

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE
By Bob Beaudet, W1YRC

Charlie's great wife, Mary, is not a ham or even a member of Charlie's radio club but she was asked by the president to present her pet project at this month's "show and tell" meeting. Show and tell is a normal mid winter custom. His request took her by surprise and she wasn't sure she could actually do it. However, he knew that she had been working for more than a year on a chart that shows as many people as she could identify that Charlie has mentored since he started helping folks many years ago. Then, through much phone calling, e mailing and letter writing, she was able to determine the number of people that they, in turn, mentored. Mary is just so proud of Charlie that she wanted to be able to show everyone that these new hams just didn't hatch all by themselves. Most importantly, she wanted them to realize that if more hams took the initiative to reach out and help folks become hams as her husband had done for them, none of us would be worrying about the decline of new hams within our ranks. In truth, she never expected to publicly present her chart to anyone. She just did it for her own pride in her husband. But after a little time to gather her wits and calm down, she accepted the president's invitation. She saw this as a great opportunity to show how the helping hand of just one ham can make such a difference. Mary always shows remarkable energy in supporting the hobby as well as a keen understanding of issues of the day. Charlie couldn't have found a better partner.

Mary's presentation consisted of a large art board chart listing names in a family tree format across the top. It then branched from each name to other names going down the board. It was definitely a "low-tech" format, however in view of the value of the subject; a low-tech show and tell would be just fine. The club's president saw her message to be important at this time, with a crisis upon us to beef up the number of new and younger hams joining our ranks. On meeting night, only two others signed up to show their projects, so Mary would have all the time she needed.

Mary first thanked the president for her chance to speak to the club. Nearly everyone in the group knew her but had enjoyed her blueberry muffins many times in the past. So, she needed very little introduction. The president helped her set her large art board chart on a tripod as she prepared her notes while beginning her talk.

Mary admitted to spending many hours researching the subject but assured that the length of her presentation this evening would be much shorter. She started simply by identifying 86 folks who consider Charlie as their direct mentor. She knows there are more. Some didn't go further than obtaining their own license. However, on average, each person over the 30 years that she could locate mentored four additional prospective hams. That figures out to be over 400 people that are hams today, thanks to Charlie's help. Surely, many would have become hams anyway, even if they never heard of Charlie but, undeniably, the value of a mentor's helping hand is remarkable. Mary finished her presentation by asking each in the audience give it a try this New Year. "Just think.... if two or three of you do what my Charlie did and a few more clubs get the idea as well, our declining membership and aging demographic problems will be ended," Mary pointed out as she closed and thanked everyone for their courtesy in allowing her to speak. The members cheered her presentation as well as Charlie for his tireless effort.

She only spoke for about ten minutes followed by a few minutes of questions. The club president saw several members looking at their watches as Mary sat to receive Charlie's smiling admonishment for embarrassing him. However, Charlie realized the truth of Mary's ending plea. At that point, the president realized that he should have prepared a larger program. The members wanted more. He spontaneously felt inspired to ask Charlie to follow Mary's presentation and give the members his view of the state of ham radio today. Charlie is normally quite pleased to speak on his favorite subject but was a bit surprised by the president's sudden request. He had no time to prepare notes or to even outline essential topics and he really disliked being unprepared. However, being the good soldier that he is, he merely smiled his agreement. Mary squeezed his hand and said as he rose, "Just because I gave you some time, don't get carried away, dear." He assured her that he'd stay in control. Oh yes, she's heard that before, all right.

As he walked to the front of the room, his engineer's mind was rapidly drawing up an outline to cover. It was sort of like the times when he was working and a customer would ask him for an ad hoc design review. Golly, there are so many issues now a days with IARU's position not requiring code proficiency to operate HF, the new streamlined licensing structure, elimination of code test requirements above 5 wpm, sun spot cycle peaking, ARRL dues going up, Jim Haynie's Education Program, so many, so many things. By the time he reached the front, he turned to his friends and smiled broadly asking, "Aren't you all proud to be a ham?" Nearly everyone loudly shouted, "YES!" "That's great," he continued as he noticed a couple of stern faced youngsters in the middle of the room. "HMMMM", he wondered silently, "What's their beef?"

Charlie decided to watch them as he started speaking, "First of all, I want to thank the club for allowing me to speak to you this evening. Certainly, a lot is going on in ham radio that will change the way we proceed into the next decade. Licensing has become streamlined and so has equipment. Band conditions are good. We have the best of all worlds before us, right?" Charlie paused and scanned the audience. Most heads were shaking a no. Charlie smiled and agreed with the majority, "You're so right. Our hobby is challenged now, as it has never been before. Our population is aging and we're failing to attract enough new blood to become licensed. The youngsters just aren't attracted to this terrific hobby as you and I were. Look around this room. How many are below 20?" The two stern faced fellows raised their hands. "How many are under 30?" Two hands. "Under 40?" Three more. "Under 50?" A few more. "There you are, folks. Most all of us here are over 50. Now, I'll be the first to say there's nothing wrong with being over 50, but when the average age of all hams in the US and Canada approaches that, alarms go off in my head. That signals a problem to me! We must do something about it, and right now!"

Charlie noticed the two 'under 20's' lads still listening intently, but with little reaction to his words. He continued, "In this era of Internet, satellite TV, cell phones, our hobby is challenged as it's never been before. We gray heads must reach out to embrace this new technology and prepare new hams to replace ourselves. With that remark, the two teenagers grinned broadly along with most of the gray heads. Charlie felt some relief to see at least some reaction and it stirred more curiosity about these new comers. He slowly wandered over to where they were seated and placed his hands on the lads' shoulders as he continued, "We need a few dozen new members like these fine fellows. Are you licensed, guys?"

One of them shyly stated, "Well, we passed our Tech exams." Charlie exclaimed, "Wow! That's terrific! Who's helping you study?" The answer said it all; "We couldn't find anyone so we're working together. It's sort of hard though, because we don't understand a lot." Charlie raised his hands and proclaimed to the club, "I rest my case! Who among us will help these new hams?" A dozen hands went up. Charlie asked the lads to look around and see these guys before they leave.

"Seriously, if we don't take more initiative in seeking out new hams, we'll be in trouble. The good news is that hams can do something that Internet can't do. Does anyone know what it is?" He scanned the crowd and no one answered, even the old timers. Then he turned to the two teenagers; "Do you know?" They looked at each other and one replied, "Well, we think radio is magic. The way you can talk all over the place through the air without a server or a computer is too cool. You just connect your transmitter to a piece of wire hanging in a tree and you radiate through the air, right?"

Charlie was almost beside himself with glee. "You have the message, all right, son. It's magic! It's really amazing! Even when you're an old ham like me, you'll stare at your antenna in amazement at what it does. Will you help us get the word out to your friends? We'll help all of them too. The two became very animated and replied, "Oh yes, gladly. We know lots of guys and maybe their girl friends that are good in science. Wait till they hear about this club."

Since Guglielmo Marconi sent the first Trans-Atlantic signal nearly a century ago, radio enthusiasts around the world have been enthralled by the pure magic of radio transmission. It's infectious! Let's start an epidemic! Reach out to help new hams. Don't be shy, it doesn't hurt a bit.