

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Even seasoned legends like Charlie have weaknesses. The hundreds of hams that have resulted from his careful mentoring and encouraging would likely not agree, down to the last person. But not surprising to many, Charlie is actually very humble even though he has every right to be otherwise. His visit to one of the county hamfests last week was an interesting experience for Charlie since just about everything on the program concerned repeaters, APRS, VHF fox hunting, HT's, and other non-HF/CW/DX topics. The flea market was filled entirely with VHF material to appeal to repeater users. But, there wasn't even a speaker on the program covering EME or VHF propagation. It was definitely a lightweight event in the view of a CW DXer like our friend, Charlie. The users and owners of two repeaters nearly two hundred miles from DX Hill organized the convention as a support event to keep their systems functioning. What, then, you may wonder, possessed Charlie to ever consider going to an event of so little promise of interest to an old timer CW DXer.

That really is a good question and if Charlie had actually known all those details, let alone thought about them, it's just about certain that he wouldn't have gone. The sequence of events leading up to attending Saturday's hamfest actually began on the day prior. On Friday, things started the same way they do most every day on DX Hill, with Charlie sipping his coffee before dawn while slowly rocking the heavy tuning dial of his receiver back and forth across 40 CW. This morning, conditions seemed unusually good with strong steady signals and very little noise. "Not much challenge with these conditions", Charlie thought almost sadly. He worked a few stations over the pole and then swung the beam all the way around in both directions to look for gray line signals from the other terminator where dusk was falling. Experience has taught him that signals don't always follow the rules in making their way to Signal Hill. They often take the most impossible to understand journey bouncing their way from the other side of the earth. Students of propagation will attest to the mysteries of this strange science. Hence, he must listen in all directions to find those weak crooked path signals.

Sure enough, from the southwest, he heard a warbly watery signal peaking at 200 degrees. The fist wasn't especially good and the speed wasn't more than 12 wpm. The signal wasn't calling CQ. It just sent a few v's, paused and sent more v's. Finally, he sent his call. It was a KL7, not rare but this was really DX. The signal was peaking just west of south and the signal seemed to be making its way around the backside of the earth and over the North Pole. Charlie called him and they exchanged 569 reports. The Alaskan station didn't seem to be very excited but Charlie surely was. This path is nearly as far as we DXers can go and stay on earth. The only longer DX would be to work yourself, which Charlie actually did one very cold February night. That time, he was able to point his 20 meter beam north and sending a single, very short dit, could actually hear his own signal on the back of his beam. In less than two tenths of a second, the radiated dit from Charlie's yagi began its journey by heading to the ionosphere and back to the earth's surface, up and down a dozen or so times only to be detected a blink of an eye later back where it had started. WOW! That night, Charlie had a tough time containing his excitement. Amateur Radio is surely magic!

Later that Friday morning around 8, Charlie was up on his tower, working on his remote coaxial switch. It's been sticking and not always closing without getting a second kick. A big green SUV made its way up DX Hill. Charlie could see it coming well before he could if he were on the ground. The truck/car turned into Charlie's driveway and caused him to pause and look to see who it was. His friend Mike jumped out and hollered up, "Hey Charlie. Do you want to help me fill this thing up with junk?" Charlie chuckled and replied, "Sure Mike, no problem but aren't you worried about getting that new tank scratched?"

Mike just waved his arm and said, "Naww. This is a working truck. The new car shine will be gone soon enough." Charlie had just about finished cleaning up his antenna switch. It had been full of dirt and needed some silicone spray. He climbed down carefully as Mike explained, "There's a hamfest up in Taylorsville tomorrow. The area has the highest ratio of Technician and non-licensed operators in the state but also the highest number of traders in the flea market business. I heard from a friend up there that says there's going to be lots of barn clean-out stuff. You know, the stuff the bootleggers like; Globe Kings, Viking IIs,

big transformers. Up there, I can pick up smoked transmitters for a song. The problem is always bad tubes or melted RF chokes. Want to come with me?" Charlie thought for a moment. Mary had an all day crafts fair that she and her friends were going to. He'd be alone with his pal, ole' Rufus anyway. "Sure", he said as he stepped off the bottom rung of the tower. "I might find a key or piece of wire looking for a good home."

Mike explained over a cup of coffee and a couple of Mary's fresh blueberry muffins that he intended to drive up later that afternoon and stay over so he could be at the flea market before it opened at 7 AM. It's a four-hour drive to Taylorsville, Mike suggested they head out about 4 PM but Charlie had a better plan. He asked Mary who was getting her things organized for tomorrow's crafts fair, "Dear, could my friend Mikey stay for dinner today? His mommy said it was OK." Mary had heard the planning going on between the boys and grinned, "Sure Mike, we can add some water to the soup." Of course, Mike knew better. Charlie chuckled and said, "Great! That way, we can drive straight through after dinner without stopping and have a far better meal."

Mike stayed a short while longer to finish a third muffin and another cup of coffee. He said, "I better go now or I won't have any appetite later and that would be a shame." It was nearing 10 AM and Mike headed for his new truck saying, "Thanks for breakfast and lunch. I'll see you in a few hours." Charlie and Mary waved goodbye as they headed for the garden to do some daily weeding and watering.

