

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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In last month's Charlie's Whistle, it was stated that Brian came to Signal Hill, prepared to work on Charlie's tower. Brian brought one of his fellow MIT grad students with him but that person didn't come to work on the tower. Not hardly. You see, while studying engineering at this venerable institution, Brian met another grad student who was studying for an MBA in the Alfred P Sloan School of Business. She was a self proclaimed foodie. What's a foodie? A person who simply loves food for consumption, study, preparation, and news may be called a foodie. But, I'm getting ahead of myself. It started several months ago, when Brian was still in the final hours of defending his thesis.

While running from the massive Hayden library to Walker, the building next door which houses the campus Amateur station, W1MX one afternoon, Brian was stopped by two students who he didn't recognize although he thought he had seen one of them in the lecture hall. They introduced themselves as Mike and Susan, both grad students; Susan studying business and Mike working on his Doctorate in Solar Research. Mike asked, "Pardon us, but I know you from the library. You're a ham, aren't you?" Brian politely nodded and said, "Yes I am and I'm heading up to the ham station right now. Would you like to see it? Are you hams?"

Susan responded that neither was a ham but might try to get licensed when they finish their work in school. They accepted Brian's invitation and went with him to W1MX.

Actually, they stayed after Brian had to leave. But during the couple of hours they spoke that afternoon, Brian learned that Susan was a strong fan of food. In fact, she had been a food editor for Martha Stewart. She actually had run a restaurant before that and was a bone fide "foodie". Brian boasted to her about Mary back home and her amazing baking. Brian said that without any doubt, Mary's baking was the best he imagined that he ever would taste. Susan was fascinated and asked to please meet Mary. Brian said he would be happy to introduce them.

So that's how it started, but as any busy grad student will tell you, finding time in two schedules that provide enough time to permit a visit to DX Hill, is easier to say than carried out. So long a length of time in fact that Brian and Susan's husband were both able to complete their doctoral theses, received their respective PhDdegrees. Brian, of course, had assumed full time working responsibilities at his employer's signal processing lab. But, Susan didn't forget and recently contacted Brian by e mail to see if she could meet Mary sometime soon. Brian had planned to come up and help Charlie with his tower work, so he responded telling her that if she wanted to, she was most welcome to come with him on Saturday and meet Mary. Of course, he warned her that it would be a fairly early day since he wanted to arrive at DX Hill shortly after 7 AM because Charlie always starts his work early. He was quite surprised when Susan agreed and asked for his address to meet him for the trip to visit Charlie and Mary. The early hour seemed to be no deterrent at all for her. Of course, most grad students are accustomed to pulling "all-nighters" on a regular basis, so leaving her Cambridge apartment at 5AM to get to Brian's home in time for the trip to DX Hill, was no problem at all.

Then, Brian thought about his plan once again and realized that he hadn't thought to call Mary to see if she would be there on Saturday, let alone prepared for a guest that early in the morning. Without delay, he called and luckily, Mary answered. He wanted to surprise Charlie, showing up for the tower work so when he called, he asked Mary if it would be OK for him to come over early on Saturday to help Charlie do his annual tower maintenance. Mary said that Charlie was right here and offered to put him on the phone.

Brian said, "Well, actually, I'd rather surprise him and not tell him that I'm coming. Also, I was hoping I could bring a friend from school along. She's not a ham but is quite an accomplished cook and writer about food."

Mary was a little surprised but said she'd be happy to meet her. The mother in her made her ask, "Brian, is this lady someone new in your life?" Brian laughed and said, "Oh no, Mary. She and her husband are grad students that I met on campus. Is it all right to bring her to visit about 7 on Saturday morning?"

As expected, Mary was quite pleased to receive Brian and his friend early on Saturday and she promised not to prematurely reveal his plan to Charlie. She seemed excited to meet Susan and promised that she'd be pleased to have a nice visit with her and learn more about her experiences.

