

## CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Recently, Charlie was enjoying his umpteenth cup of morning coffee, reading his latest copy of QST, sitting at the kitchen table while Mary was preparing some ingredients to make some cookies, muffins and pies for the church bazaar. Mary keeps a tiny TV running in the kitchen to keep her company while she works. The TV was tuned to a home crafts program on one of the home channels. The guest on the program was explaining how a new color tinting kit was available that could match any color very easily by using a simple optical sensor. Then, the program broke for a commercial. It was promoting some ready to eat meals and side dishes. Charlie wasn't actually listening to the TV program. He was flipping through the back pages of QST but subconsciously relating the TV commercial message with what he was reading in the print advertising. Then, he looked up to watch Mary prepare the ingredients for one of her incredible and legendary apple pies.

Mary had peeled and sliced some apples and placed them in a bowl with sugar and cinnamon to develop into a marinated filling. She had hand kneaded some flour, cold butter and a little water into just the right portions for her bottom and top crusts. This is the kind of thing she had done since she was a little girl in her mother's kitchen. Making pies from scratch is very simple and was one of the first things she learned to make. The recipe contains very few ingredients and it isn't hard for anyone to follow, Mary will gladly tell anyone how she does it.

Charlie, being the engineer that he is, took in all of this information and analyzed the metric significance of the entire event before him. From the TV program and its commercial message, QST advertisements and Mary's scratch recipe prep work, something struck Charlie that made him understand a major problem that we've been experiencing in Amateur Radio over the last decade or more. From what he just realized however, that trend may be partially correcting itself.

In one quick analysis, Charlie realized that our hams are offered any accessory item they need could want or even realize that they might need in ready to use form made by MFJ or one of the other accessory manufacturers for less money than it would probably cost any ham to build. There are accessories being advertised to fix problems that we didn't know we had (and likely don't). In crafts and cooking, one needn't be as skilled as Mary in scratch cooking. Three step pie crusts and ready made fillings in cans come together to make very respectable pies. All you need to know is how to open a can and tear open an envelope. Oh OK, they're not quite as wonderful as Mary's but they're surely respectable and an awful lot better than those frozen tasteless hockey pucks that used to be sold as frozen pies.

A very old and worn rule states that necessity is the mother of invention. We develop new things to satisfy new needs as they present themselves. It's a famous American tradition. Trying to anticipate future needs, entrepreneurs have produced inexpensive and practical accessories and ready to use ingredients and craft pieces that we may purchase and use without much effort on our part. They are skilled at staying a step ahead of the buyers to have products ready before they're in demand. That's the basis of successful marketing.

Charlie became a ham when he was 13, long before he became an engineer and in those ancient days, about all that was available in the commercial "ready to use" market were a few receivers and even fewer transmitters. Most everything was equipment that had been designed for the military and repackaged in more attractive black or gray cabinets instead of olive drab. Collins, Hallicrafters and Hammarlund were about the only major manufacturers in the 40s when Amateurs were getting back on the air after the war years when they weren't allowed to operate.

But, there was a literal flood of World War II surplus equipment dumped on the market just about the time Charlie entered the market. Like everyone else, Charlie took advantage of the availability of surplus gear that sold for pennies on the dollar compared to similar commercial gear. He learned a great deal in modifying the equipment to work on regular AC power. But the best value in the surplus world without much doubt was in the component market. Kilowatt tubes, transformers and vacuum variable capacitors could be found for pocket change. Hams could gather all the parts they needed for about anything they wanted to build for next to nothing. The surplus market made builders and modifiers out of just about everyone. Economics drove that decision. Many manufacturers, like Heathkit, built their businesses around marketing kits of surplus components and innovative designs at bargain prices. World Radio Labs, Burstein Appleby, and the original Radio Shack and thousands of smaller and local businesses were born out of the huge surplus electronic parts market. Most all are gone now. Radio Shack morphed into an entirely different type of business.

Similarly today, although in a very different world, economics still drives what we choose to do and how we pursue our love for Amateur Radio. Our time has become so very valuable that we can't afford to waste any of it. We find that buying ready made units and plugging them together to form a station satisfies our need to get on the air. Building our own equipment seems to be pushed off into the long infinite and unmeasured days of retirement when we think we'll be able to afford to waste time. But any retiree could tell you that retirement has no time to waste.

