

Ham radio

by Justin Nobel

A dwindling group of West Marin elders are hanging onto an endangered hobby. They are known as hams, and their obsession is ham radio, an old-fashioned way for strangers across the globe to make contact. Cell phones and the Internet seem to render ham radio obsolete, but for the 650,000 licensed hams in the U.S.—two million worldwide—the hobby still has its place.

“Ham radio is a unique hobby and a lot of folks don’t get it,” said Paul Kidd, a former Point Reyes EMT who traveled to Tonga in the mid-1990s to meet friends he had spoken with over ham radio. He now lives there with his Tongan wife, ‘Ana Fonongava’inga Vimahi.

“Why go to all the trouble and expense of building a radio station when you can call someone just about anywhere in the world on a cell phone? Because it’s magic,” said Kidd, “that’s why.”

Early ham

For the non-engineer, radio is a bit like magic. Messages are encoded onto electromagnetic waves, sent by transmitters sometimes thousands of miles through the air, captured by large metal rods known as receivers and decoded back into meaningful sounds.

According to a history of radio compiled by local historian Dewey Livingston, a writer in 1915 called radio “a victory over place and time the like of which only the living generation has experienced...it is doubtful whether our sons or yet our grandsons will witness another triumph on so gigantic a scale.”

Guglielmo Marconi, born in Italy in 1874, is considered the father of radio. He is also responsible for making West Marin the nerve center of a radio empire. Working out of the attic of his father’s estate outside Bologna, Marconi developed a crude device that in 1896 sent and received a wireless message two miles across an open field. In 1899, he sent a message across the English Channel, and two years later he broadcast one some 2,000 miles across the Atlantic.

“Wireless,” as Marconi’s invention was called (as opposed to telegram messages, which were passed along a wire) changed the world. In 1909, he received the Nobel Prize in physics for his work. He founded the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company, Ltd., and during the early part of the 20th century he set up transmitting and receiving stations across the United States.

In 1911, he decided to build a powerful new radio facility on the west coast capable of communicating across the Pacific. Marconi chose Point Reyes because it had the least interference from natural sources and competing commercial frequencies. A transmitting station was built on a Bolinas cow pasture and a receiving sta-



Paul Phelps demonstrates how a ham radio works with a spark gap. When enough charge builds, an electromagnetic wave will jump the gap, much like a radio wave shooting between a transmitter and receiver. Photo by Justin Nobel.

tion was constructed on grassy hills overlooking Tomales Bay, far enough away not to interfere with the Bolinas site.

During World War I, the Navy took over the Marconi stations. Later, General Electric and Marconi Wireless united to form the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). During the 1920s, RCA helped bring radio to a mass audience by manufacturing personal radio sets and broadcasting music and sports games.

In the late 1920s, RCA expanded its Bolinas facilities and built a new receiving station near Abbott’s Lagoon. During World War II, the army sent RCA workers to the front to set up radio communication towers. One of those workers was 95-year-old Point Reyes Station resident Gus Kovats.

Personal ham

The first time Kovats spoke with someone over ham radio, he ran into the streets shouting, “Hey, I just talked to someone from Australia!” He attended a technical school in Manhattan for radio operators and worked as a radio man on the ground for Howard Hughes during his famous round-the-world flight.

Around 1940, Kovats “wandered to California,” where he eventually got a job with RCA. Several years later, he was sent to Rome and Naples, where he clambered up 100-foot poles setting antennas to enable radio communication with the U.S.

While Kovats was in Italy, Flint was in Australia relaying radio transmissions about attack plans and the location of Japanese subs from Honolulu to warships in the Pacific. “I probably saved thousands of lives,” said Flint, who once passed out from the sheer stress of the job. “We knew it had to be right. One misstep and you

might kill three or four hundred people.”

He returned to the States with his wife Coral, an Australian nurse. In 1959, he started working with Kovats at RCA, transmitting news and information across the Pacific. “I enjoyed doing it right up until the day I quit,” said Flint. “I was very lucky. My job and my hobby were practically one in the same.”

When the record rains and mudslides of the winter of 1982-1983 cut off West Marin from the rest of the county, Flint got on his ham radio and arranged for bottles of water, boots and shovels to be trucked down from Bodega Bay. He also received transmissions from Red Cross operators who passed along inquiries from people wondering about missing loved ones. Coral ran around town looking for the names to make sure they were still alive.

Flint was honored by the Red Cross for his work. Afterwards, Paul Kidd, then an EMT, helped establish a protocol for how hams can help in times of disaster known as the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Services (RACES).

Future ham

According to Federal Communications Commission (FCC) statistics, the number of hams in the U.S. has remained about the same over the past ten years, but the number of new hams has dropped sharply. In 1997, there were 65,000 hams licensed as novice, the lowest certification level, but currently there are only 20,000 novice hams.

“Now kids are all busy with computers, IM, email, voice over IP and videogames,” said Bob Vallio, director of the Pacific Division of the American Radio Relay League. “It’s hard to impart the ex-

citement of it, because it just doesn’t look exciting.”

But there is hope for ham. Several weeks ago, I visited Dick Flint in his Inverness home under the shadow of Mt. Vision. Flint spends as much time as possible in a dark, cluttered room that his wife calls “The Hovel.” Fishing rods dangle from the ceiling and daggers are mounted above the computer. There are guns behind glass and postcards from Japan, Germany and the South Pacific glaze one wall.

Beneath a desk, a toy robot and a Sesame Street doll are strewn on the floor, and mixed in with the postcards is a magazine cutout of pop star Hannah Montana. These are signs of Flint’s 10-year-old great-granddaughter, Sara Tanner. She shares the hovel with Flint and stops by often for lessons in Morse code.

On a chilly Saturday morning last month, Tanner attended a ham radio licensing class at the Point Reyes Station firehouse held by another old West Marin ham, Paul Phelps. His pupils included an elderly Inverness resident with a shock of white hair named Lea Kreutzkamp, and David, an old friend of Phelps. Tanner was the youngest by far. She sat at the table in a purple sweater, the sleeves pulled over her palms. A device that looked like a mouse-trap lay on the table in front of her. It was a teletype machine, used to type out Morse code.

“Sara, do you know how to do Morse code?” someone asked.

“I know how to spell my name,” said Tanner.

“How do you say your name?” said Kreutzkamp.

Tanner tapped the trap with her purple palms, producing a patter of pings.