

Kinder, Gentler, Ham Radio

One of the phrases in ham radio is “Elmering”. The story goes someone new to ham radio had a buddy who mentored him into the hobby, his name, Elmer. Many, many hams state and believe this is the way to maintain our hobby, yet, and this is a personal observation over the last year and a half, but many hams don’t make a concerted effort to reach out to people in the hobby.

It’s my belief every ham should make that effort. They should show their enthusiasm and share that enthusiasm with potential hams and new hams.

Personally, some of the behavior of many of our seasoned hams suggest the opposite, in my view. And while any licensed ham is free to do whatever is legally allowed, there’s an undercurrent of resentment about where the FCC has gone in recent months and a perceived “loss of tradition” involving just how long a new ham should have to “wait” before entering HF or being considered “worthwhile” by established hams.

This may seem “hurtful”, but as a new ham myself (licensed only for the last 1 1/2 years) – I’m still

feeling a little like an “outsider” myself.

I’ve heard the following phrases and their descriptions by fellow hams.

Appliance Operator: A person who buys a complicated radio and knows nothing about its operation, construction, or capabilities. They PPT and they are on the air.

Extra Easy Class: These are people who earned their Extra class with 5WPM or without element 1 code as a requirement.

CB Operator Mentality: Anyone - usually with a new call sign - who is trying to learn ham radio with a new rig and reach out to a repeater - any repeater - to talk with someone.

I’m sure there are others, but my point of this post is simple: as radio operators who are passionate about our hobby it’s in our best interest to help and engage other operators - particularly our new operators.

Currently, with the new removal of element 1 (CW) from FCC regulations some folks who couldn’t or

wouldn't learn CW can now gain their General Class license. Listening to some hams you would have thought the world came to an end. But, in fact, the ranks of General and Extra Class have been in decline for years. The result? We could have lost those frequencies with Element 1 still in place. Next to polar bears - the "HF ham" may have become an extinct species.

Many fear a "CB" mentality on HF with the infusion of people who weren't novices, CW aware, or even interested in the technical aspects of the hobby. Some feel this means the "frequencies will go to hell" and I've already hear grouching about how breaking stations go "on and on" not knowing the frequency is in use. Or that people fail to use proper etiquette while communicating with others.

Bah!

It's our job as hams to help each other and learn appropriate operating procedure. The fact is, you aren't getting Morse Code back as the "filter" to prevent easier entry to HF. It's up to those already on HF to help new people and to police existing hams on proper procedure.

On another, similar topic, it would be nice when new people visit local ham clubs, those clubs embrace visitors, new members, and actively engage them. Even the clubs I belong to fail to make others feel comfortable. They run to their friends and engage in the latest technical topic of the day leaving new people sitting alone, to fend for themselves. My own experience with one club - one I've visited since November (it's now September - 10 months later) where not a single member (or officer) has attempted to talk to me.

That's deplorable.

Maybe if I looked like the incredible melting man, or had bad breath, or Tourette's Syndrome, that might invite a cold shoulder from veteran members. But that's not the case. From the president down to lowly members - none feel the compunction to talk to their new membership and I'm an example of this. (Yes, I can't jump in and force myself on them - but why SHOULD I?)

Of course, people like myself will eventually go away, never to return.

Sad isn't it? That our "proud" Emering heritage is

that thinly applied today. We talk a good game, but do we really believe it?

And you are probably saying, “Bob, you are full of it. We go to events and try to get people to join our club and participate in events.”

That may, or may not be true. Some of the public service events I’ve been to I’ve watched club members sit as far as they can from a table where people are looking at information about the club. Club members don’t walk over and engage those people - again - they sit with their friends outside of “ear shot” and engage conversation with the same folks they’ve grown used to. Come on people, we are radio operators. Our hobby is about communications with each other.

Field Day is another example of how we ignore visitors. I’ve noticed how few members of clubs actually walked up to visitors and gave them a tour of the club setup. Or offer materials the visitor can take home. Or offered them a chance to “get on the air.” Our “Get on the Air” (GOTA) station sat vacant through most of Field Day. That station should be continuously occupied by new Techs, or those unlicensed to operate - with the most social

General/Extra class operator available.

I'm very concerned we aren't even doing the minimal best to extend our hand to the community. One of the clubs I frequent is very much into emergency operations and support. They do a fantastic job with that, but they don't do any sort of "reach out" to the local community in any substantive way. You won't find them in the local school systems drumming up enthusiasm for amateur radio - or for their club. You won't find them responding to new people on their local repeater, or inviting them to a club meeting.

Why is that?

So I say this. Here's what I think is going on - and how to avoid it.

1. Drop the "Elitist Behavior" - Sorry, some hams came into this hobby with "home built rigs" or got their license at the FCC field office and are masterful at 28 WPM CW. Good for you! Now share your knowledge and enthusiasm with new hams. Tell them about how "hard it was" but don't hold that against someone new to the hobby. Help them set-up their new HF station.

Explain how grounding systems work, share net etiquette, and invite people to your daily or weekly net.

2. Move out of your “safe zone”. Sure, you’re CERT trained, you’ve been to tornado stricken zones, you’ve been honored by the ARRL for your community service, and you are on a first name basis with your local mayor. When was the last time you invited a new ham to your disaster meeting? Offered to explain how CERT works? Taken someone on a fox hunt? Invited someone into your shack to listen in on your MARS net? Never? Hummm.... How about inviting a new ham to “go for coffee” – there’s dozens of them on 2-meter repeaters anxious to make their first contact. Offer up some of those exciting stories you’ve collected over the years. Buy the guy (or gal) a cup of coffee - shake their hand and say, “Welcome to the most exciting and diverse hobby on the planet. Glad to have you here!” Imagine their reaction and the satisfaction you get by being the first bonafide REAL ham they've met - and YOU made them feel at home.
3. You don’t know everything – don’t expect new people to know everything either. Everyone has a “comfort zone” involving this hobby. I

can't tell you how many older hams lament "new radios", computer software, D*Star, and other technologies which new hams may find interesting. Sure, you know the grid voltages of major transmitter vacuum tubes by heart. You can draw a working amplifier circuit on a napkin. You can load any band with your 40 meter beam antenna and talk the world.

Perhaps that new ham who "doesn't know which side of the microphone to talk on," just might know something about how to make that cluster radio program work with your radio.

Hummm.... You may be that "hard line"

Advanced Class operator who won't upgrade because "Advanced was harder than Extra and I've got the FCC license to prove it", but still can't get their PC to boot! Yikes! Get over it and combine forces with new people. Let others enjoy the hobby by sharing your own expertise with them and they with you. There's no loss in pride by learning new things from people, younger than you, for which they can make this hobby "new to you".

4. Stop sitting in that same spot at your club meeting. Engage in the effort to "make new friends." And don't practice "age discrimination" - sit with that 20 something, 30

something, even 40 and 50 something. Find the “new guy in the room” and walk right up to him. Introduce yourself, tell them “welcome to the meeting” and, if appropriate, “welcome to the hobby.” It’s all about “extending your range” - not through a linear amp, but through mentorship and friendship.

OKAY, I’VE SAID MY PEACE. I DON’T EXPECT ANY MAJOR CHANGES, BUT IF YOU ARE ONE OF THOSE HAMS WHO “LIKED IT THE OLD WAY” - REMEMBER YOU WERE A “NEW HAM” AT ONE TIME, AND YOU WERE THRILLED WHEN WELCOMED TO THE HOBBY BY A “SEASONED VETERAN” OF THE HOBBY.