

From Dayton . . . to Mars

“I’m going back home now, to the Holy Land,” said the Israeli ham as he left our booth at the Dayton Hamvention®. I couldn’t help thinking, perhaps a bit sacrilegiously, that for most of us in Hara Arena at that moment we were already *in* the Holy Land ... the Ham Radio Holy Land, that is. Another Dayton is in the history books as I write this, another gathering of thousands and thousands of people with a single shared interest—amateur radio. The crowd seemed a bit smaller this year, perhaps due to sky-high gas prices, but many vendors reported better-than-ever sales, perhaps due to the arrival of those economic incentive checks just before the show got started. But even with a slightly smaller crowd, the Hamvention is still the most amazing gathering of ham radio operators on the planet.

Well, almost. The *really* most amazing gathering of ham radio operators is the one that takes place every day on the air. I was reminded of this vividly a week before Dayton, when I managed to get on the air for a little while on Sunday afternoon. I heard a station in North Carolina calling CQ on 20 meters. I answered but a station in Maine got through first. I listened to their QSO, then called and worked the North Carolina station. He explained that he had recently upgraded to General and was trying to work all states—a good goal with our seemingly endless bottom of the sunspot cycle. The DX will come back, but meanwhile, working on a domestic award such as Worked All States or CQ’s USA Counties Award is a good idea. It provides you with a challenge and keeps the bands busy. We talked until he was called away by a phone call from work. As soon as we signed clear, the station in Maine called and I also had a very pleasant QSO with him. He lives and works, as the “fix-it” man, on an organic farm right along the Bay of Fundy. It turns out that his farm is only about 50 miles from where we’re planning to go on vacation this summer, and he invited us to stop by and visit—something we may well do. After I got off the air, I looked up the address of the North Carolina station so I could send him a QSL card, and discovered from his online bio that he is an Associate Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court!

To me, the magic of ham radio was wrapped up in those two contacts. Over a period of ten minutes, I had talked to a fix-it man on a dairy farm in Maine and a state Supreme Court Justice in North Carolina. And everyone was on a first-name basis. In my everyday life in the suburbs of New York City, it’s unlikely I would have met either of them if not for ham radio. This is what it’s all about. Not only don’t you know *where* your next contact is going to be, you also never know *who* your next contact is going to be. The great breadth of knowledge and experience that results from this diversity not only makes for more interesting conversations on the air, but creates a near-unique ability for hams to pull together people with the right skills to do just about anything that is needed, on or off the air. It also creates a community—on-air, online, and in person—in which people who might otherwise never come in contact with each other are able to work together on innovations that may extend far beyond the “borders” of amateur radio.

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Back To Dayton ... and on to Mars

Back to Dayton, it was its usual amazing self, an opportunity not only to buy and sell (see this month’s survey for questions on how you deal with used gear), but also to see the latest and greatest new stuff—our annual Sunday morning new-product tour (writeup will be next month) took us 3¹/₂ hours!—to talk in person with industry sales reps, engineers, and top brass; to meet up with old friends; and to attend a wide variety of forums on topics ranging from the latest in ham radio digital technology to restoring old equipment, every operating activity you can think of (and maybe a few you can’t!), and a host of other subjects.

One forum I wish I’d been able to attend (I was off on the new-product tour) was on one of those “other subjects.” It was titled “MDRS—The Mars Desert Research Station,” and was led by Andrea Hartlage, KG4IUM. I’ve had the pleasure of knowing Andrea and her family for about four years now; we met at the Huntsville Hamfest when Andrea was named the Newsline Young Ham of the Year for 2004 (CQ is a co-sponsor of the award). She has just finished her freshman year at Georgia Tech, where she is majoring in aerospace engineering and hopes to become an astronaut. On her spring break this year, Andrea joined five other Georgia Tech students in the Utah desert where they spent two weeks in a simulated Martian environment, conducting experiments and other projects (see <<http://marssociety.org/mdrs/fs07/crew69/>>).

All of the other teams have used Family Radio Service (FRS) handhelds for communications; Andrea’s team is the only one so far to use ham radio, but it probably won’t be the last, since (no surprise here) the ham rigs were far more effective at meeting their communications needs. And, of course, she got five new hams licensed in the process!

What really caught my eye, though, as I read Andrea’s bio on the MDRS crew home page was the following: “She has been fascinated with airplanes since her first commercial jet trip as an infant, but her interest was again piqued when she received a scholarship to Space Camp the summer before her junior year of high school. It was then that she began considering aviation as a career. ... After going back to space camp for a second time, she decided that she wanted to be an astronaut.”

It was CQ that provided that scholarship to Space Camp as part of its co-sponsorship of Newsline’s Young Ham of the Year Award program. Reading how much it influenced Andrea in her career path, and knowing her level of dedication to whatever she sets her mind to, reinforces the value of our participation in the Young Ham of the Year program, and the value of the program itself. By the time you read this, nominations for the 2008 award will be closed, but if you know a young ham who is doing remarkable things, please keep the YHOTY program in mind and consider making a nomination for future awards. We need to encourage and recognize those young people whose contributions suggest that they will be not only the next generation of leaders for our hobby, but for our planet as well. It’s amazing where just a little bit of encouragement can go ... just ask Andrea.

73, W2VU