

# The “Young Hams Crisis” is Getting Old

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**Y**ou hear it on the air, at hamfests (when we had hamfests), and club meetings (when we had club meetings). You read it in news articles about ham radio. “Ham radio is a dying hobby.” “There’s nothing to attract young people to amateur radio today.” “We’re all going to die off in the next 20 years and ham radio will die with us.” I’ve been hearing it for years and frankly, it’s getting to be as old as many of the hams who believe it’s true. In fact, even older.

Now, I’m not suggesting that we don’t need to do all we can to introduce young people to amateur radio and to hopefully get some of them to join us. But I *am* suggesting that the basic premise — that not enough young people are coming into ham radio to sustain it in the future — is false. Another premise behind the premise — that there were so many more young people becoming hams whenever you became a ham than there are today — is also false. Ham radio has always attracted a small percentage of young people, a special breed of geek if you will, and it’s just that you and your friends were part of that small percentage.

You can blame former Contesting Editor Dave Siddall, K3ZJ, for my tirade this month. While Dave was writing the Contesting column, he frequently highlighted the activities and accomplishments of young contesters. And he recently brought a couple of items to my attention. (Thank you, Dave!)

The first was a “Zero Bias” editorial from one of my predecessors. You’ll find the full text in this month’s “CQ Classics” column (p. 44) but let me share a few excerpts with you here:

“Amateur radio today is attracting older men ... equipment prices have been forced higher along with everything else in our daily lives ... A second, and perhaps even more compelling reason for this lack of enthusiasm for our hobby by the younger, or youngest generation, is they have had little encouragement.

“Amateur radio needs new blood and too many youngsters never even heard of ham radio ... What we need is lots more teenagers raising the roof at hamfests and ... shuttling around on all bands.”

Care to guess when this was written? 1990? 1980? Wrong and wrong ... this editorial appeared in the *August 1948* issue of *CQ!* That’s 72 years ago, folks. According to the editorial, there were about 100,000 licensed hams in the U.S. back in 1948. There are roughly 750,000 today.

*But wait!* (as they say on TV) *There’s more!*

Dave also sent me an editorial on the same theme from *QST* ... the author was quite diplomatic, writing, “The major trend in amateur radio during the past decade seems to have been toward an increasing maturity ... The day of amateur radio as the hobby of ‘attic experimenters’ and ‘basement laboratorians,’ the art of lads of high school age or younger who dabble with it as a distraction ... is passing. Indeed, it is already past.

“Amateur radio is growing older, more mature. It has long been more than just a hobby for the youngsters; it has now gotten well beyond their reach (in terms of cost and complexity).”

Date on this editorial? *May 1938*. Yes, 1938, 82 years ago.

I occasionally do a talk at clubs and hamfests titled “Ham Radio: Successfully Dying for 50 Years.” It appears that the title needs to be updated to 80.

## The Bottom Line(s)

There are four main takeaways here:

Bottom line #1: Virtually since the birth of amateur radio, there have been those predicting its imminent demise, even some people occupying this chair.

Bottom line #2: They have consistently been wrong, and they are wrong today. The old-timers worrying today about the next generation started out as the young hams who presumably weren’t coming into the hobby 30-40 years ago. We do have a steady stream of young people entering the hobby — not huge, but it never was — and some of them are doing amazing things, as we frequently highlight in these pages.

Bottom line #3: Despite all that, we still need to work hard to attract each new generation of hams to our hobby. There are always competing interests and there always have been. One difference from when I entered the hobby back in the early 1970s is that many more clubs are welcoming of young hams today than they were 50 years ago, and there are formalized programs in place to encourage and recognize the accomplishments of young hams. Some examples include the Amateur Radio Newsline Young Ham of the Year program, Carole Perry’s Youth Forum at the Dayton Hamvention®, the Dave Kalter Youth DX Adventure program and YOTA, “Youngsters on the Air” in Europe and “Youth on the Air” in the Americas. The ARRL even has its Hiram Percy Maxim award for outstanding young hams. Peer examples are not hard to find.

Bottom line #4: Overall, young people *are* continuing to find their way into amateur radio and are advancing the way we “do” hamming. If you feel there aren’t enough young hams where you live, don’t just complain about it; do something about it. Plenty of resources are available. The future of ham radio is yours to make. Let’s keep it successfully dying for at least another 80 years.

## In This Issue

This is our annual Emergency Communications Special and as usual, we’ve got several articles to help you be better-prepared to help out in a crisis or in a public service event. Also, in our news columns this month, we touch on a few items which will likely continue to be on our collective radars for a while ... the FCC reinstating fees for amateur radio licenses ... the coming loss of the 9-centimeter band ... and the development of a possible “weather radar” system for tracking sporadic-E openings. Finally (even though it’s on the cover and the first article!), the SSB weekend of the 2020 CQ World Wide DX Contest is coming up later this month and if you work EF8R in the Canary Islands, our cover story explains why the signal is so loud!

– 73 and good DX, Rich, W2VU