

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Charlie is a loyal supporter of his Amateur Radio Club and he tries to attend every meeting and function it holds. Over the years, as we all know, he has served as an Elmer to a great many hams who are currently club members. In fact, at last week's quarterly business meeting, Charlie looked around and recognized that every officer and nearly every member other than a few old timers like himself were his former students. It made him feel very satisfied that he's certainly contributed his share toward serving the community because of his work. It was more than simply Charlie's willingness and his generous nature that made it all succeed, however. Charlie has always had a remarkable ability to deal with people. That made him a very effective manager in the corporate world and an easy fit into the Elmer mold, finding it natural to deal with newcomers of any age on an equal level. Despite his top achievements in DXing and as one of his company's most popular and effective engineering managers, he would never talk down to anyone who doesn't know a topic as well as he did. In Amateur Radio work is that it probably a good thing that new hams weren't aware of Charlie's achievements or world wide familiarity. If they knew that Charlie was a close friend to thousands of DXers around the world, they might feel intimidated and never have enough nerve to ask a question and show how much they don't know.

Not every member of his club knew Charlie very well, such as the old timers surely did. A few relatively recent members had moved to the valley following the demands made by their employers. To be successful in this market, you must follow the work to where it takes you and always be willing to relocate, even if it's to some place that's not high on your list of preferred home sites. New assignments for these folks took them to this area from other several parts of the country. That seems to go on much more now than Charlie recalls "in his day". During a customary coffee and pie break at the mid point of the meeting, a few of the new members approached Charlie to ask him to tell the bakery that made the pies that they're absolutely the best they've ever tasted. Others pointed toward Charlie when they were asked where the club had gotten the delicious pies.

Charlie thanked the new comers and promised that he would personally give the baker a kiss in appreciation. The newbies were surprised and started to reply, "Well, I didn't mean..." before Charlie's old friend Mike stopped him and laughed. "Charlie's wife Mary is the greatest baker in the entire county. She makes all of our food. I think she made six pies for tonight's meeting." Patting his substantial middle he added, "Look around the room. Most of us can show you evidence how much we love her baking." Then they all laughed together. Charlie has told a few friends that he's not sure if members attend the meetings because of the pie or if they would come anyway. His friends simply assure Charlie that most would come anyway but the pies are sort of like an insurance policy and they all appreciate having them.

"Let me introduce myself, Charlie" one of the new hams offered. He said his name was Neal and he received his ticket shortly before he moved here from Silicone Valley in California. Each of the other three new members gave their name and call and where they were from: Arizona, Oregon and Colorado. They were all engineers and in their late 30s or early 40s. Charlie said he was pleased that they've come to the area and offered his help if they ever needed it. Neal said, "That's what that other fellow over there said. He said you are the club's Elmer. I'm not completely sure what that means but I was assured that it's a good thing." Charlie chuckled and said, "Well, I guess it is, especially if you like CW and chasing DX."

Neal wanted to speak more with Charlie about what he had just said but the President was gaveling the meeting back to order after their coffee and pie break. Neal quickly asked Charlie if he could speak further with him after the meeting. Of course, Charlie agreed with a firm handshake and a pat on his back. They all sat down and resumed business. All clubs have similar issues to the ones being discussed, usually involving authorizing funds for some project, lining up volunteer instructors for some classes, public service, em comm drill, lining up a guest speaker or whatever. Activity is the heartbeat of a club. If your club isn't always active, beware. Your last meeting is in sight.

After about forty five minutes, the meeting was adjourned. Neal made a bee line toward Charlie so he couldn't escape. Charlie was still chatting with Mike with whom he was sitting. Mike knew that Neil

wanted to chat with Charlie and asked him to pull up a chair. “We don’t get up and leave until the coffee pot and pie plates are empty and clean. It looks like we have a little time left.” As he rose to replenish his and Charlie’s cups, he asked Neal, “Let’s see, there’s peach and apple crunch left. The blueberry and raspberry rhubarb are gone.” Neal smiled and selected apple crunch. He sat and asked Charlie, “The hams in California where I got my ticket are very active in maintaining a bunch of repeaters for the county’s emergency communications system. I don’t see that your club does that here. Also, we had a dozen or so DXers who only talked about doing antenna work and new expeditions going to some sand bar on the other side of the world.”

Charlie observed, “Well Neal, that could easily be our club. See those guys over there with clipboards?” Neal nodded. “They’re all DECs and ECs in our county ARES program. One of them is a broadcast technician. He maintains VHF and UHF repeaters for our team. They have a separate repeater organization to collect funds and pay bills to support the equipment but just about all the hams involved are members of our club but as I said, the funds are entirely separate. Lots of the rest of us are DXers, not much different from the ones you knew in W6 land.” Neal wrinkled his chin. “I’m curious about something. Why do some hams like one or two things more than another things? With so many interesting things in ham radio, they all seem to pick out a few things and ignore the other ones. At least, that’s the way I saw it when I took my exams. The guys that are on repeaters usually don’t have much interest in DXing and vice versa.” Charlie nodded and replied, “Well Neal, there’s some truth in what you said but it’s not entirely that way, surely not out of choice. You’ve probably already found out that some things we hams like are expensive, even if you build them. Some hams just simply have many different interests to be sure; contesting, DX, mobiling, QRP, building, antenna design, and many simply like to rag chew anywhere, on 2 meters, 10, sitting here after a meeting or at the diner on Saturday mornings.”

