

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Charlie's greatest pride in Amateur Radio has not been in his beloved DXing or in his respect for CW, the mode that always can get through. His deepest satisfaction and reward has always come from his teaching and mentoring, especially when younger potential hams are involved. He loves the fact that they are always inquisitive and hungry to learn. Obviously, not every youngster is anxious to become a ham but those who are can rarely disguise their enthusiasm. The wide eyes that first see the magic of wireless communication or the "really cool" use of Morse code can never be denied. There exists a long list of present day hams who rose through the ranks under Charlie's tutelage.

In fact this year's entire slate of officers in his club became hams with Charlie's helping hand. The club VE team and most of the emergency communications team are hams who also proudly call Charlie their Elmer.

The feeling is mutual for Charlie. He is very proud to be able to still help so many after many years in the game. It is most rewarding and satisfying. But Charlie has become gradually disappointed in the last few years. Every year, he offers to teach an upgrade class in the club for members and guests and has done so for the last fifteen years. It was a class aimed strictly at helping new hams to upgrade from their first Technician ticket so that they could enjoy HF and hopefully DXing. Back when Charlie began the classes, Novice and Technicians were very interested in learning theory; how something worked and why it was designed the way it was. There was universal curiosity to learn why a large six element yagi would usually outperform a smaller three element array on the same band or why a simple 7 or 14 MHz station could produce reliable DX QSOs most of the time but an elaborate station on 50 or 144 MHz wouldn't do so. This is not the case today. New Techs don't seem to care, at least not nearly as much.

His students a decade ago were more curious to learn theory and reasons why radio waves behaved in the way they did. When something happened to their equipment, they wanted to learn how to repair it or prevent that failure from recurring. He has noted with sadness that hams today generally do not care to know how to fix their equipment, only the name and phone number of the repair shop that can repair it for the least cost or take the radio as a trade toward the newer super rocket radio on the market.

The number of students signing up for club classes has been noticeably smaller in the last few years. Population data is supported by the declining ham population statistics published by the different ham census keepers such as AH0A and Hamdata. It's quite troubling to note the downward trend showing fewer people getting their licenses. The US has lost more than six thousand hams over the last two years. That's a very large decline and in a very short period of time.

Charlie and his friends who came into our fraternity fifty or sixty years ago are all rubbing their collective chins, worrying over what will become of their life long avocation. Charlie is particularly concerned when the most popular request he receives from people in his classes is "What HT should I buy?" or "How many repeaters should I program into its memory?" Charlie not only doesn't have the answers to these questions but it discourages Charlie as well to see what the burning questions of the day have become for the new crop. None seem to be ever interested in the same things that attracted the hams of yesterday. Charlie is always mindful of the statistics that remind him that more than half of all US licensees have nothing above a Novice or Technician ticket with a heavy majority of them quite content to stay there. It should

be no surprise then, to see the heavy interest in push button equipment and appliance operation rather than learning how the equipment works.

With so many hams active today whose highest expectations are defined by what repeaters one uses or how well they're able to reach a repeater, old timers like Charlie understandably become discouraged. Charlie believes that the magic of ham radio is lost if the ham doesn't choose to enjoy all the privileges that the hobby can provide. Why would a baseball player never want to hit a ball out of the infield or a fisherman never land a fish weighing over one pound? Charlie is a very kind and generous man but when he thinks about the current plight of Amateur Radio, he is frequently driven to the edge. He blames it somewhat on his own advancing age but in his heart, he knows that he would feel a lot better if he simply had more students in his club classes or even if more of them would ask more complex questions about propagation during the sunspot minimums, comparing a yagi's performance with a cubical quad's or the balance between linearity and efficiency in the design of a linear amplifier. Alas, he knows that more than half of our hams today don't even understand these questions, let alone care to know the answers or his discussion on the theory behind them.

Today's lack of interest in technical matters or wider license privileges isn't cause for accusations or dragging out old tired "when I was a new ham..." stories. It isn't the fault of 52% of our US Amateurs who hold a Technician or Novice ticket. They're merely doing what any smart consumer would do today. They obtained a product with the features that were promoted or they felt that they wanted, nothing more. This high percentage of our hams does not see value in climbing higher up the mountain only because it is there. Whose fault, if there is a fault, would that be? That would be ours.

A very wise person once offered advice to those of us who dwelled on wishing that we had better conditions for ourselves or that our problems weren't as difficult to deal with as we believed them to be. Instead of bemoaning our misfortune, we were advised to play the cards we are dealt in life with as much energy as is appropriate and employing our resources wisely and with guidance from our cumulative experience. Simply, play the hand you have, not the one you wish you had. Very few people are criticized for giving their best effort to a project even if the result isn't always remarkable or even the one wanted.

Charlie realizes that he cannot change the world's thinking and although he'll never become a repeater user, Charlie has resigned himself to including more substantive material in his discussions that concern the basics of line of sight propagation, thermal ducting, EME and Sporadic E. Whether they want it or not, Charlie will make sure that his students learn material that just might tickle their curiosity to seek further information. We must all play the cards in our hands. By making the most of the current crop of Technicians, we just might show them that more magic is waiting for them a few MHz down the dial. Good luck to all Elmers and thanks for your great service.