

Appliance Operators?

Last month in this space, I set out to bust a few ham radio myths, one of which was that “hams don’t build anything anymore.” This belief, I said, is even older than the “ham radio is dying” myth. And indeed, it is a belief that has been addressed in this column before. For example:

It seems that many folks think that amateur radio, as a scientific service, has stagnated, and in support of their beliefs, they bring up the trend toward all-commercial stations, commercial antennas and other accessories. We can’t dispute this trend, but we would rather interpret it a bit differently. We feel that the availability of high quality commercial gear has simply eased the job of the amateur in the development of communications techniques, instead of eliminating it...

The point is this. Amateur radio has come quite a ways from the days of the first commercial equipment, and we must realize that each new technique development has been made possible by that same equipment. To condemn it is foolish. It just isn’t possible to turn back the clock to the days when a good ham built all his equipment, from key to antenna. To encourage this is to negate the progress of 50 years of amateur radio ... and many a new development has come from the shack of an appliance operator.

How long ago was this written? Five years ago? Ten? Well, that last line might give you a hint ... “To encourage this is to negate the progress of 50 years of amateur radio.” Next year will be the centennial of the Radio Act of 1912, which formalized call signs and licensing, and hams were active for several years before that. So when was this written? Try August 1964, penned by Dick Ross, K2MGA, who is now CQ’s Publisher, but was Editor back then.

Yes, even 47 years ago hams were griping that nobody built anything anymore and that we were becoming a hobby of appliance operators. Yes, even 47 years ago, hams were using the term “appliance operators.” But as Dick pointed out then, and as is just as true today, the advent of commercial gear has not put an end to hams’ innovation; rather it has provided a platform for even greater innovation moving forward.

But what about the underlying assumption, whether in 1964 or 2011, that hams aren’t builders anymore? Well, last October we asked you, our readers, about your own building activities. The results are on page 40 of this issue and frankly, they amazed even us.

Ninety-four percent—yes, 94%—of the readers who responded to the survey said they had built at least one piece of radio equipment! And we’re not talking about building a dipole here ... 58% have built a receiver, 57% a transmitter, and 41% a transceiver. Also, we’re not talking about building a rig a half century ago (or a half century before that!) ... 68% of the respondents said their most recent ham radio project was completed within the past year (30%) or

is in progress right now (38%). Only 14% said it’s been ten years or longer since they’ve built anything.

Now I realize that these surveys are not scientific, but they do provide a reasonable snapshot of our readers’ interests and activities, even if they are off by a few percentage points. Clearly, CQ readers are also builders, and in large numbers, and that’s what really matters.

So what about a half-century of complaints that fewer and fewer hams are building anything? Could it be that the ranks of builders hit bottom and are now on the increase? It’s possible. There’s evidence everywhere that CW usage has been increasing since the FCC eliminated the code test requirement. Perhaps there is a resurgence of building among hams.

It’s also possible that the complaints were just plain wrong, both a half century ago and today. Just like the “ham radio is dying” myth that hams keep retelling. Here we are at our all-time licensing peak—over 696,000 at the end of 2010. Yet, a telling point, a story last weekend in a Chicago newspaper was entitled “Ham Radio Buffs Say Fading Hobby Serves Purpose.” Sometimes, you just can’t win.

Now It’s Your Turn ...

We know you’re building things, and many of you are building things of your own design (47%, according to the survey). Share! Let’s see some fun, practical, project articles. We don’t have the space to publish long and complex projects at this point, but we’d love to see what you have to offer in the way of practical projects that are fun to build and can be put together in a weekend (kind of like AD5X’s “Weekender” column that ran until Phil needed to step down and K0NEB reconfigured it into our current “Kit-building” column). Take pictures, draw schematics, and write up a brief description of what it is, how it works, why someone else might want to build and use it, and clear, step-by-step instructions for assembling the project. Please read our writers’ guidelines (www.cq-amateur-radio.com/guide.html), and then send along the article to me at w2vu@cq-amateur-radio.com or by postal mail to the CQ office. We’ll pick out the best of the best and get them into future issues. Meanwhile, keep those soldering irons warm!

Welcome, N2GA

I’d like to welcome George Tranos, N2GA, as our new “Contesting” Editor. As we reported last month, John Dorr, K1AR, decided to step aside after nearly 22 years of writing the CQ contesting column. George is an accomplished contester, often putting in top-tier performances from the Caribbean, and is respected for his objectivity, having served as a referee in three World Radio Teamsport Championship (WRTC) competitions. You’ll find a more complete introduction in this month’s “Contesting” column on page 97. Please give George your support and feedback.

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