Charlie paused as Mike arrived with fresh coffee and handed a large wedge of apple crunch to Neal. He asked why Charlie wasn’t having any pie. He laughed and said, “Well, I live on this good food back on DX Hill. I have to take a break now and then and let you guys enjoy it. Aren’t I big enough?” Charlie took a sip of the hot coffee and added, “You know, I have my own theory about why at least 50% of hams gravitate toward one or two aspects of the hobby over some other ones.” He looked at Neal to see if he seemed to want to know more. His face clearly said that he did. So, Charlie continued, “Well, if you stop and look at how, where and when each of us got interested and started, you’ll usually find that most of us were influenced to a more or less degree by an older and more advanced ham at the time. The normal situation is that new hams learn more about their mentor’s favorite interest than anything else because that’s what the mentor is usually working at when you call or visit him or her.” Mike chuckled and asked, “Do you think that explains why lots of newer hams around here are CW DXers? Most of them have come along since Charlie took over as our senior Elmer.” Charlie laughed and said, “Aw come on, Mike. It’s not that bad, is it? They’re not all DXers and a few don’t even like CW.” Mike grinned at that comment, “Yup, but darned few.”

Charlie reflected back and told the small group that had assembled around him, “You know, back a hundred years ago when I became interested and prepared to take my FCC exams, I had an Elmer also.” Everyone seemed shocked at that thought. It seemed entirely implausible that someone like Charlie would ever have a mentor. Mike spoke for the others, “These folks must think we gray headed hams were born knowing everything we know today.” There was some chuckling and Charlie added, “Well, of course, Mike is right. When I was in diapers, I could only copy 10 words per minute and didn’t even have DXCC yet.” That brought out some genuine laughter, even from Charlie himself.

“Seriously, the ham I admired most when I was about 10 years old was a retired World War II radio operator. Stanley Martin could copy at least 35 words per minute while having a conversation with you and sipping coffee. He would never ever miss a letter or a number, banging this stuff out on a mechanical typewriter, called a mill in those days. I wanted to become as good an operator as he was. He helped me an awful lot learning how to copy words behind and always ready for what was coming, through noise on the air or in the room.” One of the new members asked, “Did you ever become that good?” Charlie started to shake his head but before he could say a word, Mike added, “No, he didn’t stop when he became that good. He became even better. Charlie is a model for all the rest of us to emulate.”

“Now, the first thing you need to remember is to never believe stuff like that”, Charlie quickly added, throwing a wadded up ball of paper toward his good friend Mike. “My mentor taught most things to me by the example he provided. He didn’t need to say very much. He simply needed to be himself and let me watch. After the war, he became a DXer and worked everything that ever showed itself on the air. That’s all I wanted to do some day.”

Charlie went on, “I maintain that we’re all influenced pretty heavily by the person who created the interest in us that lit our fire to become a ham. But, do you know that more than half of all hams in this country are licensed no higher than Technician. Why is that? It’s not entirely because their mentor is a Technician. Most often, they’re interested in using repeaters and that’s the license most repeater users possess because that gives them all the privileges they need.” Mike didn’t entirely agree and asked, “Well, why do so many repeater users have an Extra ticket?” Charlie nodded and replied, “That’s true. You and I use the repeaters but it’s always in regard to doing something else on HF or while we’re driving. Talking on a repeater isn’t the extent of our ham experience. But for far too many, it is, often not out of choice but because they’ve been led to believe going further won’t be necessary to enjoy ham radio. Many actually believe that getting an Extra class license is too difficult. Look at our club membership. You won’t find that to be true here because of all the Extra class mentors we have. But, throughout the country, Technician class is as high as many hams will ever reach in their careers and since they never experience the HF bands, they never develop any liking for things like DX or even CW. It’s simple logic, one thing following the other and it’s really a shame. The numbers prove the volume to be true with more than 50% in Novice and Technician licenses.”

Mike agreed and the new members understood. By now, the pie and coffee was gone. Neal asked Charlie, “Would you mind if some of us stopped by your place some time? I was told you have a killer station.” Charlie responded quickly, “Well, thank you. You’re always welcome. Our place is at the top of DX Hill”, pointing up toward the ceiling. “If you have a club roster, my address and phone number is listed. Come on up any time at all. We’ll probably have something good to eat for you.”

It was nearly 11 o’clock when the members broke up and headed home. Mike said to Charlie, “Well, it looks like the next generation will be OK, don’t you think?” Charlie nodded and simply said, “Uh-huh” and both old friends got into their trucks and flipped on their mobile radio tuned to the club repeater so they could chat with other members on their way home.