

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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It had been a very hot and dry summer this year on DX Hill. Mary's flowers have suffered despite daily watering. There seems to be a great difference between regular rain and water from a watering bucket. Why do suppose that is? Is the water different? It must be because the results of having a dry summer are quite noticeable everywhere. Grass is brown and even weeds are withered. Oh well, the upper air currents will change soon enough and bring us fall rains and cooler temperatures. Earlier sunset times bring more grayline opportunities and with longer darkness hours spell good news for the DX community. Sunspot cycle 23 has been waning and offering weaker and fewer DX signals on the upper HF bands. Of course, Charlie and many old time DXers look forward to the Cycle bottoms because only the serious DXers are on the air. Weekend DX chasers will have moved to 75 and 2 meters to tell one another about all the DX they worked when the bands were open. Charlie is the eternal optimist and will invariably find good news buried within the bad. Maybe that's why he's usually so happy. The bands are always open for Charlie. It's just that sometimes you have to listen harder and be more patient. It teaches humility, something in short supply among some operators today.

Charlie helped some of the new club members this summer in building and installing their first antennas. In the club's classes over the winter, they learned how to build dipoles and simple antenna tuners but everyone's yard is different and requires unique suggestions to produce optimum performance. Teaching soldering requires plenty of hands-on practice also. Who better than Charlie to help out with his decades of experience and engineer's approach to problem solving? He participated in five different antenna projects between Field Day and now. Each one was unlike the previous.

The most interesting one was at the home of the club's newest member, Eric. He wasn't a product of the winter classes, though. No, he didn't know much about ham radio before June of this year. He's a brand new freshman in high school and became interested in ham radio on his own, that is to say without someone to take him to a club meeting or activities and surely no Elmer. His mom and dad were separated recently with divorce proceedings scheduled. Eric's sense of stability and well being was set on its heels. He has had to be much more self sufficient than other boys his age. Under their agreement, he and his younger sister Erin would live with mom but spend time with each parent regularly. They appear to be doing very well in spite of the obvious difficulties brought on by the divorce proceedings.

The circumstances which led to the divorce were over dad's work and never spending time at home or with the kids. He was very ambitious and worked 90-100 hour workweeks with half or more of the work traveling. Of course, travel time takes him away 24 hours a day for as long as he is gone. He was a certain candidate for being General Manager of his division and well into the mid six figure income club by the time he reaches the age of 40. To say he was driven by ambition would be true, even understated. Becoming a young millionaire was in his grasp and it was all he wanted.

Anyway, it was dad's turn to have Eric with him on this fourth weekend of June. They were driving through one of the city parks on Saturday about noon, enjoying an ice cream cone and their time together when Eric spotted what was a compelling sight. He yelled at his dad to please stop so he could go see what it was. As soon as the car stopped, Eric leaped out and ran toward the dozen or so men and women who were busy tying down ropes and shooting light lines over trees with a bow and arrow. They had a few tents set up and parked three RVs side by side. Eric had read in one of his Boy Scout magazines about amateur radio but didn't realize at first that he had stumbled upon one of the local clubs setting up for its annual Field Day operation, scheduled to begin in only a few more hours.

Eric's eyes were the size of silver dollars as he ran from one tent to another, looked into each RV and couldn't ask questions fast enough. Several of the club members helped Eric to understand what was going on and explained how he could take part. **HOW HE COULD TAKE PART?** "Are you kidding," he asked in disbelief? He continued, "But, I don't have a license or anything. I can't... I mean, what could...well, but I don't know anything." The guys all laughed. One fellow asked, "What's your name, son? You surely

seem interested and that's fine for now. We're here to show you what it's all about." Eric told him his name and that he's only read about ham radio but he thinks it would be a cool thing to do.

The club member agreed, "It is a cool thing, Eric. There's a new rule this year for Field Day that's made for you. It's an opportunity to have folks just like you get on the air and find out just what ham radio is all about. It's called GOTA for Get On The Air. Do you want to operate, Eric? You're surely welcome." Eric looked over and saw his dad talking to several other club members and helping them trying to get a gas grill going. Dad looked interested also. Eric excused himself and ran to his dad to see if they could stay for a while. Before dad could say anything, several of the crew said in unison that they hoped so. Dad nodded his approval.

You'll never guess who was working on the grill. Who said Charlie? You're right! He and Mary were there to lend a hand and right then, at that moment, the problem was getting the crew fed. The gas grill had been in storage since last Field Day and was being cantankerous but it was slowly responding to Charlie's cleaning and TLC. The old engineer had a knack of getting anything to work. Mary just waited patiently but confidently to start preparing a good lunch for the crew. They even brought their 'ole hound dog, Rufus to Field Day. He loves coming to Field Day because hams always pick nice places, full of interesting smells and new animal friends to chase. Finally, he just found a nice shady spot to nap.

