

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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It's not something that Mary permits Charlie to think about, but recently Charlie came back from his morning walk with Rufus and admitted to her that he had been thinking that he had gotten older. Mary didn't like to hear him talking that way and asked, somewhat jokingly, "Do you mean just recently or over a long period of time?" Of course, Charlie understood what she meant immediately and said, "No, not in any bad way. I feel fine and don't anticipate any immediate problems. But, while out in the spring sunshine just now, I was thinking of all the years we've lived here and the great family we've raised. It's been a long while. I retired nearly ten years ago and it doesn't seem that long. How about you, dear? Have you ever thought of that?"

Mary constantly is busy with her crafts or baking and doesn't spend much time just thinking about things like that. She replied, "You know, dear, I never feel any older. It's probably because you don't let me." She smiled and added, "How can I ever feel old when I see you climbing your tower, crawling under your radio bench to fish wires, getting up at four in the morning to go send code to someone on the other side of the world, fixing radios for friends, helping bright young people like Brian and the others from the club and all the phone calls you get? You're more active now than you were before you retired. Just keeping up with you keeps me feeling young."

Charlie gave her a hug and said, "Yep, we're lucky people aren't we? Of course, complaining about stiff knees and aches and pains won't help either of us, huh?"

Mary nodded her agreement and asked if he was ready for some breakfast. At that moment, Rufus let out a loud bark seeming to answer for Charlie that they both were quite ready for their breakfast. They laughed and both gave Rufus some scratches to his ears. They realized that their four footed friend had added years as well but still enjoyed life. Together, they hoped to continue as long as they could in this way.

After breakfast, Charlie telephoned his club president. At the last meeting, the discussion from the members showed some concern about the future of ham radio and Charlie thought that he might be able to offer some ideas "off-line" to the new president.

They arranged to have lunch together that noontime and discuss it. The new mega book store in the valley had recently opened and Mary had heard that their sandwiches and pastries rivaled hers. The newspaper reviews stated recently that the coffee shop was, in fact, a fairly well stocked food court with a variety of substantial food, not two day old donuts as some appended coffee shops offer. So, the plan was set that Mary would join them for lunch but then roam through the books while the "boys" talked about radio. Mary loves to read and had a long list of books she wanted to check out.

They met on time and Tom Walsh; the club president had brought his wife, Jenny with him to roam the books as well. When she heard of Tom's and Charlie's plan, she jumped at the idea. She's a retired college professor of literature and loves books and the works of many contemporary authors. Both ladies could become immersed in a book and become completely lost in the pages.

They enjoyed a very nice lunch and Jenny and Mary became acquainted. They share many likes and Jenny was eager to learn much more about baking at another time from Mary since her skills were legendary in the area. Today, lunch was a soup and sandwich event and Mary asked for samples of everyone's sandwich for evaluation. She had to admit that all the sandwiches were excellent. Charlie had ordered a few mini muffins for them to sample as well and after tasting them, it was clear that Mary remained the queen of baking in the region. Mary explained that

commercial products can never compare favorably with her recipes since theirs have ingredients designed to make a profit and have reasonable shelf life where hers do not ever have that constraint. Expense is no object and she rarely has any trouble with stale products in the house. I wonder why that could be.

After a very enjoyable lunch, the ladies excused themselves and Tom and Charlie got to business. The principle concerns the club members brought up at their last meeting were that the number of licensed hams in this country have dropped significantly in the last few years, ARRL membership across the country continues to drop, activity on repeaters is only a shadow of what it was only ten years ago, club attendance is down, interest in the hobby among younger folks is rare and existing ham population is continuing to creep steadily upward. Of course, these problems aren't unique to their club. Just about every club in the country is complaining of the same issues.

Tom said that he doesn't know what they can do within the club to reverse these things. Charlie told him that there's nothing they can do to change the natural flow of social behavior. It's a force more powerful than anything they can control. However, there may be a few things that we could do to slow these trends down a bit.

Charlie pointed out, "Look Tom, the most natural thing to do is to try to show non-hams what attracted us into the hobby. But, I'm afraid those things aren't very interesting these days unless someone has a background based on the way things used to be. Young folks, basically those under 35 can't relate in the same way people from our generation can to "wireless" technology. Kids and young adults take WIFI for granted. Their telephones, PCs, door locks, auto starters, garage door openers and even their TV remote controls are wireless. They can't imagine a world without these devices."

Tom had listened to Charlie and replied, "Charlie, you're right but I think it's a basic issue with their generation. The Generation X'ers need fairly instant returns for their actions. The idea of going out and building something isn't popular at all. They'd rather go out and buy something all made and ready to use. Then, when it's broken, they want a new one. We knew how to fix the things we had and build and modify things. The interests are different today."

Charlie nodded his agreement and said, "No argument from me, Tom. But, that's true everywhere. What are we to do? Just sit back and watch ham radio keep sliding down the slope? We can't change the hobby into something it isn't."

The old timers sat quietly, sipping their coffee thinking about what they had just said. After a few minutes, a fellow about eighteen years old came up to their table and said to Tom, "Uuuhh, excuse me, sir. Is that your truck out there?" Tom immediately looked out through the window at his truck and said, "Yes, it is. What's wrong?" The young man replied, "Oh nothing is wrong. I saw that diamond symbol in your back window, your call letter license plate and the big antenna on it. Then, I came in here and saw that same diamond symbol on your cap and your call letters. I just had a question."

Charlie stood and pulled out a chair, "Have a seat, son. You came at just the right time. We have plenty of questions too." He sat and said, "Well, my name is Jason and I'm graduating from high school in June. I think I want to study something technical in college but I can't get any help from my guidance office. They want me to go into business."

Charlie smiled very broadly and thought this was certainly a "deja vous" moment. Thoughts of his last student, Brian, were immediately brought back. What a coincidence! He said to Jason,

“I’ll bet you’re a good math student.” Jason replied, “Yes, I have straight A’s in math. That’s why they want me to go into business.” “But, you want something in science,” Charlie asked? Jason nodded and added, “I want to get an Amateur license so I can build a transmitter before starting college this fall.”

Tom and Charlie happily explained the many details that Jason wanted to know about. They invited him to their club meetings and both said they’d be happy to show him their station and help him study for his own license. Jason was very pleased. That’s something that we all must be ready to do whenever an opportunity drops from the sky like this. But most times, opportunities aren’t simply presented to you. Every one of us must seek out ways to showcase our hobby to the public at public service events, “show and tell” demonstrations at senior centers, community colleges, public libraries and any other place where Amateur Radio may be seen and might stimulate curiosity.

As we all know, times are different from fifty years ago. What worked then will probably be ineffective today. What is certain is that we need more new hams to continue the good work we’ve done for decades. We won’t be here forever and our places must be given to new hams. Don’t miss an opportunity to recruit a new ham of any age.