Well, a few hours later, Mike arrived as planned. Charlie had packed his overnight bag with essentials and was ready to go. Mary was pleased Charlie was doing this for himself. He had been working very hard lately doing repairs around the house and getting away like this would do him good. She would also feel less guilty about abandoning him being gone all day at her crafts fair.

Dinner was wonderful, almost too wonderful. Mike backed away after his third helping of roast beef, steamed mixed veggies and salad. He observed, "I don't want to eat so much that I need a nap. We've got a long drive ahead of us." Charlie poured another cup of coffee and pointed out, "Here friend, this will help." Mary insisted that everyone have some blueberry pie that she baked a few hours earlier, "It will go well with your coffee, boys."

Well, they hit the highway on schedule and enjoyed good chatting all the way to Taylorsville. They arrived as the sun was setting. Before checking in to the motel, Mike drove to the fair grounds where the hamfest was going to take place in the morning. He wasn't surprised to find dozens of early traders, camped in their RVs, already deep into their deal making. Mike pulled in and made his way through several tables full of "stuff". Charlie just watched, almost afraid that he would see something he couldn't live without. Instead, he just observed the characters.

It was nice because not only was he far from home but also was amongst a crowd that wouldn't be apt to know him or with whom he would have much in common. These were all VHF repeater folks. Also, there seemed to be a very large number of loud talking CB types, all loaded down with HTs and scanners on their belts and "personals" on their caps. My gosh, what had he done? Charlie wandered around, keeping one eye on Mike who was busy looking at a couple of boat anchors. There were several loud conversations going on. A few RVs had broken out some six packs and it was getting mighty rowdy. This was not Charlie's kind of place and he started over to Mike in the hope that he was ready to leave.

Charlie found Mike on the listening end of a monologue with a most distasteful character. Mike was apparently bought a rough looking Viking Thunderbolt amplifier from this guy. Listening to him, Charlie formulated an opinion quickly that he had the biggest ego he had seen in some time.

This motormouth seemed to be expert on everything. Every fifth or sixth word from his mouth was a first person pronoun, I, my, or me. It was plain to see that his favorite subject was himself. Charlie stood so Mike would see him and noted Mike trying to get a word in. Mike just smiled at Charlie and shook his head. The mouth kept talking about what he did to fix that and why he liked that and why he got this, etc. Charlie was admiring his breathing ability but not his inflated ego. He could talk constantly and take breaths so quickly that others couldn't jump in. Mike finally dropped a transformer on the fellow's foot and

while he yelled, Mike quickly said, "I have to go, Larry. Thanks for the amp. I'll tell you if it ever runs again. Just try to figure out what I meant when I called you a 30 to 1 guy by tomorrow. If you do, I'll give you double the price I paid for this Thunderbolt."

At that point, he motioned to Charlie to give him a hand with the boat anchor and they walked it off to Mike's shiny but now dirty SUV. Larry was yelling all the while holding his foot but he said, "OK, I'll be here tomorrow."

Carrying the big old amplifier back, Charlie asked Mike who that fellow was and Mike shook his head saying, "The biggest ego, full of himself that I've seen in a long while. He wanted \$550 for this amp. I looked inside and spotted the gassy 4-400 tubes and told him it wouldn't work with dead tubes. He said he bought it to redesign it with some solid state circuits he developed so didn't need the tubes. I spotted the broken bandswitch and asked him how it worked on 11 meters before the tubes blew? He said he didn't have anything to do with those guys. When I asked him what his call was, he said "MOTORMOUTH". I laughed so hard that I said I'd give him \$25 for the burned out and broken amp. He thought for a couple of seconds and agreed."

They reached Mike's truck and loaded the amp in the big empty back. Somehow, both knew that more treasure would be following tomorrow. Mike said, "Charlie, these guys are mostly good VHF guys. Like any group, they have some who don't respect rules and bootleg. There are plenty, I think, who are CB types operating 10 meters using ham gear. These guys'll be caught eventually by Riley Hollingsworth and I'm doing my share buying their equipment after they blow it up. I can usually fix it and resell it to a licensed ham collector and it takes one more rig out of their hands. This Thunderbolt was probably on 10 meter SSB until the CB operator detuned it too badly and overheated the tubes so the seals around the pins melted."

The guys checked into the motel and got to sleep pretty easily. Five AM arrived before they could imagine and they showered and dressed quickly. By 5:30, they were in the truck heading for the convention site. A drive-through donut shop provided a couple of tall coffees to open their eyes. At 5:45, the flea market was busy even though the advertised start time was 7:30. Serious buyers don't pay attention to details like that. Mike informed Charlie that the bootleggers trade before the posted hours and some of these guys were hawking stuff all night.

The hamfest program started at 9 with a VHF forum, not of interest to either Mike or Charlie. So, that gave them most of the morning to cruise through the flea market area set up in a large auxiliary parking area adjacent to the county fair grounds. They each brought 2 meter HTs and set them on a simplex pair that didn't appear to be busy. Mike headed left and Charlie headed right with the understanding to call the other only if something was an outstanding steal. Mind you, it was still before 6 in the morning and hundreds of buyers and traders were digging through all the boxes under tables, looking for treasure. Flea markets are the same everywhere with bargains for some and opportunities galore. One difference he noted was how few call sign nametags he spotted amongst the crowd.

