

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Charlie is a loyal club member and rarely misses any meeting. Like many of his fellow old timers, he regards support of his club as something he must always consider an essential part of his regular routine. But, while quietly sitting through the last club meeting, he experienced what could only be described as a slowly developing epiphany. It started innocently enough, while the Field Day chairperson was reading through his committee's 'lessons learned' and the group's suggestions for the 2005 event. Charlie can perform mental multi tasking quite easily and while paying close attention to the report being presented with part of his brain, he was scanning the room, taking notice of how much gray hair he saw, other than his own of course. He silently glanced from the back of one head to the next, taking note of each friend's relative age and seniority in ham radio.

It was fairly shocking to him to learn what he had intellectually realized long ago. Before he had finished his informal census, his manager's natural skills were already working on a rough summary of the data and some possible corrective action. It was no surprise, of course, to see that his club members had aged quite a bit. After all, that fact has been reported nationally and even internationally. Obviously, we all realize that we're getting older with every passing year but the average age of hams in general is rising as well, and is presently estimated to be in the high fifties, albeit with a broad margin of error because our politically correct federal record keeping doesn't permit FCC to track all sorts of interesting demographics, including the birthdates of 675,000 licensed Amateurs. In addition, applicants for a license can't be asked if they are married, male or female, level of education, work status, political preference, or most anything else that might provide some idea of the their personal interests. Admittedly, none of these statistics should affect in the least whether or not a license or club membership would be granted, but it surely could provide interesting material for club activity planning. Years ago, a picture was attached to most all federal applications and records but now, of course, wouldn't it? But doing it would be seen as insensitive since it would reveal demographical details that are illegal to officially ask. I wonder how much long our state motor vehicle registries will continue to include a current picture on our driver's licenses. If the P.C. police have their way, it won't be long.

Charlie didn't need a calculator to determine that the senior members attending this club meeting far outnumbered those less than 60 years of age. Then, Charlie ran down the club roster that he kept in his notebook and estimated 75% of the membership to be over 60 with many well over. Charlie obviously knew that this wasn't unique to his club. It's a very common problem. At this rate, all of these clubs around the country that we've worked to build and loved for many decades may simply dissolve when the last member joins his friends in the big antenna farm in the sky.

The reason is obvious. Fewer young members are joining, pure and simple. More basically, fewer young people are being attracted to Amateur Radio. That's just that simple. But, what can we do about it. We absolutely can't say "nothing". Merely sitting here and recognizing the obvious problem won't save the club. Clubs must go into a serious recruiting mode and add new and younger members if they hope to survive. This isn't something nice to do or politically correct but rather, it's essential for existence.

Like so many other things, though, this problem is a serious challenge. The problem has been well defined in every circle of ham radio and is very well recognized and no one has a 'silver bullet'. Charlie started thinking about it before the club president finished "new business" and when he asked for any other items before entertaining adjournment; Charlie raised his hand and was recognized.

Charlie observed, "It's been some time since we went out and tried to recruit new club members. Our average age now is getting pretty high and rising every year. Soon, we'll be too old to do anything about it and we'll just fall apart. Why don't we form a study group to do some work by our next meeting that will present a plan to do something about this?" A few hands rose and the first person said, "Come on, Charlie. You know perfectly well that we've tried to sign up young members for years. It hasn't worked. They come to a meeting, take a look at how many seniors we have and never come back."

Another member said, "Charlie, you ran classes for years in the past. Those classes produced lots of members. But, how many of them are still here? Only a few." The last hand raised was that of one of Charlie's oldest friends, another old timer named Bill and a highly respected member. He said, "Mr. President, Charlie, I believe you're absolutely right but the issue is one that will require plenty of patience and understanding to have any remedy take action. Just saying that we need younger members is an oversimplification of the issue and as we all know, entirely obvious.

The problem as I see it is a systemic one, not one that passing a motion here can ever hope to solve. If the club sees fit to appoint a group to study this, I'd like to be a member and work to find a novel solution."

The president looked around the room saying, "Any further comments?" Without waiting to be recognized, the club's eldest member called out, "Let's do it. Sign me up too." Several members including the president chuckled over his direct manner. The president continued, "I'll take that as a motion from Harold. Do we have a second?" A dozen hands went up and the secretary simply picked the first person he saw when he looked up from his laptop keyboard.

"Well OK then. Now we have a study team," said the president. "But, Charlie is that all you need? Will you take it from here?" Charlie knew this was coming. Whenever he has an idea, he gets saddled with another project. He replied with a smile, "Thanks, that will be fine. I'll meet with Bill and Harold after we adjourn and we'll come up with a plan. We may need more ideas from our few younger members too so expect a phone call you folks. We'll make a report at the next meeting."