So that's the background of the story behind the story from last month. Actually, in some ways, even though it had nothing at all to do with Amateur radio, it was the better story of the weekend. Charlie and Brian spent a good three tough hours working on Charlie's two big yagis. You wouldn't think that there would be so much work to do, especially since Charlie faithfully does this preventative maintenance work every autumn, but there was, at least this year. It seems that over this past spring and summer, ants had constructed a home in a switch box and another structure in a weatherproof phasing network enclosure. How on earth they managed to get all those blades of grass, sticks, mud and other debris up the tower is unbelievable! It was truly a Herculean task.

Charlie had heard of ants making nests of grass and mud inside the traps of triband beams. This, of course, significantly compromises their performance and usually the degrading takes place over time so it isn't noticeable. Obviously, all this debris across dielectric material partially shorts out the traps' capacitors and raises the dickens with coils, switches, connections, etc because it provides an electrical path across them or to ground. Charlie and his classic radio restorer friend Mike have found many a tribander for sale for short money at flea markets that needed repair and unknown to the seller, all they needed was cleaning ant residue out of their traps. Charlie and Brian carefully cleaned out all the mess atop the tower and resealed everything. They replaced dried up and hardened tape and rubber boots as they made their way down the tower. The wonderful aroma from Mary's kitchen tantalized them all the way from the top of the tower to the ground. It was a little distracting as they tried to imagine what they would have for lunch. They could tell that lunch would include apple and blueberry pie, muffins, steaks, baked potato and some other wonderful things just from the aroma.

Mary had a great time. She and Susan found that they had a lot in common and after spending the morning together, no one could tell that they had just met. By the time Charlie and Brian had finished the maintenance work on the tower, the new friends had finished preparing a lunch fit for the pages of Gourmet magazine.

Over lunch, Brian realized that Susan had actually been interviewing Mary to learn her baking secrets and why she never went into business selling her cakes, pies, muffins and cookies. Mary just smiled and said that her only customers were her family and friends.

She never had other interests. Susan only wished that she had as much natural talent as Mary. She told Mary, "We could do great things together." Mary was flattered but had no interest at all in what Susan had proposed. Naturally, Susan was thinking like a Sloan School MBA with a business plan already being outlined.

Charlie and Brian were busy eating, having built up a good appetite while working fairly hard for the last few hours. Eventually, Charlie finished what was in his plate and said to Susan, "I tried to encourage Mary years ago to open a little shop to sell her specialties but she didn't want the pressure that would likely go along with it. She said she'd rather make things for her friends and the ham club. She's happy that way and so am I."

Susan stayed all day and gathered loads of information, took pictures and seemed totally enraptured. Brian and Charlie spent time in the ham shack making sure that their work had improved performance, which of course it greatly did. Charlie had noticed recently that his 40 meter beam's performance had not been up to par. It was clearly the fault of the ant residue. Like a good "Elmer" should do, he used the opportunity to demonstrate to Brian the very tangible benefit of regular preventative maintenance. "Doctor Brian" as they call him agreed that nothing has changed...every time he comes to DX Hill; he learns something even despite having earned an MIT PhD. There's nothing to compare with hands-on practical knowledge, especially when it's presented and explained by an "Elmer" like Charlie.

Do you have an Elmer? Do you know what an Elmer is? If you've been a regular reader of Charlie's Whistle for a while, you've learned what a perfect example of an "Elmer" actually is. Charlie is as fine an Elmer as one will ever find, an older experienced ham with remarkable wisdom and patience. Read the early introduction to this series of tutorial stories dating back to 1996, archived on the BVARC website, <http://www.blackstonevalleyarc.org/>. Click on the small green "Charlie's Whistle" button on the tool bar. Then make yourself a fresh cup of coffee or tea and start reading. An Elmer is a great resource, especially if you're a fairly new ham. In fact, if you're a new ham, having an Elmer's phone number on your speed dial is essential to survive your first few years. You'll usually receive good information from your Elmer as opposed to the scuttlebutt and hear-say that you will gather on a repeater or from other new hams who are passing on fourth hand information that is often incorrect. Do yourself a favor and learn correct information from the start. You'll be helping everyone around you, including yourself.