

Vanishing Act?

What does ham radio have in common with wild horses and pit toilets? Well, according to America Online, all three are among the “Top 25 Things Vanishing from America.” Unfortunately, there is no indication from the editors of “Walletpop.com,” part of AOL Money & Finance, as to what their criteria were for selecting items for the list or for assessing the qualifications of the writers of each segment. Also unfortunately, the piece was a “main page feature” on AOL the day it appeared, so it was promoted to several million AOL users. Also unfortunately (well, fortunately in the larger sense), the story was wrong, at least in certain key points.

Author Tom Barlow, N8NLO, whose credentials appear to include being a writer and holding a ham license, says that in the past five years, “the number of people holding active licenses has dropped by 50,000...” He follows that by saying, “(a)s cell phones and the Internet siphon off much of what once attracted people to amateur radio, the nation’s ham radio population is graying rapidly... All these elements speak to a long, slow diminishment of a pastime that began with Marconi.”

There is no denying that our total licensing numbers have fallen in the past five years, and I won’t even quibble too much with Tom’s numbers (the actual drop was 33,000 from 2003–2007, with growth of 4,000 from 2007–2008, so he’s only off by roughly a factor of two). But let’s look at some important background to these numbers. The total number of licensees started falling in May of 2003, after reaching an all-time high of nearly 688,000, according to the AH0A website. That date is significant because it is just over 12 years from February 1991, when the first codeless Technician licenses were issued.

At that time, there were indeed many people who were attracted to ham radio by repeater autopatches for making phone calls from their cars and “free” e-mail via packet that operated at about the same speed as (or faster than) your typical dial-up computer modem of the day. As cell phones became ubiquitous and internet connections became faster and faster, many of the people who became hams solely to make phone calls or send e-mails did indeed drop out. Most of them had never really become part of the ham community, but their licenses remained on the FCC’s books for a full ten years, plus a two-year grace period for renewal. Those first codeless Tech licenses that were not renewed began falling off the FCC’s rolls in early 2003, exactly the point at which our overall numbers began to drop. Over the same period, though, there have been between 20,000 and 30,000 new licensees each year, so in the four years in which we lost 33,000 licensees overall, we also gained about 100,000 new real people. And now the overall trend is upward.

An interesting page to look at on the AH0A website is his “Average Months to Expiration” page. This is a figure that resets when a license is renewed. Anyone with more than 60 months remaining has either renewed or been issued a new license within the past five years. Between late 2000 and mid-2004, the trend was negative, with the average licensee being less than five years away from expiration. But the numbers have been climbing steadily since the middle of 2004, and except for Novice licensees, all license classes have been over 60 months since October 2006. In the most recent three months (April, May, June 08), the average ham was about 68.2 months away from license expiration—an all time high since AH0A began tallying these figures in 1999. What this means is that the average ham today is operating with a license that has been issued or renewed within the past five years, and this is a very healthy sign for our future.

Shooting Ourselves in the Foot

What *does* worry me, though, is our collective tendency to shoot ourselves in the foot, especially when we create a

negative image of ham radio in an effort to promote it. A recent article in the Rochester *Democrat Chronicle* newspaper about a high school radio club quoted its adviser as saying, “There’s no secret that ham radio is an older man’s hobby ... If we can get young kids interested, maybe we’ll save the hobby from extinction.” Of course, we don’t really know how many young people are getting into ham radio these days because the FCC no longer releases birthdate information. Many of us who are active today got our starts as teenagers and we tend to think that there was much greater interest in ham radio among teens 30 or 40 years ago than there is now. I’m not so sure about that. My high school radio club had about 10 members and a half dozen licensed hams, out of several hundred students in the school. One of our local radio clubs made a point of inviting us to attend its meetings and join its activities, but we were the only kids there, maybe two or three at a time. The rest of the club was made up of “older men.”

Elsewhere in this issue, you will see our report on this year’s Newsline Young Ham of the Year, Emily Stewart, KC0PTL, who is neither old nor a man. Neither are the six other young women among this year’s 30 YHOTY nominees. The article also includes a rundown of this year’s scholarship winners from the Foundation for Amateur Radio. Of the 49 winners, 14 are young women. Last month, we pointed out the work done by ARRL Membership Manager Katie Breen, W1KRB, on revitalizing the ARRL staff radio club. Katie, again, is neither old nor a man. I think we’re seeing a trend here, but it’s not the one that’s being shared with the media by so many other hams.

N8NLO (the author of the AOL piece), responding to the many comments disagreeing with his perspective, said he hopes they are right but that “I’ve seen local clubs no longer able to field volunteers for events or hold Field Day.” That may be so, and one could argue that the hobby is in trouble if the staff radio club at its national organization headquarters was falling into inactivity, but the real story there is how two of those staff members, one young and inexperienced as a ham, managed to turn it all around. On a similar note, Ted Randall, WB8PUM, who produces a radio program about ham radio on international shortwave, has a story on his website, <<http://www.tedrandall.com/pages/good-stuff.php>>, about a new, young, ham in Tennessee who was looking forward to attending his first hamfest when he learned that the sponsoring club had been disbanded and that the hamfest would be cancelled. John Rhoades, KJ4EVN, got in touch with another young ham, Matt Klimkowski, KG4WXX, and along with a couple of other young hams, decided to try to run the hamfest on their own. When word of the effort reached Dr. Michael Barrett, President of TW Antennas in nearby Cookeville (see review of the TW 2010 in this issue), he immediately agreed to sponsor the hamfest and cover the costs, so not only was admission free, but so was the food! Attendance wasn’t great, as there was still confusion over whether the event was on or not. What really matters, though, is that this group of young hams is already hard at work planning next year’s hamfest!

Final item: One of my son’s friends from high school is a film major in college. Assigned to produce a mini-documentary for a class, he picked ham radio as his topic. I don’t know if he ever finished the program, but along the way, he went out and got his Tech license and last I heard, he was teaching himself Morse code!

You know, maybe they’re right ... maybe this hobby of old men *is* dying ... and being replaced by a hobby led increasingly by young men and women who aren’t always satisfied to play with toys that other people have built, but want to build and design their own toys for the rest of us to play with. Ham radio is dead! Long live ham radio!

*e-mail: <w2vu@cq-amateur-radio.com>