Charlie already had a plan and he wanted to discuss it with the volunteers that offered to help. A smart manager never asks any question that he doesn't have an answer for. Another member, a fellow named Tom stopped by and said that he wanted to help the group. He was a new transfer into the area from the mid west; a professor at the university in Center City. He was a ham but hadn't become very active yet since his move last summer. Tom taught graduate level theoretical mathematics. He was about 40, had a young family and seemed to be a very congenial and friendly fellow, not an academic nerd as some professors can be, especially professors of deep topics that most of us can't begin to appreciate.

Since Charlie was already named committee chair, he called a meeting for the following evening at his home on DX Hill. Bill and Harold were happy with that suggestion since they had been to DX Hill before and could already smell the muffins and other marvelous creations coming from Mary's kitchen. Tom wasn't aware yet of Mary's well known reputation for her blueberry muffins and apple cobbler so his interest was purely in the interest of contributing to the committee. Certainly, he was from the desired age group that Charlie wanted to discuss, so his thinking would be extremely valuable. However, he said he wouldn't be able to come to the meeting the following evening since he had to watch the kids while his wife, Susan attended a crafts meeting at their church. With a little questioning, Charlie learned that it was the group meeting that Mary always attends. "It's good that you said that because Mary will be there also. I didn't even think about that. Well, OK then. Let's make it for Monday evening at my place at about 7. Is that OK?"

Everyone agreed and the meeting broke up.

By the time of the crafts meeting, the word had gotten from Tom to his wife Susan and from Charlie to Mary that they should meet each other and share their stories about their ham husbands, which they did. Susan asked Mary if she knew of any hams in the area that were still using Morse code and contacting distant stations. Mary laughed and asked why. Then she asked if she was serious. Susan replied that she was quite serious and that Tom had wanted to get into this thing called DXing since he was an undergrad student back in Illinois and had become a ham some 20 years ago but he never had the time or the house and room for antennas. Susan also said he loves to use Morse code and has since he was a Boy Scout. Mary knew that Tom was coming to her home on DX Hill with the committee on Monday and just grinned in her devilish way and assured her that all of Tom's concerns will be quickly answered. Charlie knows someone just like that very well. Susan was pleased and they proceeded with their crafts work.

In the past, every club has focused some of its recruiting effort on school kids. The ARRL has a terrific program they appropriately call the "Big Project" and many clubs run summer tech camps and programs for after school, like the "Drop Zone" across the highway from the high school described in a recent Charlie's Whistle story. These programs target middle and high schoolers and have produced many new hams. However, an age group we've overlooked is the middle aged group from 30 to 50. In other words, the parents of the students we have been recruiting. Some parents have come along with their sons and daughters but only by accident. They weren't targeted as a specific group.

Harold's eyes play tricks on him after dark, so he had arranged to ride with Bill. They arrived a few minutes early for the meeting and that was fine since it gave them time to have a rag chew. There's never a wasted moment on DX Hill either. Mary made certain that her 'boys' always have a full pot of coffee and enough blueberry muffins and apple cobbler to feed at least a dozen of them. A few minutes after seven, Tom pulled up and was all apologies for his lateness. It seems he became lost taking a turn down the hill and had to double back. It was already dark, of course, so he couldn't see Charlie's tower as he drove up the long gradual hill to Charlie and Mary's cozy home.

Mary had spilled the beans that Tom was looking for someone in the area who enjoyed chasing DX on CW so as the 'boys' settled in around their dining room table and pour their coffee, Charlie asked, "Tom here asked if we know someone in the area who is a CW operator and chases DX. Do you fellas know anyone that fits that bill? Harold and Bill appeared puzzled as the sound of CW was heard coming from the shack. Harold asked Charlie, "What's this all about, Charlie? A trick question?" Tom shook his head and assured that it wasn't but the sound of CW gave it away and he broke into a smile. "It's you, isn't it Charlie?" Charlie pleaded guilty and assured him that many more CW DXers are in the area and he'd introduce him to them all. He was welcome to their elite little group.

The muffins and cobbler flew around the table and Mary remarked with her hands on her hips, "My Goodness! Doesn't anyone feed you boys at home?" She was only poking fun since if her tasty baking wasn't such a hit, she'd be hurt for sure. There's little chance of that with these hungry hams.

The meeting went on and Charlie pointed out that he hadn't seen much interest focused on the middle agers in the ARRL programs and on-line recruiting effort. Are they the forgotten ones?

Once the kids are off to high school and college and don't need rides every day to soccer, baseball, basketball, hockey, etc. and mom and dad find large gobs of time on their hands.

