

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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One of the standing traditions that Mary and Charlie have is to regularly go out to dinner with close friends at Christmas time. During the time between Christmas and New Year's, they went out with Charlie's friend Mike and his wife Marlene to an old country inn up on the ridge across the valley from their home on DX Hill. It's about an hour's drive but according to critical reviews and what friends in the ham club, Mary's crafts club and their church have reported, they would not be disappointed.

Mike is Charlie's friend of a few decades who owns a barn full of old Collins equipment and always is turning up attractive deals. He also frequents flea markets to buy and sell equipment. He also participates in government auctions and often lands great deals. A couple of years ago, he was high bidder on a pallet full of HF amplifiers that were designed for our State Department and destined for shipment overseas. Charlie and Mike opened the Cosmoline packed crates and discovered several gorgeous commercial Collins amplifiers that were capable of full legal power all day long from 1.5 to 30 MHz. Charlie obtained two of them for his station, Mike kept a couple for himself and he sold the rest to individuals. He made a considerable profit on that deal.

During the week between Christmas and New Years, the four drove through the valley and to the inn. They enjoyed one another's company as well as the beautiful lights on houses and trees along the way. When they reached the inn, the scene that greeted them could have been on a Christmas card. A little snow had fallen and the old place was decorated to the nines. Smoke was rising from the huge field rock chimney. Mary and Marlene may have described it best by saying it was the kind of place you can only imagine going to during the Christmas season with friends.

Mary is, as you all know, a very good cook. Julia Child once brushed off someone calling her America's Chef by saying that she was just a good cook. Similarly, Mary has admitted when asked to be one of the best cooks on DX Hill. Charlie and many others certainly would agree.

Being the good cook that she is, she knows food preparation and offered suggestions to the others and the waiter how something should be prepared. Charlie only advised the waiter that he'd be wise to follow Mary's suggestions. The waiter was quite courteous and noted everything Mary suggested and promised to pass it along to the chef.

While waiting for dinner to be prepared, the discussion between Mike and Charlie invariably got around to ham radio. But, since Mary and Marlene are not hams, they respectfully restrained themselves from going into full ham dialogue. But Mary could easily tell that something was bothering Charlie, so she gave him the opportunity to clear it up before dinner was served. She asked Marlene, "Would you care to freshen up before dinner?" Of course, Marlene got the message and the ladies departed.

Charlie asked Mike, "Is it just me because I'm getting older or do the new operators miss the point that attracted us to this hobby?" Mike rubbed his chin and nodded, "No, I think you're right. I've seen the same; especially since this new batch of no code folks have become active on all the bands." Mike quickly added, "I'm really happy that we've attracted more hams but they aren't the same as the ones we've seen in the past." Both thought for a moment and then Mike offered, "You know Charlie; I don't think it's because of the no code thing. In trying to attract younger hams, I think we've also attracted their twenty and thirty something habits, customs and priorities, which are very different from ours. They're used to instant messaging on their Blackberries and all the other devices that they use every day. Everything is done for them and is easy enough for a three year old. Absolutely no skill required. They want ham radio to be the same."

Charlie rubbed his chin and then wagged his finger at Mike, "Yep, you're probably right, Mike. You know last year, I spoke to our club about the instant gratification problems that I saw with the new DXers who were upset that they couldn't get DXCC in a year. Some were upset that they couldn't work a hundred countries in a contest weekend." Mike grinned and said, "Is that because you can do it, Charlie? Is it a personal thing?" Charlie knew that his old friend was kidding but he also knew that Mike was stating a very valid point. Why does Charlie get bothered over these "kids" who feel genuinely upset that they can't work a hundred different countries in a weekend? Why doesn't he simply look past their habits and ignore them?

This strong desire has driven some new generation hams with software savvy into creating programs that would search the DX Cluster for new entities and sound alarms when it detects one. With something called rig control, the program can tune the transceiver to the DXer's frequency, turn the beam toward him and will log the contact, make out the QSL card and mailing label. They have also created programs that can copy and send code at very high speed. There's nothing stopping these clever software designers from producing a program that combines all these things into one super program so that all the operator needs to do is sip his coffee and watch. It's small wonder why Charlie is upset, being the very proud traditional skilled legacy ham that he is.

Charlie said something unusually strong for him, being such a normally gentle person. "Mike, I don't like what the new technology is doing to our hobby. We're supposed to be experimenters, operators, designers, builders and public servants. I can guess that the new hams would feel that they're serving all of those goals with their automated programs but not to me. I don't believe that the end ever justifies the means, in most anything. These new hams, by using automated methods to find, work, log, QSL and record their DX are losing the sense of how important it is for all Amateurs to become skilled and competent operators. By sitting back with their feet on the desk and watching their programs have all the fun, they don't learn the basic skills of a DXer or a contester. They're just lazy."

