

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Every springtime or early summer, a few clubs around DX Hill combine their energies and resources to put on a moderately sized hamfest. They have limited budgets but always find a way to host a flea market and produce a very interesting event including a nice sit down luncheon, certainly a great excuse to gather lots of old friends with an excuse to rag chew and remain in contact with fellow DXers, contesters, VHFers, tinkerers and simply old friends.

This year, the hamfest committee asked Charlie to be the hamfest's Saturday luncheon speaker and talk about the present state of Amateur radio and his views for its future. Charlie is well known in the area and is regarded as one of the most highly respected sages in several counties and the committee felt that more folks might come to the luncheon if they could hear Charlie speak. In a small community, locals are more creditable than "suits" from outside. At first, Charlie said he'd be happy to do it but later, after he thought about it for a while, it seemed like a bit more daunting a task than he had originally assessed it to be. He wondered why he always says yes before he knows what he needs to do. Some day, that will get him into trouble, he thought with a grin. Speaking at this event could easily get him into hot water with some segments of our ham population, especially the new HT toting repeater crowd. Amateur Radio is in constant change, after all. How on earth could he fairly and honestly give his views on the state of the hobby without putting the audience to sleep or igniting a war of words? There's so much detail involved.

Well, he thought about it for a while and then, Charlie took some time to reflect for a while on basic behavior patterns within the ham population that the regulators may have tried to follow before trying to put a presentation together. He asked himself various questions such as why a mountain climber tries to reach the top of a mountain. Why does a baseball hitter try to hit a ball out of the park? Why does a marathon runner always try to attain a better time for running the 26.2 miles? The answer to all is the same, because that's the natural ending to be reached in excelling in their specific pursuit.

That same logical process affects Amateurs as well. DXers strive to attain the top of The DXCC Honor Roll. VHFers strive to break distance records on different VHF and UHF bands. Contesters strive for progressively higher individual and club scores year after year. Reaching the "top of the mountain" is the natural and normal thing to do.

Charlie thought for quite a while about how to work this into a presentation and he kept returning to a central idea, that while our population of licensees has certainly increased, our core numbers appear to have declined. That is to say that our "center of gravity" has moved down in the ranks and as a result, the quality of our existence may be legitimately questioned. An obvious conclusion could be that many Amateurs have allowed themselves to settle for a more mediocre position relative to all Amateurs as a group. That could suggest problems further down the time line if we can't find a reasonable way to change it. Otherwise, all this analysis will become simply so much mental exercise. So he sat in front of his computer with a thick pad of paper, some pencils and started his research and note taking.

Back in 1950, we only had about 100,000 hams in the USA. Today, we're close to 670,000 or to say it another way, we've grown at an annual rate of 12.2%. Hmmmm, he thought. That's really not so bad at all. Most corporations should be happy with that kind of growth over a 50 year period. Wal-Mart recently reported that it was experiencing 8 to 9% annual growth and expected to continue that rate of growth into the future.

In 1951, the Friendly Candy Company (FCC) dropped the three tier license structure that, since the start of what we know as Amateur Radio today, allotted somewhat restricted privileges to Class B and C Amateurs and full privileges of the time to Class A. This tri level hierarchy was created by the Communications Act of 1934 and it served the needs of the country quite well. Class A licensees enjoyed completely full privileges available to Amateurs and Class B and C licensees were granted the same full operating privileges except any permission to operate at all on the most desirable 20 and 75 meter bands. That surely was a big incentive to individuals to make them upgrade to the Class A ticket. The normal paradigm followed by the hams of the day was to enter the hobby through the Class B or C and as quickly as was feasible, upgrade to Class A. Very few remained in Class B or C voluntarily. Class C was intended mainly to serve Amateurs who lived in remote areas, substantial distances from an FCC examination point as well as those applicants who had legitimate physical problems in visiting the FCC in person. Of course back then, Class A and B tests were administered by the FCC in their field offices around the country. To make it worse, many offices only offered tests on one day per month, a very far cry from the super convenient VE program we've enjoyed for the last 20 years. Finding a convenient exam site today in the evening, on a weekend or at a hamfest near one's home is a snap. It's a good example of making the process user friendly.

