April, they were not watching reruns of *Lucy*, *F-Troop* or even *Car 54, Where Are You?* Its a good bet they had their scanner tuned in to the Lexington llama caper.

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