Mike replied, "Charlie, a few weeks ago, I participated in the ARRL 160 CW contest. It was on CW and many stations were ripping along at 25, 30 wpm and more. When I search and pounce, I always call stations at the speed they are sending and in more than half the cases, they couldn't copy my call until I slowed way down and repeated it once

or twice. I know very well that I was being heard but these guys just couldn't copy my call at the speed they were using. I had never seen that to be so prevalent before that contest. This new wave of guys who learn CW after getting their licenses must be entering contests now. I can hardly wait for the ARRL DX and WPX contests."

Charlie added, "These folks use CW Skimmer and other software to decipher the code, rather than try to learn the code themselves. In my view, these wanna-be's will never become real hams as long as they refuse to actually learn code and become respectable operators. Those other guys you worked may just need some Elmering to tell them to slow down a bit until their copying skill catches up closer to their ambition. They'll be OK if they slow down a bit and actually learn the skills to become a good operator. The real problem is with these make-believe hams who refuse to learn code and spend their time using their software tools to copy and send for them is that they're not advancing themselves as Amateurs. I just find that disgusting. If they just tried to learn, I think that I'd feel much differently about them."

The ladies arrived back and Marlene said, "I'll bet you boys thought we had gotten lost. Mary peeked into the kitchen and the chef invited us in. He asked if she were the lady who sent in specific instructions. You know what happened then. Mary had an apron on in a few seconds and he put her to work. After a while, I had to pull her out before they added her to the payroll." Mary added, "It was wonderful! Charlie, you know the way I make my gravy with the butter and cream and not use those yuckie thickeners to give it body? Well, I showed the chef how I did it and he said he had never seen that way of doing it. He was so appreciative that he kissed my hand, said merci mademoiselle and told us that our dinners were on his tab tonight."

Charlie smiled and said, "Well, that's Mike's luck. He was going to pick up the tab tonight. Merry Christmas, Mike." They all laughed. Charlie was kidding Mike and he knew it. Actually, Charlie had planned to do it, so it was he who was lucky. After a short while, the waiter and a trail of others behind him arrived at the table and began filling the table with all sorts of appetizers, salads, soups, a variety of wine and other beverages. The waiter said, "Compliments of the chef. Your dinners will be held until you are ready for them."

Wow! Everyone at their table and several others nearby was astonished. They enjoyed everything from the shrimp cocktail and lobster bisque to the escargot and tropical fruit. There was far too much for them and they knew that they needed to stop before they couldn't possibly enjoy their entrée. After enjoying as much as they dared, Charlie signaled their waiter that they wished to have their entrée's served. The table was cleared and the waiter said that he would prepare two "take home" bags of the remaining appetizers for each couple. How considerate!

Charlie had ordered one of his favorites, a nice medium rare steak with baked potato. Mary wanted chicken l'orange and Marlene asked to have swordfish. Mike couldn't resist the house's specialty item, prime rib which was presented with great flourish by the staff. It's easy to see why this inn has such a wonderful reputation. Everything was prepared to

perfection and there was very little talking for the next several minutes while the group worked on their scrumptious dinners. After finishing, Mary proclaimed that the dinner was done to perfection and coming from her, that's quite an endorsement.

During desert, for which everyone selected fruit and sherbet, Charlie dared to add something more to his and Mike's conversation, "Mike, earlier I didn't want to say that all this new technology was bad. In fact, I'm happy to see these new tools come into our hobby but what bothers me is when these 'thirty something' newbies use them to take an easy way to becoming a DXer or contester, they never learn the basics of becoming a considerate and competent Amateur. If they use these tools to help them after they acquire at least moderate personal CW and phone operating skills, I'd be perfectly happy."

Mary just looked at Marlene and said, "Do we need to go back to the kitchen?" They all laughed and Charlie said, "OK, OK. That's all. I just had that final thought in my head from what we were talking about earlier." Mary said she was just kidding and knew that it was hopeless to keep you two from talking about ham radio.

Dinner was wonderful and they groaned themselves away from the table and picked up the two large bags of appetizers from the chef who personally brought them out of the kitchen. He kissed Mary on her cheek and told her she was always welcome to visit his kitchen. They wished the staff a Happy Holiday season and found their way to the car. The hour long ride home through the valley was very pleasant and relaxing. They listened to a nice CD and chatted about their Christmas experiences, their kids, grandkids and dogs. It was a wonderful evening and they agreed to do it again really soon.

Happy Holidays from DX Hill.