

The KeyNote



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In This Issue

YouTube to the Rescue!, pg. 14



QRP the
Hard Way,
pg. 9



The Sideswiper: The Forgotten Key, pg. 11

Table of Contents

Information Page.....	2
Editor's Notepad	3
Welcome New FISTS.....	4
QRZ FISTS DE KARL, KB1DSB	6
Rites and Rituals	7
FISTS Awards.....	8
QRP the Hard Way.....	9
The Sideswiper: The Forgotten Key.....	11
YouTube to the Rescue!	14
FISTS Photos.....	15
Sprint Information	16
FISTS Sprint Entry Form.....	17
Letters to the Editor	18
FISTS Store.....	19
To Join or Renew Your FISTS Membership.....	22
FISTS CW Club Membership Application/Renewal.....	23

"When you've worked a FISTS, you've worked a friend."

The Sideswiper: The Forgotten Key

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I HATED the sound of a sideswiper at first, but after my ear became accustomed to it, I began to understand it, like when you understand the verbal melodies of New Orleans, Boston, or New York. The sound is like a foreign language, but isn't. Soon, when in the hands of an expert, the sound of a sideswiper was a beautiful song that I longed to hear.

Old timers know what a sideswiper is, but younger members of FISTS might not. The sideswiper, or cootie key, is a key that operates somewhat like a bug or an electronic keyer, but has no vibrator and has no electronics, it just operates by pushing it to the left and to the right in a never ending left-right-left-right pattern! Unlike bugs and electronic keyers, both dits and dahs are made by both thumb and finger.

Sending with a sideswiper is similar to sending with a semi-automatic key, or bug. Your arm rests on the desk or table, and you rotate your arm back and forth with your wrist and fingers as relaxed as possible. Don't use your fingers to move the key's lever. Let the long muscles in your arm do all the work.

To make a dot, you just tap either side of the paddle(s) lightly. To make two dots, you tap first the left side and then the right side. To make an "S" you tap left-right-left, or you may make it by tapping right-left-right, and so on. For a "K" you can make a dash with the finger, a dot with the thumb, and the second dash with the finger; or again, you can reverse it and make a dash with the thumb, dot with the finger and dash with the thumb.

If you think it is easy, try it. Even excellent operators find it hard to make the dits and dahs consistently in a 1:3 ratio. If you're like me, you'll

got the sides mixed up at first, but keep on practicing, you'll get it finally.



Figure 1. Bunnell DSK

Different Types of Sideswipers

The first side swiper key was known as the Double Speed Key made by Jesse Bunnell of New York. Figure 1 shows my Bunnell DSK on a base made by the late FISTS member, Tim Soxman, W3ZVT.

You don't need a Bunnell DSK, to send using the sideswiping method. The easiest way is to take a single lever paddle, short the dit and the dah contacts together, and connect this to the tip of a phone jack. When connected this way, moving the paddle to either side will key the transmitter. Figure 2 shows how I did this with my VibroKeyer single-lever paddle.

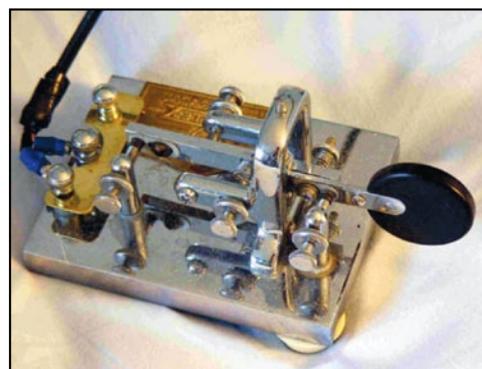


Figure 2. VibroKeyer single-lever paddle

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Another way to make a sideswiper is with a hacksaw blade, as shown in Figure 3. Hacksaw blades are commonly used because they are both flexible and good conductors. Below is a sideswiper made with a hacksaw blade. Yours doesn't have to be quite so fancy. Just make sure to put a piece of electrical tape on the end for something to hold on to, and scrape the paint off the hacksaw blade so it makes good electrical contact with whatever you use for terminals.



Figure 3. Sideswiper with hacksaw blade

Bob Shrader, W6BNB (SK), or “RS” as he was known in commercial radiotelegraphy circles, used two hand keys bolted together, base-to-base, and fixed so the bases are at 90° from a wooden—or better yet, a heavy metal—base. He used angle brackets to support the keys.

Another simple cootie key can be made by tying the vibrating end of a bug to the damper with a rubber band so that the vibrator can no longer vibrate but can still move slightly. Re-adjust the dot post contact adjustment screw so that it makes contact with the U-shaped dot contact spring on the vibrator lever when the thumb finger piece is pressed. Now when you press the finger piece on either side you will key the transmitter like a straight key. Adjust the key so

that the contacts close solidly. This is an excellent key, as the dot spring gives it a very nice feel.

Cooties on The Air

There aren't many sideswipers on the air. Hack, K4KP, was a master at this key, and made copies of them in his machine shop and gave them to people who would use them. K4KP was like Johnny Appleseed making cootie keys so the skill would not die.

Ralph, KM4BI (SK), still uses one of Hack's keys. After he retired from the Tennessee State Police, he was frequently on the air using his sideswiper. He had a great sideswiper fist.

Hank, W1HRQ, who ran the Transcontinental Net of the Society of Wireless Pioneers from his home in Maine connected a 1 μ F capacitor across the key line to give his signal a bell-like sound. He liked to operate around 14,113 kHz and had a big signal. Whenever you heard that bell-shaped keying, you knew it was him.

I had been sending Morse for over 40 years before I finally tackled this type of key. I practiced the alphabet over and over again, the numbers and punctuation over and over again until I could send at about 20 wpm. A good cootie operator sends 25 to 30 wpm easily and 35 to 40 wpm with a bit of effort. It is much easier sending at those speeds with a sideswiper than it is using a straight key.

You can hear sideswipers once in a while on 40 and 20 meters, and I would urge you to give them a try. A group of us have established several informal radio nets to promote the use of the sideswiper. All sideswiper users are warmly invited to take part in our nets. You can find out more about these nets by going to <http://www.sideswipernet.org>. There, you'll also find videos and audio posted. I also have a video

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Sideswiper *(continued from page 12)*

on how to use a sideswiper at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0EDFjCEoDI>

At other times, sideswiper aficionados can be found on the recommended calling frequencies: 3566, 7033, 10121.5, 14055, 21055, 18088, and 28055 kHz.

C U ON THE AIR!

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**We need articles and reviews for
*The KeyNote!***

Send your Word or text files to
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