

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

Bob Beaudet, W1YRC

Wintertime on DX Hill can be a very special time. Long nights and clear panoramic views for many miles in all directions can provide restful and productive time to read, contemplate or simply enjoy the company of friends. In the summertime, there's always so much to do and not enough time to do it. But in winter, the weather prevents us from some activities and by doing so, allows more time to enjoy other things. Mary does most of her craft work in wintertime since most work in her other hobby of gardening has been put aside. Of course, baking takes place all year long and for that, Charlie and his many friends are very grateful. Mary's muffins, pies and cookies are known throughout the region and are appreciated by young and old. Her recipes and methods aren't commercially motivated; such as by substituting margarine for butter or corn syrup for sugar. No, her cookies, pies, muffins and cakes are the real thing and they taste it. No compromising in the DX Hill kitchen.

These midwinter days provide time for Mary's craft clubs to meet, share projects and trade ideas and material. They also allow Charlie to get to more flea markets, since time isn't as difficult to budget without competition from antenna projects and house repair work. Such was the case this month. Winter weather had been cold but not especially severe with regard to driving or walking, ideal for Mary's and Charlie's activities.

Every year in February, the regional Valley Community College, about 25 miles down the valley hosts two different and distinct events on the same weekend; a major quilt design and fabrication workshop and brunch sponsored by three church groups and a ham radio flea market which is similarly run by several clubs in the area. Now, how in the world did this fortuitous gathering of diverse resources at the same place and time ever come to pass? Well, when you learn that the College President is a very active ham and his wife is an avid "quilter", it's a lot easier to understand how this was a very natural thing to have happen. This is the fifth year for this creative get together and like other events that are well conceived and supported, it grows every year. Every activity is indoors, obviously, so winter weather isn't ever a factor. The event is always scheduled on Friday and Saturday of the college's mid winter break from classes so there's never

a parking problem and no there's conflict with classes for use of the campus Activity Center. It's a very large building that includes a triple wide basketball court for the flea market to spread out tables, boxes, boat anchors and many open classrooms with large tables, perfect for spreading out quilting material. As luck would have it, the Activity Center includes a large and well appointed kitchen, so the need for meals, snacks and refreshments would always be very adequately and easily supported.

How can anyone be so fortunate to just "run into" this sort of opportunity, you might wonder? Well, sometimes taking advantage of opportunities as they're presented will make it work. All it takes is having someone with vision see its potential and the rest becomes easy. It surely helps when someone who can cut red tape is in a position to help. Anyone involved in business, academic or military planning will tell you that a small amount of good luck will benefit the most carefully crafted plan.

This year, Charlie and Mary had heard that between the advance quilting registrations and flea market table sales, more than a thousand people were expected for the big all day event on Saturday, rain/snow or shine. That's just amazing since a few years ago, at the first combined event, everyone met in a single room for coffee before the start of activities. It's come a long

way in a few years! A problem within a few more years may be to find a larger facility and that will be tough.

With students out of school, Friday is designated to bring material into the building and get things set up, ready for an early Saturday opening. Mary had been baking all week, just to be ready. After all, she wanted to spend time doing quilting with her friends too, not baking all day. On Friday, she and Charlie delivered boxes full of muffins, cookies, pies and cakes that she had made in the last few days, all in air-tight containers. Friday was a very busy day with hundreds of folks rushing around, setting up at the flea market. Like all regular vendors, they spent plenty of time looking over everyone else's "stuff", trying to find a "deal" ahead of Saturday's buyers.

Charlie was standing out on the sidewalk while waiting for Mary, watching the boat anchors wheeled in on carts and hand trucks. There were some beauties coming in; Collins, Hallicrafters, National, etc. He made a mental note to call his friend, Mike later to be sure he's planning to come by and check it out. Then, he realized that Mike would likely be one of the sellers and be bringing some stuff in anyway. He had no sooner thought that when Mike pulled up. He rolled down his truck window and said, "Hey old timer. Care to help me lug some boxes in?" Charlie laughed and said he'd be happy to. Mike parked his big rig right there at the curb and the old friends unloaded the truck.