The group kicked the idea around for a while. How could they present the idea? How about taking adverts on the Sunday paper sports pages? Too pricey. Those ads can cost thousands. Where would we get that kind of funding? How about public service announcements? Hmmm.... That has possibilities but they're timed wrong. Stations rarely bump PSAs into a popular commute time slot. But, let's talk with the drive time FM station on the other side of the valley. Maybe they'll do a few for us. Tom popped up, "Say, one of their talk radio people teaches in our school of communications. I know him pretty well. I'll bet I could convince him to do a few talk topics at drive time, now that elections are over and they're looking for new issues."

Charlie said he was happy that they had reached some agreement in their approach and general consensus that the middle aged candidates had been overlooked. They may be the future of ham radio. They have more disposable income than younger parents and may be looking for worthwhile things to invest time into.

They agreed that Tom had a good plan. Bill pointed out, "Say, our SEC is always beating the big drum looking for recruits to conduct EmComm drills and nets. That could surely be written up as a PSA and get air time in the morning and afternoon drive times. Emergency communication recruiting ideally don't want new hams to fill them. However, young new hams have enthusiasm and are tireless, attributes not found in older hams. Furthermore, signing up the sons and daughters will bring along a percentage of interested moms and dads."

Harold nodded his approval. He added, "It's a mistake to rely on old timers like me. We had our day and did a darned good job. It's someone else's turn now but I wouldn't mind if these whippersnappers asked for my opinion once in a while, even if they're only being polite."

Charlie laughed and said, "Harold, if anyone asks for your opinion, they're not being polite, they're at their wit's end." Everyone roared including Harold.

They spent the rest of the evening in the shack, after refilling their coffee cups and bringing a heaping plate of apple cobbler with French Vanilla ice cream with them. Tom commented, "If I come here too often, I'll gain plenty of weight." Bill asked Tom, "Do you know any DXers in the club with less than a 42 inch waistline?" Tom shook his head. Bill added, "Mary's recipes have something to do with that." Mary had been crocheting in the den and said with a grin, "I heard that, Bill, and you're probably right."

Tom sat in the operator's chair and tuned the low end of 40 meters. The Europeans were kicking up to S8 to 9 with a few well over 9. He asked, "Wow, what kind of antenna to you use on 40? I never hear Europe this loud." Before Charlie could say anything, Harold pointed out, "Son, a yagi at 100 feet will beat a dipole every time." Surprised, Tom replied, "Oh my Gosh! You have a beam on 40? I've never used one. No wonder the band sounds like this." Charlie told him to call a CQ. He did so and had a dozen replies. Tom reached over for the key and worked one after another, the smile never leaving his face. The others just watched the "new kid" enjoying a first in his career. What a joy!

Finally, about 10:30, the crew decided to break up and head home. They felt sure that before the next meeting, they could present a plan complete with drive time agreements to promote getting mid aged parents to come and form a class to learn what they need to become licensed.

It was great fun to watch Tom operating a top end CW DX station, something he had previously only dreamed about. After the "boys" had left, Charlie scratched old Rufus on his nose to wake him and head for the door to take their nightly walk. Mary walked with Charlie and Rufus this evening. It was a little cooler than she preferred but they had a clear starry night sky and even saw an occasional meteor darting across the sky. Mary and Charlie held hands and she said, "You came through again tonight, dear. When do you think you'll have to admit that you can't find an answer for a problem?" Charlie thought for a long while as they slowly strolled behind Rufus. "Well dear, I hope it's not until a few months after I've joined my friends in the big antenna farm in the sky."

Recruiting new blood for our beloved hobby is critical, something we must do to survive. Saying that Internet has taken away our candidates or that kids can talk to foreign lands by Internet without a radio or license is simply a lame excuse. There's no replacement for the magic of radiating an invisible radio signal to the other side of the earth from that wire in your tree or aluminum tubing gleaming in the reflection from the moonlight. That's simply magic! If all you're looking for is being able to speak with Indonesia, pick up your kitchen telephone right now and dial (62-21) 766-6364. You'll be connected with the beautiful Villa Mai Nae resort in Bali, Indonesia. You'll enjoy crystal clear speech and have a very nice chat with some very friendly people. The use of an appliance like a telephone or a television is something we take for granted. Working Bali, Indonesia by radiating your CW, SSB or RTTY signal through the various layers of gases enveloping the earth and reflecting your signal several times between the earth and different ionosphere layers before the signal's arrival on an antenna and being detected on the opposite side of our mother earth can only be called magic and not something taken for granted. If someone cannot understand the difference between using an appliance and performing magic, they likely and sadly don't belong in ham radio. They probably can't even understand the magic we've felt in Red Sox nation in defeating the Yankees after 86 years.