Charlie moved up one long row of tables and down another, looking at everything and asking for prices occasionally. He noticed many high power amplifiers were for sale at very inflated prices. Nothing was all that impressive until he turned down row three. He saw Mike at the other end of the row. Then, Charlie spotted three of the same commercial HF amplifiers he bought several months ago on another buying trip with Mike. They had gone to a warehouse clearance together and Charlie bought all the crated and sealed amps he could find. They are great units and he is using one now.

There were more of the same here but selling for \$2500 each! Charlie nearly choked at seeing that, recalling his deal in which he bought two crates for \$200, each one contained four amplifiers in original packing together with a spare tube in separate packing. That worked out to be \$25 per amplifier with a spare tube included. Charlie gulped when he saw the same units at a hundred times the price. There was a seedy looking character behind the table staring at him. He eventually asked, "Well buddy, are you interested or what?" Charlie just shook his head and replied, "Sorry, they're too rich for my blood." The merchant said, "Aw, come on. You want to be strong on those upper channels or not? This will do it for you, buddy." Charlie glanced up the row and saw Mike chatting with someone. Not just anyone, mind you.

Riley Hollingsworth himself was cruising the flea market. Charlie had heard reports that he enjoyed visiting flea markets when his travels take him to different parts of the country and here he was in person at 6:30 in the morning in Taylorsville looking for a deal like any other ham. He didn't wear his call sign name badge, though. I wonder why?

Charlie called Mike on his HT, "Mike, I think you and your friend will be interested to see what I'm looking at. Get down here. I'm at the end of your row." Charlie waved at Mike so he'd be seen. Mike and Riley came striding down and joined in to admire the powerhouse afterburner. Charlie pretended to be interested in the amplifier as they approached. The merchant saw his chance and put on the pressure, "Look guys, this will put you on top of the pile on those frequencies above 300. This ain't one of those puny 100 watters. This baby will roar." Riley looked at it and asked if it will operate all the channels. The seller assured him it would. Riley asked if he needed a special license to use it. The seller laughed, "Are you kidding? What license."

That was all he needed to hear. Riley calmly showed him his ID and told him his equipment was off the market and he should stand aside. Riley asked Charlie and Mike if they could watch the gear for a few minutes while he took some information from this fine merchant. Of course, they agreed. Funny thing, a few other merchants quickly pulled down some of their merchandise when they saw what happened.

When Riley finished taking some notes, he had the merchant load the amplifiers into his black van. It seemed that they had been confiscated as a fine for the infraction. Mike looked around at dozens of vendors packing up to leave. "Look Charlie. The word's out about Riley. The vultures are scattering. Most of the stuff here is sold to bootleggers, especially before the scheduled opening." The vendors remaining were the legitimate microwave device dealers and VHF/UHF vendors.

Mike and Charlie headed for the coffee stand and guess who was holding court there telling everyone about his talent and skills in just about everything? That's right. It was Motormouth, as full of himself as ever. He spotted Mike getting coffee with Charlie and waved but didn't stop reciting claims about himself, except to warn everyone to be careful because the Fed's have arrived.

Mike called out, "Have you figured out why you're a 30 to 1 guy?" Charlie didn't want to get involved so he just stood quietly sipping his coffee. The talkative fellow was quiet for a moment and said he couldn't guess why he was a 30 to 1 guy. Mike told him that when he was in college, he knew someone like him. Being an engineer, he tried to put metrics on everything so he used to exercise his mind by keeping count of how many times people would refer to themselves versus the other person or group. "I just would count every I, me, mine, my in one total and every you, they, them, their in another. I'd keep the count going for a minute and compare the numbers. It's like taking a pulse. Most people fairly evenly divide their attention and come out near parity. Folks like you come out 5 to 1, 10 to 1 or lots more."

The fellow got the point and he wasn't very happy. He said to all his friends that these are the guys working with the Fed that shut Tony down. Charlie grabbed Mike and said, "Come on, let him hold court with his friends." Mike only smiled. They walked away and roamed what was left of the flea market for another hour, buying some connectors and Charlie actually found a Vibroplex bug in fairly good shape. The seller had very little idea how to use it and Charlie didn't reveal that he did. For \$20, it became a resident of DX Hill. Then, they packed up and headed for home.

Mike said as they started out, "Well, one more dealer will be fined and three more amps out of the hands of a 10 meter bootlegger. All in a day's work." Charlie had mixed feelings and was quite happy he didn't have to deal with this sort of thing any further. While driving home, Mike said, "You know Charlie, I'll bet these three amplifiers will be up for sale at my supplier's warehouse as surplus government property in a few months. How about going with me again?" Charlie grinned and replied, "Sure, why not."

There is a huge difference between self-esteem and conceit. We should nurture self-esteem and earn the respect of others who judge our personal traits without being told what they are. Being proud is fine but being conceited surely is not. Being so is most unbecoming, even within Amateur Radio.