In 1951, the old license structure was abandoned in favor of a more detailed and complex five and eventually a six level licensing philosophy. The "Candy Company" reasoned that descriptive names should be used to designate the greater granularity and in doing so, provide more accurate titles to the license structure. Novice was the entry level, Technician and Technician Plus was for experimenters above 30 MHz., General was for the average all band ham and Advanced provided greater bandwidth to their privileges and the Extra to give the ham full unlimited privileges. The names suggested what the privileges were for each class of license. There was a subtle philosophical message that the FCC expected the majority of Amateurs to follow a classical bell shaped curve and reside in the two middle grades of license, Technician and General and indeed, that's just what happened.

Licensees in greater numbers weren't really encouraged to attain higher license classifications since with the Technician or General licenses; they had all the privileges they wanted. Why work hard to get a higher class ticket? The General class ham even had operating privileges on the revered 20 and 75 meter bands. So, mediocrity set into Amateur ranks. No longer did everyone climb the mountain simply because it was there. They were satisfied to stop part way up the climb. That's not very healthy, is it?

Today, our Friendly Candy Company has returned to a three tier licensing structure with the Technician class now serving as the first or entry level and allowing holders of that license full privileges above 30 MHz. No knowledge of code at all is required for holding a Technician ticket. General class provides restricted privileges on all Amateur bands and Extra class serving as the top license with unrestricted privileges permitted to its holder.

So, we've come full circle starting in 1934 with three classes of license, rising to six different classes and eventually returning to three once more. The more things change, the more they stay the same. But a significant difference exists today comparing the current demographic profile to those who populated the tri-level structure of Amateurs fifty years ago. Charlie intuitively knew this but what he found through some basic research was very depressing indeed.

In 1950, a small number of remotely located or physically challenged Amateurs held the Class C license and a larger but still fairly small percentage held the Class B license before upgrading to Class A. The top class A included the majority of active hams.

Today, even though we have nearly seven times more hams in the US, more than half of our licensees are permanently holding the grandfathered Novice or the current Technician licenses. There appears to be no desire on their part to upgrade since they have all the privileges they want to keep them happy. Another 20% have a solid hold on their General ticket and only 27% hold the now obsolete Advanced or the current Extra class license. A whopping 52% hold Technician or Novice licenses and from studying the demographics, there's no sign that most of these 'renewable for life' license holders will move to become anything more. They're quite content to stop one third of the way up the mountain. Only 16% of our ranks may claim that they've reached the Extra class mountain top. Mediocrity or lack of incentive? What or who is responsible? The so called Gen X "what's in it for me generation"? Regardless, the bell shaped curve distribution is now heavily skewed to the lower half of our large population.

Charlie thought about all this for several days before he decided how or even if he would present what was requested, the state of Amateur Radio and his thoughts for its future. It made him fairly sad in one way. But, eventually he realized that we actually have plenty to rejoice. In fact, we have more Extras today than the total of all hams in 1950. Adding in the Advanced holders, we're stand at nearly double that number. Further, the total US population has increased by about 300% since 1950 but Amateurs have multiplied about 700%, more than double the growth of the country's inhabitants. So, when you look at the distribution by proportion to the census, the skewed curve doesn't really spell disaster.

Many believe we need to increase the total ham population to backup and provide weight for our negotiators when they argue to save or expand our band space in future World Radiocommunication Conferences. Whether true or not, having more hams to stand behind the claims surely can't hurt.

Charlie started writing his final draft from his notes. Soon, he had a good solid outline for his talk. The last thing he ever wants to do is to discourage fellow hams. What he will say will give them confidence and pride in our wonderful hobby of Amateur radio. I wish we all could attend Charlie's talk. I'm sure it will be spectacular!