

REMEMBERING BACK WHEN WIRELESS WAS EDGY

For those younger IT types that grew up with wireless, this quick trip down memory lane might be little more than a yawnfest. But many of us remember when wireless was new, edgy, and fraught with mystique. This piece is for us geezers.

Back in the day (that day being around the late 1990's/2001-2002ish), wireless networking had a whole other vibe. It was a relatively expensive technology, and usually served as an “accessory” to the wired network. Or it provided point-to-point bridging alternatives to leased lines. To “do” wireless, you had to understand networking and have a solid working knowledge of RF. Early access points were way too expensive (and client counts were too thin) to warrant dense deployments so you had to know your stuff when it came to antennas, power settings and how to manually manage a given RF domain.

But aside from “I do wireless for a living” aspects of early Wi-Fi, there was an adventurist culture attached to wireless networking that has arguably faded away (or maybe it's just matured, too?). Some of us got into “war driving”, seeking out wireless networks for the pure joy of finding them and seeing what we could learn about them.

People did unholy things to Pringles Potato Chip cans and woks and old satellite dish antennas in the name of shooting signals further and hearing them from longer distances (which was part of the overall security threat package to early wireless.) The really geeky among the wireless-curious wrote WEP cracking tools, and the rest of us felt ten feet tall when we actually made those tools work for us to divulge what their owners were trying to protect. Again, it was just a different time, and there was a lot of thrill factor associated with wireless.

So why bring it up now? Depending on how you measure such things, we've had a few generational evolutions from the good folks of 802.11ville, and the connected world has certainly "gone wireless". WiFi is so commonplace, it's no longer just the realm of specialists- though the same skills are still needed as before (and then some) to really pull off "wireless done right" in a complicated world. Sure, the past has passed.

But, I recently stumbled across something cool on the web that got me a bit nostalgic...

Anyone remember these days? Or these? Being a "radio guy", the notion of creating your own antennas and making signals go long distances is one of the things I've enjoyed through the years.

At the same time, today's systems tend to be more micro-cell-ish and so I had somewhat put this chapter of the Book of Wireless away in my mind's library.

A couple of days ago, I was researching something unrelated when I came across the WiFi Shootout links from the 2004-2008 time frame. As cheesy as this sounds, it was kinda like looking at a photo album of my children, or at least children that I was quite fond of.

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