As they were working, a young fellow walked up to them. He was in his mid twenties. He looked at Charlie and said, "You probably don't remember me, Charlie. My name is Jerry Flanders. I attended a talk you gave at the club a few years ago. I had just graduated from high school and passed my General ticket. After the meeting, I asked you what you thought about an IC-765 transceiver and a ten meter yagi that someone had for sale. You told me it was a good deal and I should get it and work DX all over the world with it." Charlie listened intently and recalled the talk he gave. He mentioned that it was more than a few years ago, more like five or six. The young man nodded, and went on, "Yes, it was six years ago. I bought the radio and put up the yagi just as I was told to do. As you said, I worked all kinds of DX and had lots of fun that summer. That fall, I started college. I enrolled in an intense business program at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. It kept me tied up through school breaks, summers, holidays and all free time I had with class work, field work, thesis and finally, I received my MBA last month and finally had some time to get on the air. That's the problem. My radio's broken. I can't work any DX! In fact I can't work anything. All I can hear is a hiss coming out of the speaker. I sent the radio to a service center and they sent it back with a note saying there was nothing wrong with it."

Charlie had been listening in his usual manner, analyzing every detail Jerry gave him. He asked about his antenna and learned that it had been up at his parent's home while he was away in college. He was suspicious that all the inactivity to the radio and antenna could have caused damage. He had wrapped the IC-765 in plastic to protect it. It looked OK but he was pretty sure it wasn't working any longer.

Charlie had an idea and asked, "Jerry, do you have any antenna for 20 or 40?" Jerry responded that he didn't. Charlie then asked if he even tried to listen on any other band, using the 10 meter antenna. Jerry looked surprised, "Why no, I can't do that, can I?"

Charlie assured him he could surely listen with about any antenna and went on asking if he knew anything about the 11 year sunspot cycle or the solar flux index. Jerry replied that he had never heard of them. "Well Jerry", Charlie continued, "I think I know what happened to your radio." Jerry had an anxious look as he asked, "What's wrong with it, Charlie?" Charlie replied, "Absolutely nothing, most likely. Back a few years ago, when you first tried your new radio and

your 10 meter yagi, the new sunspot cycle 23 was heading upward. The 10 meter band was open to Europe, Asia and Africa nearly every day. Conditions were good and improving further. Now, the band is quiet with little or no DX coming through on 10 meters. The present sunspot cycle affecting us now is the 23rd distinct cycle that's been systematically measured since about 1750 when records of the first eleven year cycle of sunspot counts were observed on the sun's surface. Most certainly, these cycles have been going on since the Big Bang and the start of our solar system but we're relatively new to observing the effects of solar radiation on what we do as Radio Amateurs, only recording the last 250 years or so."

Charlie asked Jerry if he understood any of this. He thought for a few seconds and simply said, "No, not at all." Charlie grinned and suggested that he come on up and visit his shack on Signal Hill next week and they'd go over it. "The present sunspot cycle is about three years from hitting its bottom and then it will be a couple of years more before it gets high enough up the next cycle slope, number 24, to return good band conditions to 10 meters," Charlie explained, "but I assure you that 10 meters will come back. How about trying 20 or 40 meters until then? They're not as dramatically affected."

Jerry seemed relieved and replied, "Well, I'll need another antenna for that, right?" Charlie said that was right, "but don't worry. There's always room for one more antenna. I'll help you."

You may all want to learn more about propagation, sun spots and their cyclical behavior by reading information material on these excellent websites:

<http://csep10.phys.utk.edu/astr162/lect/sun/sscycle.html>

<http://cse.ssl.berkeley.edu/segwayed/lessons/sunspots/research4.html>

<http://science.msfc.nasa.gov/ssl/pad/solar/default.htm>

http://science.msfc.nasa.gov/newhome/headlines/ast13apr98_1.htm

The magic of Amateur Radio and specifically DXing resides in its uncertainty and mystery. If you want a guaranteed conversation with London at noon next Thursday at 10 AM, use a telephone. If however, you care to cast your line into the ether and see what your little radio and piece of wire hanging in a tree will bring to your ears, try calling CQ. The thrill of contacting a distant country or even another part of ours by radio is unforgettable and can never be described or imitated.

That's why old timers like Charlie and so many of his fraternal partners in Amateur Radio never lose interest and are as, or more, interested today than when they were first bitten by the ham radio bug as students, many years ago. No two days on the air are quite the same.