Well, you must know what happened. The father and son team stayed on for the afternoon and operated the Field Day GOTA station under the watchful eye of several members including Charlie who were happy to see this going on. Every minute these youngsters spent operating gave them more confidence and made them more and more fascinated by the magic of Amateur Radio. Like so many other FD participants this year, they felt the GOTA idea was one of the best changes made to Field Day rules in a very long while. In fact, they felt it was outstanding!

Of course, Field Day took place several weeks ago in late June. Very quickly after that weekend, Eric and his dad decided that they wanted to become hams themselves. They were just having far too much fun. They decided at Field Day that they wanted to learn CW and get on 20 and 40 meters. There was a VE session a few weeks later at another club a few exits down the Interstate and they planned to get their HF privileges then and possibly pass their Generals as well. Actually, one of the instructors from the winter classes offered to tutor them in their studies and help them get their tickets. It took three weeks of study three evenings per week to get each of them licensed, all with Technician tickets. They were so confident of passing the General and beyond that dad had already picked up a new HF transceiver and made plans to install a couple of wire antennas for 40 and 20 meters because they simply knew the General and Extra tickets would soon be obtained. There was another test session nearby in two more weeks and they knew that with their tutor's help, they would have at least General licenses to bring home from there.

The station would have to be at grandpa's house. The custodial arrangement calls for Eric to split his time between mom and dad. He could only be able to operate when it was dad's turn to have Eric for some weekend time. The obvious solution was to have Eric and his dad living together but mom and the court would object to that. Then, there was the matter of Eric's younger sister Erin. Only 11 years old, she was active in Girl Scouts and in several elderly assistance programs at their church along with mom. Ham radio was not one of them.....yet.

Well, this anguishing went on for a while until this day of the antenna project arrived. After the separation, Allen had moved back with his father who had been widowed a decade before. Although he was sorry that the marriage was failing, he was pleased to welcome his son Allen back home. Since Allen's mom passed away some years ago, the house and his life has been very quiet and of course, the grandkids bring his house to life with their presence. Another factor was that grandpa had retired recently from the same company that our old mentor, Charlie had served as a manager for so many years. In fact, he even reported to Charlie through two other middle managers for several years. It's a small world isn't it?

On antenna installation Saturday, cars and trucks pulled up right on schedule at about 8 AM. Charlie and Mary were there along with at least a dozen who wanted to help put up the two dipoles. There surely was no shortage of help. Charlie went right to work with the crew in pacing off the best layout for the 20 meter

dipole with its broadside to the northeast and southwest. They decided that the forty meter dipole should favor a path a few degrees more east to favor the West Coast and the Mediterranean. Some others had calculated the lengths using $468/\text{freq}$ (MHz). as well as done an eye ball measurement of the likely feedline lengths to avoid that they would become a resonant length themselves.

Mary sat in a comfortable rocker on the porch and watched as a minivan drove up and let a young girl out. She ran up to Allen and gave him a hug. It was Erin, his daughter who came over to see what was going on. Allen looked and saw Erin's mom sitting and waiting alone in the car. He didn't know what to do but finally decided to do nothing about it. Instead, he explained to Erin what he and her brother were doing with all these other men.

Mary also saw mom just sitting in the car watching. After a few seconds, her mother's instincts took over and she picked up a couple of the blueberry muffins she brought over and poured two cups of coffee. She carried them over to the car and introduced herself. After a few minutes of talking through the car window, mom asked Mary to sit with her, which she did. They chatted while the "boys" ran their wires across the yard from one tree to another. Before long, Frank made ready his competition bow and arrow. Frank is the best archer in the area and has won many trophies in competition. Today however, he was simply another ham with the task of stringing these dipoles up as high in some monster oak trees as possible. He studied the trajectory to be sure that no danger would befall any of them or the neighbors. This is one time he wanted to know where the arrow would fall back to earth. Then, he drew the bowstring back and aimed high.

With a sharp PING, the arrow sailed high and straight at least two hundred feet high and easily over the tree, dragging the thin fishing line with it. Tying a quarter inch nylon line to that thin and pulling it through the branches made quick work of one end of the dipole. Frank then went to the next anchor point to repeat the process. All this while, Charlie was showing Allen how to solder the center connections to the coaxial feedlines. The best way to learn soldering is by doing it a few hundred times and with a patient mentor like Charlie, his first exposure to soldering was a smooth lesson. It took less than a half-hour to raise the two dipoles high over grandpa's yard. Even though he wasn't a ham, grandpa somehow could sense the joy these wires in the air would bring to his son and grandson and that made him very happy indeed.

