

## Return of the Flea Market

**D**uring the first half-hour of this year's Charlotte (NC) Hamfest, we sold absolutely nothing at the CQ booth ... and because of that, I have renewed hope for the future of hamfests in general. Let me explain.

First of all, the Charlotte Hamfest was in a new location this year, a very nice complex north of the city in the heart of NASCAR country. As in the old location, the hamfest was split between two rooms, one for commercial exhibitors and the other for the indoor flea market (a really good idea this year, as it was rainy and cold the entire weekend). In the old place, attendees coming through the main entrance could either go straight to see the commercial exhibits or turn right to go to the flea market. In the new building, though, the two rooms are behind each other and anyone coming in the main entrance had to walk through the commercial area in order to reach the flea market. And when the show opened this year, that is *exactly* what they did; virtually everyone (and there was a pretty good crowd when the doors opened) zipped right through the commercial area, often without even stopping to say hello, and headed straight for the flea market. Only after a half hour or so did they begin to filter back into the commercial exhibit room and we began to sell books and subscriptions and head on our way to a typical sales volume for the Charlotte show.

I had a chance to wander the flea market myself a little bit, and saw essentially the same thing I had seen in the Orlando flea market the previous month, and what I started to see at flea markets last year—lots of ham gear! Solid-state transceivers, 50-year-old “boat-anchors” (old, heavy tube radios), shortwave receivers, telegraph keys, microphones, and more. Good stuff, much of it in excellent condition, stuff we haven't seen too much at flea markets in recent years, stuff that has all too often been sold for exorbitant prices on eBay and other internet auction sites instead of for bargain prices at hamfest flea markets.

It could be that the bad economy is spurring on the bargain hunters, but that alone wouldn't account for the increase in bargains to be found. It seems that the

“bloom” is off internet auction sites as far as ham gear is concerned. With the sites charging higher and higher fees, the inability to visually inspect and handle gear before buying, prices spiraling well beyond real value in the fog of competitive bidding, and shipping costs for some boat anchors exceeding their value as well, both sellers and buyers are starting to look for other ways to “redistribute the wealth” of used ham gear. The immediate and obvious choice is the hamfest flea market, a venue that had in recent years become home more to old computer gear than to ham gear, and to cast-offs that couldn't be sold on eBay.

Last year, I began to see the tide turning, with more ham stuff in better condition showing up on flea market tables. Now, we are seeing the second part of that equation falling into place: The word is out that value and bargains are back at hamfest flea markets, and savvy hams are again beginning to arrive early to find the good stuff before someone else does. And that is why everyone who was waiting at the door for the opening bell (something else we haven't seen for a while) at Charlotte whisked past us to the flea market room as soon as the doors opened.

While I was annoyed at the time that we had no sales at all in that first half-hour, when I realized what was going on, I was actually quite pleased. A thriving flea market is at the heart of any successful hamfest, and when there's nothing much to look for in the flea market, the whole hamfest suffers. And when one hamfest suffers, others follow suit. Indeed, this is what has been happening in the past several years. Conversely, when the flea market offers quality gear at reasonable prices for the bargain-hunters, the whole hamfest benefits. And when one hamfest grows, others follow suit. It is refreshing to see that trend beginning to turn around, and I am optimistic that if it continues (which I think it will), then we will soon begin seeing a revival in hamfests overall. (Can magazine classifieds be far behind?)

One thing that does *not* appear to be changing, and which was a topic of conversation among vendors and customers alike, is that Sunday mornings are now dead times for most hamfests. Except for Dayton, virtually

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*The flea market at the 2009 Charlotte Hamfest drew the attention of the early arrivals, offering quality used gear at bargain prices.*

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nobody comes to a multi-day hamfest on Sunday anymore. It used to be that we'd get off to a very slow start, but then see an influx of people in late morning, after church services finished up. This has not been happening in recent years. The two most successful regional hamfests today—the Orlando Hamcation and Ham-Com outside Dallas—have shifted to Friday afternoon and Saturday as their main selling times. In some cases, business on Fridays has rivaled that of Saturdays. It may be time for planners of other multi-day hamfests to begin looking into the Friday/Saturday option as an alternative to the traditional Saturday/Sunday show.

## Seeking Sunspots

Another popular topic of conversation at Charlotte—and particularly at the Carolina DX Association dinner, which I was once again privileged to attend—was sunspots, or more accurately, lack of sunspots. We are now into what feels like the 15th year of the current sunspot minimum, and DX on the upper HF bands continues to be in short supply. There's a funny thing going on at the same time, though. Participation in DX-related activities, such as contests and DXpeditions, continues to increase even though supposedly there's no DX to be worked. As reported in this month's DX column, the recent K5D DXpedition to Desecheo Island made more than 115,000 contacts! The 2008 CQ World-Wide RTTY DX Contest, whose results appear in this issue, broke the 2000-log threshold for the first time (a 20% increase from 2007), and the 2008 CQ WW DX Contest—the biggest of them all—had more than 10,000 logs submitted for the first time ever. And in the 2008 CQ DX Marathon, which also saw an increase in log submissions of more than 20%, the top five claimed scores in the Unlimited

Class all claimed contacts with more than 280 DXCC entities in all 40 CQ zones; in the lower-power Formula Class, all five top claimed scores were for more than 200 countries in more than 35 zones (three of the five worked all 40 zones). So, either a whole lot of people are lying about working non-existent DX, or maybe, just maybe, despite the lack of sunspots, there *is* still plenty of DX to be worked by those willing to put in the effort. And despite all the talk about ham radio fading away into nothingness, activity levels appear to be on the increase. So, either fewer hams are becoming much more active, or all those “non-existent” new hams (roughly 25,000 per year) actually do exist and are getting on the air and making contacts. A decade ago, I started giving club talks titled “Ham Radio: Successfully Dying for the Past 50 Years.” I guess it's time to update the title ... it appears we've now been “successfully dying” for the past 60 years—and counting!

73, Rich W2VU

## Clarification & Safety Warning

April's review of the TAK-tenna mini HF dipole antenna suggested that an attic might be a possible location to install this small antenna. Company owner Steve Tetorka, WA2TAK, says his antennas should **NOT** be used indoors under any circumstances. This is due to very high voltages that can develop on the wires, especially if the antenna is not resonated (and 75% of users do not resonate them). These high voltages, in turn, can occasionally generate sparks, which pose a fire danger if the antenna is being used indoors. So use the TAK-tenna outdoors only. This warning is included in the instruction manual, so anyone following the instructions should not have a problem.