

The Sports Page: The Canadian Contest Scene

A Behind The Scenes Look at the QSL Bureau



In this column, we have a special treat. Have you ever wondered how the QSL Bureau works? I must confess, I have been a happy Bureau user for many years and it has existed in one form or another long before I got my ticket. At times – usually when that fat envelope from the Bureau arrives with all manner of QSL cards from around the world – I wonder “How does the Bureau work?”

I recently received a “Please send funds” email from Michael Brickell, VE3TKI – who looks after shipping my cards – and I decided to ask the question. While this column covers the VA3/VE3 QSL Bureau, each province has its own incoming Bureau and they perform similar tasks to those outlined here.

Radio Amateurs of Canada offers an Outgoing QSL service that takes care of getting our cards to the various QSL Bureaus around the world. The service is available to RAC members, RAC affiliated clubs (club call only) and family members.

So when you receive your package from the QSL Bureau, here is some of what makes the magic happen.

Ontario Incoming QSL Bureau

An Ontario Incoming QSL Bureau has existed for over 45 years. The Bureau was originally run on behalf of the former Canadian Radio Relay League (CRRL) by a group of women, mostly Radio Amateurs, who were known as “The Ontario Trilliums”. Eventually, one of their members, Jean Evans, VE3DGG, became the Box 157 (the QSL Bureau Post Office Box) representative and took over the Ontario Trilliums.

When Jean passed away in late 1991, Gary Westhouse, VE3NIT (now a Silent Key), who was a member of the CRRL, was asked, on very short notice, to take over the Bureau.

Gary was the voice of the VE3 QSL Bureau from late 1991 to 2012, when he retired as Bureau Manager. During this period, Gary singlehandedly looked after all of the behind the scenes activities of the Bureau, including: operation of the Bureau; dealing with all mail coming into the Post Office Box; sorting incoming cards; and integrating them with the cards coming in from the RAC National Incoming QSL Bureau, and arranging for card pick up by his network of mailing volunteers.

Upon Gary’s retirement in 2012, the Bureau was taken over by new management and reorganized so that all the behind the scenes work would not have to be done by just one person. In fact, this work is now done by a team of 4 or 5 people, to spread the workload and provide some redundancy.

We started by taking a look at the various functions performed by the Bureau. This led to a restructuring so as to spread this

workload amongst a small core team of volunteers.

In addition, the new Bureau management also implemented an idea that originated from the first QSL Bureau Manager, Mike Christmas, VE3XMS, that the Bureau should be set up as a not-for-profit corporation.

The corporation, set up in 2012, consists of 17 mailing volunteers and has a 7-member Board of Directors. The Board appoints the officers of the corporation, who are the President, Secretary and Treasurer. The President is also the Bureau Manager (currently Michael Brickell, VE3TKI).

QSL cards for Canadian Amateurs arrive first at the RAC National Incoming QSL Bureau which is currently run by the



RAC National Incoming Bureau Sorting Area



Bob Hudson, VE3CWU (left) and Murray Yewer, VE3JMY, sorting QSL cards at the VA3/VE3 National Incoming Bureau (<https://ve3qcb.ca/>)

Bureau Manager, Ed Spingola, VA3TPV, in Mississauga. Ed is also the VA3/VE3 Incoming QSL Bureau's Mailing Manager.

The QSL cards are then distributed to the 11 individual provincial and territorial incoming Bureaus.

In 2020, sorting, boxing and mailing the roughly 150 kilograms of incoming cards to the provincial and territorial Bureaus took about 75 hours.

Radio Amateurs of Canada funds the operation of the RAC National Incoming QSL Bureau, including the cost of shipment of cards to the provincial and territorial Bureaus. The provincial incoming Bureaus are not run by RAC; they are all operated independently. RAC does not fund the operation of the provincial and territorial incoming Bureaus. These Bureaus are all run on a user-pay basis; that is, Bureau users must provide funds to the Bureaus for postage. RAC membership is not required to use the incoming QSL Bureaus.

Cards for Ontario Amateurs constitute roughly 35% of the total volume of incoming Canadian cards. The volume of Ontario cards received has been decreasing, likely due to the influence of the American Radio Relay League's Logbook of the World (LoTW) system, other

electronic confirmation methods, high postal costs and, more recently, the influence of the global pandemic.

The Ontario Bureau's Mailing Manager does a preliminary card sort, by the first letter of the call suffix, into each of the three-letter VA3/VE3 calls, the two-letter VE3 calls, and the two-letter VA3 calls. A significant effort is required to deal with the various special event calls and "busted" calls which require additional handling. In 2020, processing the 51 kg of incoming Ontario cards (about 17,000) took about 25 hours, spread over the year.