But to get back to Charlie's observation concerning basic components and ready made items, Mary was making a pie from basic component parts or ingredients in the same way hams used to build equipment and accessories. Hams had no choice 50 or more years ago. Today, hams buy ready made accessories and sub assemblies. Crafts people buy ready to use paints, glaze, adhesives, and just about anything. Even "ready to use" food components are on the market to make pies, cakes, cookies, roasts, soup, salads, coffee and just about anything. No one has to work at the basic component level any longer unless he or she wishes to do so.

That is key. Are the results superior when produced from basic ingredients or components? Often, the answer is no. Are they less expensive? Often, they aren't. Are they better in any way? Well yes, but usually for the person producing the item, not necessarily for the recipient.

Cooking, sculpting, painting or building something using one's own creative skill is rewarding in a special way. Opening a package, plugging in an accessory, assembling ready made units or any other "paint by number" project is not.

Charlie scanned the dozens of advertisements in QST offering all sorts of ready to use accessories, even ready made jumper and coax cables. He saw the easy to use supplies that are being hawked by the sales person on TV. He watched Mary softly hum to herself in her own space as she delighted in creating another of her masterpiece apple pies from scratch with nothing ready made by someone else except for the flour or cinnamon. He thought of the new group of 20 and 30 something women and men that Mary and her friends work with at their church cooking classes. Interest in home cooking has sky-rocketed in recent years, thanks in large measure to Julia Child and others on TV who have brought cooking skills to the public. Books, tapes and high end equipment are available to help new cooks learn how to achieve great results working with basic ingredients and nothing pre-packaged.

Charlie understood why the philosophy that brought hams like him as far as it did needs to reinvent itself if we expect ham radio to endure over the next fifty years. New hams need to discover the magic for themselves that brought Charlie and others like him into Amateur Radio. How will they do it? That remains to be discovered but we can be fairly confident that the same old ideas won't work. If modern hams are able to purchase anything and everything that they could possibly need or want, they'll have no need to own a soldering iron, test meter, or even know how large a half wave antenna needs to be.

It wasn't long ago that a ham wouldn't imagine spending \$50 to \$100 or more for a dipole antenna. Who would buy a dipole? Just a roll of wire and three insulators. That was a normal junk box antenna that you'd make out of most anything you could find in the garage, barn or friend's junk pile for a cost of zero. I've used rubber heels from discarded shoes or plastic soda bottles for insulators and wire that I salvaged from a junked transformer. The feedline might cost something if you didn't have some used coax or 75 ohm twinlead (yes, there was 75 ohm twinlead) from an old antenna, but that was usually the limit. Today, our new hams readily write checks for these things and then don't know how to adjust them to the frequency for which they wish to optimize it. Some can't tell how long a dipole is without using one of the dozens of on line calculators to determine antenna sizes. Gone are the hams who can recite the half wave dipole formula  $[468 / \text{freq (MHz)} = \text{length in feet}]$  in their sleep. It's discouraging to see how times have changed and not for the better.

Charlie now understood better than he did before what the reasons were for our hobby's decline from the glorious days of the past. He concluded his thoughts while watching the TV advertisement, reading QST and seeing Mary working happily away on an apple pie. The reason we don't have the curiosity among new hams today is because there's no need for it. It's a plug and play world and we've done it to ourselves with advances in merchandising, marketing, manufacturing and promotion. None the less, it's real and we're living in it.

What we need is a Pied Piper to lead the way into the future. Julia Child led the way for the aspiring cooks of the future. Who will lead the way for the 650,000 hams and more importantly, the unknown number of new hams yet to be licensed in the US? Or, as some cynical people believe, is Amateur Radio obsolete and doomed to extinction? Maybe each of us will be able to help just a little bit if we decide that this year; we will actually make something from our junk box, an antenna, a power supply, a coupler, even a transmitter. But, we must make it from the ground up by building from the component level. By seeing our own effort result in producing a working product, we might once again see the magic of Amateur Radio and what drew us into the hobby in the first place. Then again, we might be able to show new hams in a whole new way what they need to understand in order to become tomorrow's Amateurs. What say? Give it a try?