Before stringing the feedlines under a windowsill, Charlie connected the coax lines to his portable antenna analyzer. The resonant point came out pretty close to what they calculated, within 35 kHz. They had planned the 40 meter antenna to resonate at 7.150 MHz and the 20 meter dipole at 14.175. This way, both bands would be covered with acceptable SWR and using a tuner, they could be tuned to unity over the band. Even though a half wave dipole is calculated and measured carefully, actual resonance and performance is affected by surrounding trees, buildings, flag poles, power lines, conductive terrain and even moisture present in plant life. That's why actual resonance points often occur higher or lower than expected in real life situations.

Mary had been enjoying a nice visit with Eric and Erin's mom, Susan and whatever they said, it must have been inspirational because Susan was joking and talking as if she had been with an old friend. Allen observed this with great interest and asked Charlie if Mary knows his ex-wife. Charlie looked over at the two ladies and shook his head saying; "No, not before today my friend but it looks like that may have changed. Mary is an amazing person and mothers everywhere love to talk about their kids. You know, sometimes it's that simple."

Of course, the problems that led to the separation and divorce are painful. Allen wanted to be able to provide very well for his family but forgot along the way, that what they needed most was him, not merely the money he could bring home. In the race for the top, he lost sight of that until it was too late. Luckily, Susan is a very good mother and did the best she could, filling the role of both parents until she finally realized she couldn't keep it together any longer by herself.

What was easy to see here at the antenna party was that both Susan and Allen loved their children and would do whatever was needed to preserve their stable and progressive development. Mary looked over to the antenna crew and motioned to Charlie and Allen to come over to the car. Susan showed no reaction as

they started walking to the car, a distance of about a wavelength on 80 meters. The two were on speaking terms but differed greatly on how to raise their kids, but there was no sign of actual animosity, especially in front of their children or friends.

As Charlie and Allen got to the car, Susan asked "What's this with Eric? He seems to be having a great time here" Allen nodded and replied, "He surely is latching on to this ham radio thing. Dad is too." Susan watched Eric showing his little sister what he had been learning. He showed her the coax cable and how it was connected at the center insulator. He took her into the house to show the new radio that dad got to talk to other hams all over the world. When Eric and Erin came out of grandpa's house, they each had a shiny apple to hold them off until lunchtime. Erin came running over to her mom.

"Mom, mom! Eric showed me all this stuff. It's cool! Can I do this too? Please???" Susan grinned and looked at Allen. She said to her daughter while still looking at him, "Sure honey, daddy will help you." Nothing was said but clearly, there was serious communication happening. After several seconds, Mary sensed that the silent talking had gone on long enough and broke the long pause by saying, "When you boys decide that you've played with those wires enough, I'll make us some lunch. What do you say, kids? I'll bet grandpa's kitchen has some good stuff in it." They cheered at that and Susan nodded. She had to wipe her eye and added, "I'll help you Mary. We can talk some more."

Charlie hadn't said a word but knew Mary had done her magic again. What an amazing lady she is! He went over and put his hand on Allen's shoulder. He asked, "Do you think ham radio has just broken the barrier?" Allen looked puzzled and Charlie pointed at his two children who had gone back to "playing with the wires". He asked, "Do you think that through your family's interest in what we're doing here, your differences may have been narrowed? Allen smiled and said that he knew things would be better now between Susan and him, however it happened and whomever served as the catalyst and he thanked Charlie for the help.

Of course, Allen had recently changed his work goals significantly and no longer worked 100 hrs per week. He realized how shortsighted he had been. Just making money isn't the most important part of parenting. Sure, it's essential to meet family needs but Allen was over the top. Being a success in business had made him a failure at home. It took this kick in the head to show him what was important. Yes, he had opportunities and skill to climb in his field but failed to exercise reason, moderation and balance. The Amateur's Code outlining what an Amateur is states that he or she is considerate, loyal, progressive, friendly, balanced, and patriotic. That advice composed in 1928 is as true today as it was then and applies to life as a whole just as well.

Oh, I almost forgot. After a very nice lunch, Charlie and the crew helped set up the station and he showed Allen and the kids what it was like to chat with stations in Europe, the Caribbean, California and a mobile driving on I75 north of Dallas. He even showed them the real mode of communications, CW. Eric and Erin were completely mesmerized. Big brother Eric told his sister not to worry because he'd help her get her ticket. Charlie nodded his approval and said, "Well, it looks like my work here is done." They all shared a laugh, cleaned up the work site and headed home to let this nice family begin their rebuilding process.

Playing golf, poker and chasing DX are all similar in that one must play the ball, hand, or band as it is dealt or where the ball lies. Wishing for or whining about something better will never solve a thing. Making the best of options, on the other hand, will help you succeed.

As you loyal readers know, Charlie tunes 40 CW every morning at dawn to see what DX will be dealt to him today. Does he ever complain? Never, ever. He is delighted in the challenges he is dealt every day and is thankful for the skill and equipment he has to work his beloved DX.

True DXers everywhere know, DX IS!