

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

Bob Beaudet, W1YRC

Charlie misses having Brian stop by DX Hill after school and asking endless questions. Of course, now that he's in college, Charlie knows he will see much less of him. This summer, Brian was asked to lead a team doing research on signal processing applications, an opportunity he couldn't pass up. The bottom line is that DX Hill was quieter this summer than it has been for the last few years. The club's activity slowed down after Field Day and families enjoyed vacations and just taking life easy.

The down side of all this is that new ham prospects don't usually surface during these hot days of summer. Many leaders within the hobby are openly concerned that new ham prospects are becoming an endangered species, falling into computer systems and the Internet for their technical pursuits.

In his younger days, Mary and Charlie would jump into their car in summertime and head for the mountains or rent a place by the lake but now, both usually prefer to remain at home on the hill and enjoy their own hobbies which are many indeed. They also love staying home in their beautiful, comfortable but small home. Mary loves most kinds of crafts and is busy from morning to night making or remaking something. When Charlie isn't tuning the bands' lower edges, working on some piece of equipment, or reading some ham or engineering magazine, he's usually fishing or getting ready to do so. Fishing has been Charlie's private passion since his father introduced him to it 60 years ago. "It's nourishment for the soul", his father would tell him, "Fishing reminds us how dependent we are on God and the nature He has created for nourishing our existence." Charlie can hear his father's voice reciting these words to him each time he is sitting quietly in his small boat watching his thin line laying across the glistening water.

In the past, Charlie has drawn many analogies between his love of fishing and DXing while speaking with Brian or the other new hams he has mentored over the years. One of his favorite stories involves the comparison fishing serves to illustrate the mystery and uncertainty of the process. What fun would a fisherman enjoy if he or she could simply dial a number in the tackle box and produce a 5 pound bass any time one was wanted? Silly, huh? Of course it is, but isn't that what Internet hobbyists do when they type in a web site address? The fun and sport of fishing is the uncertainty of the result of the process. However perfectly one goes through the preparation of trying to attract a fish, the result may be a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for dinner. Yet, millions of people of all ages around the world love to fish. What is the draw of fishing? Many fishermen don't eat fish they catch and either return them carefully to the water or give them away to friends who will make a meal from them. It seems that they simply enjoy the process of fishing. Similarly, many hams enjoy the process of operating, building, or designing.

Charlie and his faithful hound, Rufus were out recently fishing on Peacedale Pond, about ten miles from DX Hill. It was a perfectly calm Thursday morning, not too warm and not too cool. They were using an old but sturdy wide bottomed rowboat a fishing friend keeps down there exactly for this purpose. He enjoyed being alone with his thoughts in complete silence, broken only by the sound of water lapping against the boat and of course, Rufus's snoring. He had time to think about the problems of the day and just simply enjoy his time spent with nature. He had been pondering an issue that was brought up at the last club meeting about declining membership and the average rising age of hams across the country. Charlie wondered if other hobbies have that problem but wasn't sure. They must have. What are they doing about it? Hmmmm.....don't know.

Remember that an engineer defines the problem and then designs a solution. The engineer in Charlie always prevails at time like this and while gazing at his line and motionless float in the water, he started the process.

.....OK, we think we know what the problem is. Now, let's think of how we're going to solve it.

He thought for a long while until finally, he slapped his knee, waking Rufus who merely grunted and resumed his nap. "Of course!" he said aloud. "We've all been looking for ways to push people into amateur radio. Tell me how many people have been pushed into fishing. None, I'd reckon." He thought a while

longer and talked once more into the silence on the pond, "We must find ways to pull, not push. That's critical if we're planning to attract youngsters. They won't be pushed into anything by gray heads like me. But I've never pushed anyone. I've always shown prospects how magical and fun ham radio can be. They've been drawn into it by themselves. Oh well, maybe I pushed a little."

Charlie reeled in his line to find that his bait had been carefully removed from his hook by a fish that was paying closer attention to his work than Charlie was to it. Charlie chuckled and rebaited the hook. He cast his line into a cool shaded patch of lilly pads and resumed thinking.

"Why do millions of us love fishing? Why do I love ham radio? Hmmmmmm.....The reasons aren't all that different. If all I wanted was a fish, I'd spend less time and money by visiting my supermarket. If all I wanted was to talk with a foreign country, I'd use the Internet or my telephone that is a whole lot more dependable than having to battle the quirks of HF propagation. But, that's not the draw. I'm drawn to fishing and DXing by the same thing, very simply the uncertainty and sport of the process."

It seems that once more, Charlie has reduced a problem to an algorithm that only needs metrics to be added for its solution. The challenge is ours to market our hobby effectively so that new prospects will see the same magic that attracted us into this world of lifelong fulfillment.

(Ed Note: This month's C.W. story was completely written when I received and read August, 2001 CQ magazine. The editorial by Rich Moseson, W2VU was extremely interesting to me since he used the same theme and even the analogy to fishing in making his point about marketing amateur radio. The similarity between this Charlie's Whistle and CQ's editorial is strictly coincidental, but it tells me that others are giving this problem some thought as well. Bravo, CQ. Nice work!)