After the preliminary sort is complete, and once there is a sufficient volume on hand, the Mailing Manager passes cards for the three-letter calls on to the mailing volunteers. Most of the mailing volunteers live in Mississauga so it is convenient for them to pick up cards. For those not located in Mississauga, we make an effort to get cards to them as part of other activities.

The two-letter card groups, by far the largest volume, are later sorted into individual calls by a four or five member sorting team, using sorting boxes designed by Ed, VA3TPV. The sorting team approach has not been used since the pandemic began. Sorting the two-letter card groups typically takes the team two to three hours. In 2020, there were two sorting sessions; in each of 2019 and 2018 there were six. The above photo shows a typical card sorting session.

Once the mailing volunteers receive the cards, they sort them into individual call signs, record the card weights and mailing costs in the Bureau's database, described below, and finally, mail the cards to users. This process typically takes four to six hours for the two-letter VE3 calls, the largest call letter group. The photo below shows the result of this process for a typical two-letter VE3 card mailing.



A Typical 2-letter VE3 Card Mailing.

The VA3/VE3 Incoming QSL Bureau has its own website at <https://ve3qcb.ca>. The purpose of the website is primarily to replicate the paper record keeping previously done by hand. The Bureau's website provides an easy means for the mailing volunteers to track users' funds, cards and labels on hand. This is done through a "back end" database accessible to the mailing volunteers.

The "back end" consists of a number of pages. A "Make Deposit" page is used to record funds, address labels, and the weight of cards on hand for each user.

A "Make Shipment" page calculates the cost of a mailing based on the card weight involved, automatically deducts the cost of the mailing, and decrements the card weight and labels used for the mailing in the user's account.

"Notes" and "Recent Activity" pages are provided for the mailing volunteers' use as well. The website administrator has the ability to change postal and HST rates if needed. The website, including the database, is backed up daily, via a subscription to VaultPress. The website and the database were developed in WordPress for the Bureau by Brian Hogg of BH Consulting.

The Bureau's website also has pages useful for Bureau users such as the "Do You Have Cards?", "Your Mailing Volunteers" and the "Deposit Funds" pages. Using the latter page, Amateurs may deposit funds with the Bureau using PayPal or a credit card if they don't have a PayPal account. It is also possible to mail a cheque to the Bureau, however we encourage users to submit funds via PayPal.

The Mailing Manager administers the Bureau's Post Office Box and also the Bureau's PayPal account. The Mailing Manager notifies the mailing volunteers, via email, of funds deposited by Bureau users. The mailing volunteers, in turn, update the users' accounts, using the Bureau's database.

The Bureau supplies envelopes for mailing. We strongly discourage users from sending in envelopes as they create problems for storage. We have an address label printing service at a small charge of \$2 for 30 labels. Users are charged a small per mailing handling fee for card processing.

We use the Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED) call sign database to populate the Bureau database with address information, and we have the ability to update address and call owner information as needed.

We expect Bureau users to inform us – and of course ISED – if their address has changed. The mailing volunteers notify users when additional funds are needed, usually by email. If we don't have an email address for a user, we look on the QRZ.com website. We make a reasonable effort to contact users if they don't have sufficient funds for mailing, however, if after several tries we are unable to get a response, we dispose of the cards as there is limited space for storage.

Each provincial and territorial Bureau has its own individual structure and process for handling cards. The common factor is that they are all run by dedicated volunteers.

The VA3/VE3 Incoming QSL Bureau has proven to be an efficient means to distribute QSL cards to Ontario Radio Amateurs. It is our pleasure to offer this service to our users.

We wish to thank all the volunteers who have made the continuing operation of the Bureau such a great success.

– *Michael Brickell, VE3TKI*

RAC QSL Bureau System

Operation of the RAC QSL Bureau System would not be possible without the commitment and hard work of the QSL Bureau volunteers.



RAC, and all those who benefit, salute these dedicated Amateurs and extend sincere appreciation for the long hours they devote to this difficult task.

QSL Cards via the Bureau System

The RAC Incoming Bureau sorts and distributes QSL cards to all Canadians (members and non-members) via the call area bureaus. However, some Canadian Amateurs, like others around the world, have indicated that they will not accept cards through the QSL Bureau.

Most indicate this on various websites like QRZ.com and others, yet thousands of cards are still sent and received each year incurring unnecessary costs for the Bureaus and the Amateur.

Bureaus in some countries do not accept cards for non-members of their national society and dispose of undeliverable cards. They are not returned to sender for economical and environmental reasons.

RAC Outgoing QSL Bureau Tips

The RAC Outgoing QSL Bureau provides an outgoing QSL card forwarding service to overseas and USA Incoming QSL Bureaus.

The service is available to RAC members, RAC affiliated clubs (club call only) and family members.

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For more information about the QSL Bureau System please visit:

<https://www.rac.ca/qsl-bureau/>