

Amateur Radio is Alive and Well in Rural America!

By Glen Sage, W4GHS

When tuning across the ham bands, it is not unusual to hear people speak about the demise of amateur radio. The erosion of interest is usually blamed on the Internet or the lack of the interest by youth. It is easy to shake our head in agreement and think to yourself, “This is just the sign of our times.”

On second thought, my mind goes back to childhood and how I felt when I walked into the shacks of four of the local hams that lived within two city blocks of where I grew up in Princeton WV. I recall the feeling of excitement and wonder as they spoke to people across the country or around the world. As a small boy in the 1950's, I felt that the license privilege was beyond my grasp. I just didn't have the ability to understand the electronic theory and I would never be able to afford the cost. Besides those obstacles, how would I ever be able to make sense of all those strange sounds of Morse code?

In 1976, I was living in Henry County Virginia and I read of a ham class that was being taught at the local community college. Quick as a wink, I was enrolled and the excitement and fascination grew with each session as the strange theory began to unfold in a very logical way. After passing the novice exam, I waited patiently for my license and call to arrive. About 6 weeks following the test, I was WA4WXN. I already had my station set up and was on the air that afternoon making CW contacts on the 80-meter novice band.

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Just recently I was reflecting on my early experiences with amateur radio, I wondered if people in the 21st century don't still share some of those same feelings about amateur radio as that small boy back in West Virginia. On one hand was the voice saying, "Young people are just not interested in amateur radio anymore" and on the other side was my excitement about a hobby that I love. It was then I went with my positive feelings about amateur radio and decided to start a license class in my local community of Carroll County Virginia.

I enrolled as a certified instructor with the ARRL and read the advice on the league website about planning and conducting a class. In the spring of 2005, I began the planning for this class. I knew that to have a good enrollment, I must publicize in the broadest way possible. Our recent local license exams had been attracting almost no one from our local area. To insure growth within our hobby, new hams had to be recruited and licensed from our community. I decided to place brochures at local libraries, doctors' offices, lube centers, barbershops and electronics stores. I had an article published in the paper and ran notices on the county website. I was hoping that 6 to 8 people might enroll for the class. I tried to allow the brochure and articles to tell the story of how much fun amateur radio could be and also lifted up the public service aspects of the hobby. I explained that anyone that was having difficulty with the material would be given special attention. If they really wanted a license and was willing to work and study, our instructors would continue to work with them until they passed the technician test.

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As the cut-off date for enrollment approached, I watched the registrations grow. We soon had 10 people, then 15, 20 and at last 25 students for the class. Those enrolled included over 50% that were involved in public service such as fire, rescue, search and rescue and E-911. This suggests to me that there is strong interest in amateur radio among public service groups in communities across America.

Following the cut-off date, others let us know they wanted to take the class when it was offered again. All of this took place in a small rural Virginia county with a population of less than 29,000 people.

We soon had several volunteers from the local club that offered to assist in different ways. David Puckett, KI4AVS and his wife Tina, KI4BMU were there for each session to assist with handouts and other tasks. A number of the club members dropped by the class at different sessions to offer encouragement to the new students. James Blythe, W4RDX taught sessions on antennas, propagation and Dxing. Glen Diamond Jr. N4VL served by teaching the electronic theory. I filled in by teaching the remaining chapters. Each of the instructors presented their subjects in a positive way with a sense of excitement about the hobby. At the end of the course we had 20 students that showed up for the test session and the 21st took his test 2 weeks later. These students ranged in age from 12 years old to about 80 years of age. They all passed their technician test and received their license. All the students had expressed an interest in serving in emergency communications (ARES)

and Skywarn. Our local ARES/RACES unit doubled in size in just one week. Some of these students have gone on to register in the ARRL Emergency Communications Course EC-001.

Near the end of the class each student was assigned a mentor from the club. These mentors assisted the new students in setting up their stations and getting on the air. In some cases, equipment was loaned to the new hams. Prior to the last class session we had an antenna building party. The students gathered at my home and joined together in building dual band (144/440) “J” Pole antennas from copper tubing. These antennas were constructed at a cost of about \$10.00 each. About all these new hams are running these antennas as their primary base station antenna.

Our local club (The Briarpatch Amateur Radio Club, W4BRC) was meeting in a classroom at our local hospital and after the graduation of this class we had to move into the larger of the two classrooms. Our last meeting filled this larger room to capacity. This was partly due to the new hams but also a number of the older hams that had been inactive in our club, caught the feeling of excitement generated by the new hams and have now started attending club meetings.

We started a “New Hams Net” on one of our local repeaters 145.13 (N4VL). This net allowed for a non-threatening environment for these new hams to make their first contacts and gain confidence in operating within a formal net. After the early

jitters were abated, we have now moved on to message handling, “Go Kits” and other aspects of emergency communications.

Amateur radio, ARES, the Briarpatch Amateur Radio Club and Skywarn have all received a boost from this influx of new life into our ham community. No one has been a bigger winner than those of us that worked with this class and witnessed their progress each week. We have also enjoyed working them on a daily basis on the air. It is difficult to imagine the sense of satisfaction that you get as an instructor when students say to you, “You have helped me to fulfill a lifelong dream in becoming a ham”.

Getting new hams licensed is only the first step and that is not the time to “cut them loose” to sink or swim. Too many of our communities are loaded with licensed amateurs that are never heard on the air. Some receive their license and never make a single contact. We can all make a difference by teaching, mentoring and encouraging these new hams. This is how we will continue to retain them as an important part of our ranks.

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