Motorola, Inc. was founded in 1930 in Chicago, Illinois, to manufacture radios for the burgeoning automobile market. Instantly successful the company remained so for the next 70 years, until bad business decisions and lack of innovation began to take their toll. Once a major player in many markets, including consumer electronics, computers, semiconductors, and radio communication equipment — including being the number one supplier of VHF radio gear to railroads — the company ended up spinning off its profitable businesses in an attempt to stay afloat, a practice that history has shown to be largely ineffective and often fatal.

The first signs of weakness occurred in 1999, when Iridium Communications, a pioneering low-earth orbit satellite telephone company, declared bankruptcy after only nine months. Motorola had invested billions of dollars into the failed venture and was forced to sell off its money-making semiconductor division to absorb the blow. Continued business declines prompted the company to spin off its lucrative defense and automotive electronics businesses. The one bright spot in an overall gloomy picture was Motorola’s Mobile Devices Division, which held a majority market share of the expanding cellular telephone market.

However, in reacting slowly to fast-changing market trends and advancing technology, Motorola failed to effectively make the transition from analogue to digital cellular technology and found itself washed away in the wake of Nokia (itself a has-been), Samsung, LG, and Apple, the latter whom introduced the ground-breaking iPhone. The situation went from bad to worse, and Motorola was forced to break itself up for sale — the former Mobile Markets Division was sold to Google for 12.5 billion, mostly because Google wanted to avoid litigation with Motorola over alleged patent infringements. The only division remaining was reorganized as Motorola Solutions Div., Inc. in January 2011, which is an entirely new company. The federal government approved of all these transactions in February 2012, consigning Motorola, Inc. to history.
In the midst of this turmoil, Motorola lost its preeminent position as the most respected and preferred supplier of VHF radio equipment to the railroads. Ever since the railroads began to equip their trains and maintenance vehicles with radios in the 1950s, Motorola was on top. The company enjoyed the largest market share by far and had a reputation for high reliability and excellent transmission capabilities. Railroad people loved Motorola equipment, and it's difficult to find anyone who has anything negative to say about it. The Motorola Spectra locomotive radio was found in just about any locomotive on any railroad until the 1980’s, and crews that were forced to use any other radio were often not very happy about it. This became apparent when the railroads began purchasing units from lower-cost suppliers and reliability suffered. Train crews would constantly complain about the sub-par performance of these radios, and even railscanners could tell the difference — it was often difficult or impossible to hear these new radios on their scanners. Perhaps the most reviled radio of all was marketed by the Union Pacific itself under their Nexterna brand. Most crewmen considered these units to be "useless."

With recent government directives to adopt new frequency and transmission standards, the railroads looked to Motorola to replace their existing equipment. However, Motorola never released plans to market railroad-specific radios, a development that remains incomprehensible to many. Although Motorola stopped selling the popular Spectra locomotive radio in 2005, the rail industry figured Motorola would announce a new model to comply with the new standards. The company had always been a major player in the railroad radio market, so the assumption was a natural one. However, the only announcement coming from Motorola was that they would no longer offer support for Spectra radios. Not surprisingly, a number of companies have moved in to fill the void. General Electric has become a top supplier with its model 12R locomotive radio, which is based on the experience of predecessor companies including Harris Corporation with its Alpha series of locomotive radios and Harmon, which marketed its Trackstar models before being purchased by GE.

Railfans lament the passing of Kodachrome, and it seems impossible that a company as large and dominating as Kodak could possibly collapse. And so it goes with Motorola.
R.I.P. Motorola, it was a great run.

(Thanks to Frank Mercurio, W9FM)