

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE  
By Bob Beaudet, W1YRC

Charlie and Mary are happy to see this winter end. They're certain that you are as well. They've each had colds since New Year's and long hours of darkness have not helped them feel better at all. Well, spring is finally here and the warm breeze and bright sun will soon run their sick feelings out of town. We've had enough rain and snow to finally fill all the reservoirs and raise the levels of ground water so the gardeners won't have to worry too much about their new plants drying out.

The spring equinox brings better HF conditions with greater sun exposure, improving daylight paths especially between the northern and southern hemispheres. Now that this sunspot cycle has definitely peaked, Charlie is looking forward to less QRM and lower noise floors as we slide down the slope into the bottom of Cycle 23. Why, you wonder, would a big DXer like Charlie be pleased that sunspot numbers are declining? Simple. When DX signals aren't S9, we have to listen more deeply and generally use greater skill to capture DX QSOs. Therefore, because it's not as easy to do, many "weekend" DXers find other pursuits as DXing gets too difficult for them. They merely leave the DX for serious DXers to dig out. They often tell Charlie at club meetings that the bands are dead. He just grins and nods, knowingly. Charlie honestly believes that he always works his best DX at the bottom of the sunspot cycles. At least, that's what the last three cycles have proven on DX Hill.

This very subject came up at last month's club meeting. Some new members were planning to sell their 10 meter transceivers at the spring flea market while there are still some buyers around for them. Charlie asked what they were going to do with the money and each told him that they were going to look for more vhf/uhf gear. They figure the HF bands will be dead for the next few years. Charlie asked them if they ever operated cw and they all wrinkled their noses and replied, "No, thanks. That's too hard." Charlie patiently explained how becoming proficient in cw can make all the difference in their enjoyment in operating HF. Each of them had upgraded to Extra class last year due to the new 5 word per minute code requirement. Like any Extra, these new "restructured Extras" could operate any amateur band or mode. However, the top cw speed they felt needed in their lives was 5 words per minute and not a bit more. What a shame!

It's very sad to see this lack of ambition. However, they see no value in high-speed code proficiency. They feel that merely reaching 5 wpm was difficult enough. Today, unless we perceive its value, cw as a communications mode will become a lost art joining the company of hieroglyphics, taijiquan, aerogami or violin making. Why is that? Is it so difficult to learn? Not at all. However, its importance as a desirable or even necessary skill has been severely diminished by the FCC's restructuring action. They seem to feel that basic proficiency is all that must be examined to attain its highest amateur license class. It's sort of like a driving test where virtually everyone passes after very basic knowledge is demonstrated. Greater driving skill, like cw skill, only can develop with practice and obviously without practice, the skill will languish and die.

Charlie has spent decades helping new hams climb the ladder into proficiency as amateur radio operators. He places high value on being a good cw operator. Like many of his generation, he was sad to see erosion of cw requirements in the new licensing requirements. On the other hand, there are many worldwide that see communication in cw as archaic and simply unnecessary. But, Charlie is wise enough to realize that he cannot impose his personal wishes upon those who cannot see the larger picture.

Many clubs in the country have noticed decreased enrollment. Old time members are struggling to find enough activities merely to retain current levels of enrollment among themselves. No one wants to contribute and everyone wants more from the clubs. Face it, gang. That's not the way it works. In order to enjoy output from any device, it must receive input. But, the old timers may be on to something. If they are able to generate a consistent program of activities without waiting for someone else to do it, clubs will be more attractive and should draw new members.

Of course, the plan to make clubs more widely attractive must include interest in activities for the younger than 40 crowd. We all know the impact that the Internet has had upon their amateur radio interest. The FCC's more user friendly restructuring may possibly encourage some to join the ranks. Surely, we hope so. However, the bottom line is that regardless of that, we must, absolutely must find ways to attract greater numbers of new hams into the hobby or it will become a lost art entirely in the next couple of generations.

Let's stop thinking in the past and reviving AM or even wide spread CW. Let's put our effort into looking forward. What can our clubs do to promote digital modes? Can we offer classes in PSK31? Can we bring the Internet into the meeting rooms and demonstrate the learning resources available? Can we try to anticipate where technology in our hobby will move? Isn't it that wonder and magic that attracted us to ham radio in the first place?

Charlie and Mary had a pleasant surprise last month. Brian was home on spring break from his first year at MIT and stopped by for some blueberry muffin nourishment. He arrived just as Charlie was crawling around his garage looking for some wire to repair one of his tuning boxes. He's been getting things ready to drop some 160 meter slopers off the tower to points down the hill and he needs to use some matching at their feed points. Brian helped Charlie find what he needed and asked, "What are you going to use for radials?" Charlie smiled at Brian's thinking. Golly, he's going to be a great engineer, he thought. It makes Charlie wish he were still working so he could hire Brian when he graduates.

Charlie replied, "Do you recall the time you visited my friend, Mike and saw all his classic gear?" Brian nodded. "Well, when I saw him last fall, he told me about a farm supply store that was going out of business. He convinced me to go with him to see if they had anything that we could use. Well, I started thinking of what Mary might need for her gardening. You know fertilizer, seeds and so on. When we got there, my eyes locked on some huge spools of copper clad steel wire stacked in the corner. They were all dusty and dirty but they were labeled 5000 feet of #14 fence wire. The clerk was at a loss to see how he would get rid of it all since the dairy and cattle farms in the area had been sold off to housing developers and no one used this stuff. These spools had been taking up space for years. Mike offered him \$20 a roll and he wanted five rolls. I jumped in and said I wanted the same."

Charlie had walked Brian into the house to get a few of Mary's blueberry muffins as he continued his story, "Well, this clerk excitedly looked up his inventory sheets and saw that he had 25 rolls in stock. He replied that we could have all 25 for \$250. Before he changed his mind, Mike and I reached for our wallets and peeled out the money. Wow, that clerk was surely happy to see that cash. He reminded us that it was a close out and we couldn't return it. We told him that we knew. So, Brian, I have enough wire to make as many radials as I could possibly want."

Brian told Charlie that he'd be glad to help him lay them out this summer. It was then that he remembered, "Oh Charlie, guess what? Professor Rawlings received a grant to study DSP applications in ultra high-speed modems and he wants me to work on it with him this summer. I was going to take a job at one of the companies recruiting on campus but I think I'd like this grant work. I can stay on campus and take a couple of courses too. What do you think I should do, Charlie?"

He asked what his parents thought and Brian replied, "They think it's good but they want me to ask you." Charlie thought for a moment then asked, "What kind of work would you be doing at those companies that want you?" Brian wasn't sure but thought it was pretty basic stuff. Charlie told Brian, "After your sophomore and junior year, you should be thinking forward to what sort of career position and company you want to go with after graduation, but not now. This year, after your freshman year, many of your classmates wish they had your choices. I would work with Professor Rawlings and learn as much as you can. It will be great and I wish I were working with you."

Brian was very pleased. He finished his muffins and stayed a while longer just talking. When he left, he thanked Mary and Charlie for helping him one more time. It was Charlie's genuine pleasure but he assured Brian that he was most welcome. Old timers are sounding boards. New ideas today must come from the new blood but they need support and calibration. Brian certainly feels himself to be fortunate to have Charlie around.