

HAM RADIO IS ALIVE & THRIVING

Often times in natural disasters, there is no telephone service. There is though, a network of people able to communicate without needing electricity. They're amateur radio operators, or hams, who work behind the scenes and provide communication services. They get the message through when conventional communication methods fail. Their slogan, "When all else fails..." is more than just words to the hams as they prove they can send messages in many forms without the use of phone systems, the Internet, or any other infrastructure that can be compromised in a crisis.

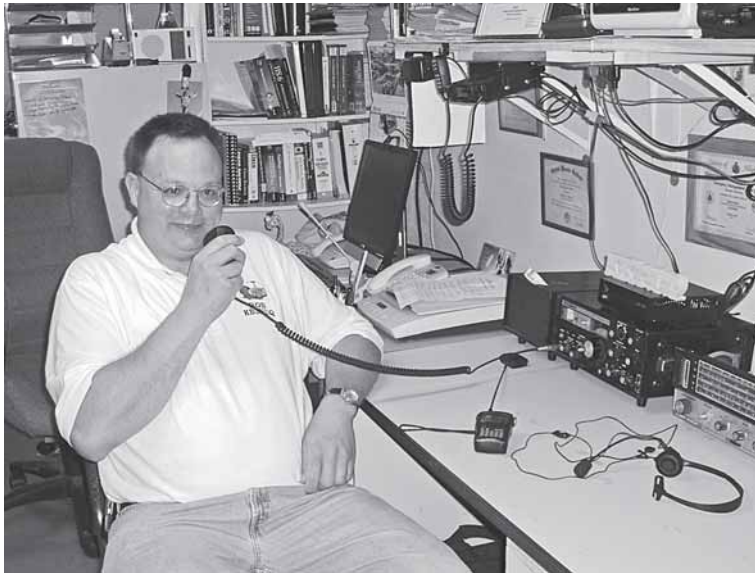
There are several hundred active ham radio operators in the Pittsburgh area, including the 60 members of the Steel City Amateur Radio Club based in Collier Township. The club meets every third Tuesday evening at their Collier Township clubhouse. Its members are active in different ham radio activities, including providing communication services for numerous events in the Pittsburgh area, like the Saint Patrick's Day parade, the Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix, and the MS 150 bike race.

Bob Mente of Collier Township has been a licensed ham radio operator for almost a year. Ham radio operators must be tested by a volunteer group of ham radio exam coordinators and are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) before they can communicate. Bob said he was first introduced to ham radio in the 1970s. He was reintroduced to it by a friend last year. Bob joined the Steel City Amateur Radio club immediately thereafter, took his exam, and is now a licensed ham radio operator.

For Bob, being a ham radio operator provides him a chance to provide a public service. Not only do ham radio operators provide communication for public service events, they also communicate with the National Weather Service through the Skywarn Program. Bob said hams provide ground level observations to the National Weather Service during severe weather events, allowing the National Weather Service to provide timely and accurate weather warnings.

One way ham radio operators prepare for emergency situations is their annual Field Day weekend. During Field Day, ham radio operators in the United States and Canada simulate emergency situations and practice communicating under harsh

circumstances. Bob said Field Day is about being prepared. Field Day weekend is a 27-hour event held the last weekend in June. During Field Day weekend, ham radio operators are not permitted to use any household current for their equipment. Bob said instead they rely on batteries and generators to run their radios.



When not providing emergency services, Bob said most hams chit chat on their radios or have specific discussion groups called nets. Ham radio operators also participate in a national traffic net that passes messages across the country. Locally, ham radio operators receive and pass messages to and from the national traffic net at 8 p.m. every day of the year.

Ham radio operators communicate on VHF, UHF, and HF frequencies with different types of radios, including hand-held radios. Hams also use satellites and microwaves to communicate. Some hams communicate in Morse code, something Bob is in the process of learning. The FCC eliminated the Morse code requirement to obtain a ham radio license in February. He said he communicates by voice and has contacted other hams as far away as England and Australia.

Ham radio operators are prohibited from broadcasting anything on their radios, like music. Under FCC rules, the only thing that can be rebroadcast are space shuttle transmissions.

An expensive hobby, most radios average from \$150 to \$3,000, not including other equipment such as antennas, amplifiers, or antenna tuners, for example. Bob said most hams keep their equipment for a long time. There are various vendors for supplies and equipment.

Ham radio is a hobby for Bob and his wife Joyce. She's also a licensed ham radio operator and is employed full-time by UPMC as a patient information coordinator. Bob is a virtual IT manager for his company, Mente IT Consultants, LLC. His company provides information technology consulting services to businesses in and around the tri-state area.

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