

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By Bob Beaudet, W1YRC

Mid winter activities around DX Hill take various but definite styles. Weather is usually the gating factor for most reasonable hams. Outdoor work has been wrapped up and hams are looking for indoor projects to keep their time productive. At one time, folks built new rigs in wintertime but many do today. Routine antenna maintenance work at most ham's homes was completed by October and November but the last few years have seen fairly mellow winters so some daring souls actually scheduled tower work for January. This year, they will be reminded what a real winter is like. Readers will be quick to point out, however, that it depends entirely upon what latitude we are living in to make that a good choice. Friends in W5 land find these months to actually be the best of the year with comfortable working temperatures only having to work around rain. But DX Hill is located in W1 land where it gets mighty cold and snow is measured in feet, not inches. Only the bravest or most daring souls perform any antenna repairs during winter, certainly never routine work.

However, these cold winter days and long nights do provide quality time for reflection. Maybe the time is forced upon us but it's genuine, anyway. It allows us time to re-calibrate our personal priorities and goals and gives us quiet time to consider where we've come from and where we're headed. Understanding our origins as hams is important to recognize what kind of amateur we have become today.

Have you ever been called an appliance operator? Did you know what it meant? Surely, it wasn't intended as a compliment. Quite the contrary, someone was pointing out with disdain that the equipment you were using was store bought like your refrigerator, TV, car, or coffee maker and you were something less than a "real" ham because you didn't build it. Of course, a few decades ago, you couldn't buy amateur equipment so no one could be an appliance operator even if he or she wanted to be one. Before WW II, ready built gear just wasn't available to amateurs. The market for it hadn't developed yet.

The flood of war surplus equipment and components that became available after the war facilitated business for many of the equipment makers and dealers that launched in the late 40's and early 50's, paving the beginning of a broad amateur equipment marketplace. Did you know that the original "Radio Shack" was on lower Washington Street in Boston, a short walk from the Customhouse where the FCC conducted testing? It was normal to stop by Radio Shack after taking your exam to dig through their bins of surplus transformers, chokes, tubes, and whatever "junk" they had. Back then, they served hams with a good selection of components but you had to dig to find them. Their name testified to their allegiance to ham radio as well. Their parts weren't displayed in blister packs back then either. It should be noted that Radio Shack employees invariably were hams and could help you find something without staring at you because they never heard of solder. Progress is wonderful, isn't it?

Today, our selection of commercial gear is unbelievable, not to mention its value for the money. Building your own just isn't necessary or even practical any more as it once was. That's not to say that building gear isn't a good thing for amateurs any more. Not at all, but today, one does it out of choice rather than practical necessity. Even our dear friend, Charlie's primary station is commercially made. Except for his linear amplifier and various other accessory pieces, everything he uses is store bought.

To help maintain old members' interest in emerging technology as well as reveal it to new members, Charlie's club always includes at least one 'show and tell' meeting during winter where members present just about anything that's caught his or her fancy. Members and guests of the club are encouraged to follow some broad guidelines, however. Topics must include direct reference to new technology. They need not be ham radio related but the closer to cutting edge technology, the better. Past presenters have covered computer interfaces, fuel efficient engines, pacemakers, digital weather stations, wrist watch TV receivers, the latest smart tools from Sears, and even atomic clocks and watches which automatically updates itself by daily monitoring of WWVB at the National Bureau of Standards in Colorado.

The main reason the club promotes this activity during winter is two fold. First, as I said earlier, the long winter dark periods provide limited opportunities for outdoor activity and secondly, holding such an activity was felt to be an excellent means of bringing contributions out of members who might otherwise not feel participate during regular meetings. New hams often feel overwhelmed by the heavy horsepower they sense in control at meetings. Old timers all

know each other and aren't shy about talking, but unless they remember to reach out to newer members, they will lose them.

Maybe, it shouldn't be that way but it's often the case. Members come to clubs with a wide variety of skills and expectations. Some are engineers and some are farmers. All have expertise in a field that requires knowledge and skill, often in fields unfamiliar to the rest of the club members. For example, a member who is an excellent clock maker will likely spend most of his or her time just listening to other more experienced hams speak about antennas, amplifiers, RFI, etc. in order to learn something new. That is, until someone asks a question on something resembling a clock mechanism like a cranky precision meter movement. The opportunity to contribute related knowledge often would allow the clock maker to join the discussion with the heavy hitters on an equal footing.

We're all experts in some field. None of us are experts in everything. The older we grow, the more we realize how true that is. However, don't ever try to tell any of Charlie's students that he isn't expert in nearly anything. Charlie retired a few years ago after a long career as an engineering manager. His broad knowledge, experience, dedication, patience and love for technology is known and respected by every ham within many miles of his DX Hill home. Charlie loves to mentor new hams probably more than anything does. He claims that it keeps him sharp and most of all, young. Charlie humbly insists that he benefits from mentoring more than the students, because it keeps him from becoming stale although no one really believes that.

In the post WW II years, many hams opted to use military surplus components to build their equipment as well as modify readily available equipment that sold for pennies on the dollar. In most cases, amateurs had no choice since the variety of commercially built amateur equipment was so limited in the 50's and 60's. Common practice was to purchase available receiving equipment but usually build transmitting equipment. Remember receivers and transmitters were separate in those days. These were the times before SSB or DSP. Transmitters for CW or AM were simple to build using easily and very economically available parts. For example, a widely used tube used in radar transmitters was a 304TL. This foot tall triode could be obtained for 25 to 50 cents or less, new in the box and could easily handle a "brick on the key" kilowatt on 40 or 20 meters.

In the late 60's, more ready built equipment started to become available and affordable in the broad marketplace, including an increasing volume of Japanese transceivers. They weren't an immediate hit, however. Not too surprisingly, many US citizens still held strong feelings about the Japanese in those post war days but as time passed, memories softened and more amateurs tried out these radios in friend's shacks and at conventions. Their superior engineering and value attracted many amateurs to buy them. Sales increased to the point that today, nearly all amateurs in this country use one or more off shore creations in their shack or mobile.

It didn't take long for hams with commercially built stations to earn the label "appliance operator". At that time, being called that wasn't meant as any form of compliment. It's true that this condescension was leveled by hams that still built their own gear and looked down upon those who didn't, regardless of their reasons. There were still many amateurs who used home brewed equipment, although with the advent of more complex modes such as SSB, the home brewed pieces became limited to power supplies, tuners, keyers, etc. Stations entirely or even half home brewed became more and more rare. Today, it's nearly impossible to work someone in this country on any band or mode that's using home built equipment, except for the linear amplifier or small accessories. Have you ever tried to repair the circuit board in your mini HT? Dealing with mini boards or even worse, multi-layer boards drives most of us to give up and immediately send the unit back to the service center.

Home brew amateurs have gone the way of home auto mechanics and appliance repair shops. Technology has driven us to become a throwaway society, like it or not. When repairing something is more costly than replacing it, the powers of economics rather than electronics dictate the decision. Common sense asks us how many of us drive home built cars, fly home built aircraft, sail home built ships, or build our own refrigerators, TVs, or even toasters? Sure, we still can do these things for fun but not of necessity. Those of us who choose to do so will readily admit that they build their own as a challenge and as a hobby in itself, but never ever because they have to or that it makes economic sense.

Ever the pragmatist, Charlie's shack is an efficient mixture of pieces he has designed and built such as his old workhorse amplifier for 160 through 10 meters and two HF imported transceivers which he admits contains miniature assemblies that he cannot work on or see even with a large magnifying light. These new transceivers are just not designed to be field serviced by the users other than replacing entire boards, etc.

Reluctantly, he boxes these units and ships them to manufacturer's service centers for occasional servicing just as the rest of us do. It makes financial and practical sense to let the manufacturer's service departments to keep our equipment in top condition.

In one way or another, we all qualify as appliance operators in this day and age. It's a product of our society. Those of us who seek greater technical challenge still design and build equipment, however usually not of the complexity of communications transceivers. QST and CQ magazines carry interesting design projects every month to satisfy the urge to roll your own gear. However, not driven by necessity, the days of widespread use of home brewed equipment are gone forever. Yes indeed. It may be stated with confidence that today, we are all appliance operators and it's nothing to be worried about.