

## Reaching for Our Roots

Later this year, we will be observing the centennial of amateur licensing in the United States, so over the course of the year, I plan to look at some of the traditions that serve as foundations of our hobby and how they remain relevant today. We actually started last month, reviewing the ongoing (and apparently growing) interest in CW, five years after the FCC eliminated the Morse code exam as an amateur licensing requirement. This month, I'd like to revisit CW—although from a personal perspective rather than a statistical one—as well as two other “foundational” traditions: building and mentoring.

First, on CW, I'm one of those people whom Nancy Kott, WZ8C, of FISTS described in this space last month. I learned the code well enough to pass my exams, but have never felt comfortable enough with it on the air to get much real enjoyment out of operating CW. On the other hand, I have always felt compelled to periodically give it another shot, precisely because it is such an important part of our heritage. Over the years, I've looked for different ways to make it more fun for me, from various code “readers” to help fill in the spots that I've missed to trying to make some CW contacts in low-pressure contests, such as state QSO parties. Any success was short-lived.

But over the past couple of years, the more I've read of N6GA's QRP column here in *CQ* and K16SN's “Trail-Friendly Radio” column in our sister magazine, *WorldRadio Online*, the more I've been thinking that something like this might be the answer to my CW conundrum ... if I can wrap ham radio, and especially CW, into something *different* that I also enjoy, such as hiking or bicycling, then maybe I'll learn to enjoy CW more because I'll associate it with other pleasurable activities.

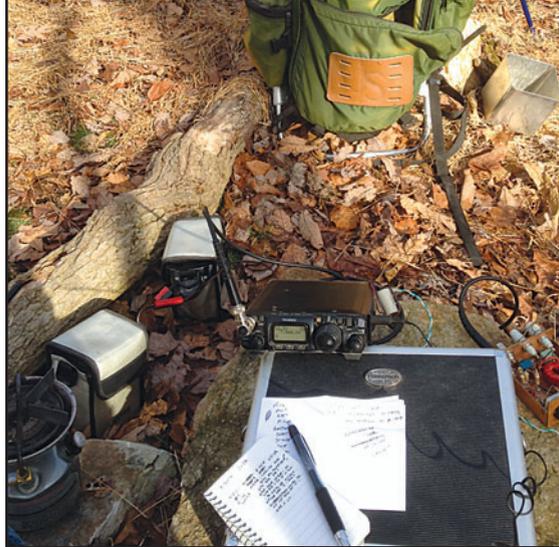
Over the holidays, an MFJ-9200 portable QRP rig managed to materialize in front of the fireplace and guess what? I'm having a ball, even from inside! I'm still no code whiz, and on a recent CW contest weekend, I quickly plugged in the 17-meter module in order to head to a “no-contesting” zone and stick with folks at my speed level. But for the first time in 40+ years as a ham, I can honestly say that I'm having fun on CW! Plus, especially at my proficiency level, working CW forces me to slow down, focus and put everything else out of my mind for the time being. It's very relaxing overall.

Another one of my self-perceived weak areas is building, yet another foundation of our hobby. It's not that I'm so bad at it; it just hasn't come easily. And I never seem to find the time. For example, about five years ago, I built a “Tuna Tin Two” QRP CW transmitter from QRP Maine. I could hear the signals in my “real” transceiver so I knew it worked. And then I put it aside, waiting to use it until I got a matching receiver. That happened about a year later ... but the “Sudden Storm” receiver kit sat in a box in my ham shack until about three months ago! That tug of our “roots” is strong, though ... I finally built it (and had a surprisingly good time doing it ... there I go, having fun again!) and now have a field-portable two-tunatin QRP station, and I've even been able to prove to myself that it really works by making (so far) one real, random, contact with a half-watt of output.

The best part of that was that the station I contacted, K3NG, was himself operating QRP-portable in the hills of Pennsylvania, activating a “Summits on the Air” (SOTA) hilltop (see photo). I've since worked Goody on a different hilltop (using the MFJ rig) and I'm afraid he's gotten me interested in SOTA-hunting. And who knows, maybe when the weather is warmer, I'll head out and become one of the hunted instead!

The third ham radio tradition I would put at the base of our hobby is the spirit of helping each other, or “Elmering” as we often call it. This is probably the most important of them all, since it helps support all the others. Example: when I finished building the Sudden Storm receiver kit, it didn't work. I called up my colleague, Richard Fisher, K16SN, and he spent close to an hour on the phone with me, making suggestions and offering tips. Nothing worked, but we had a good time just working together to try to figure it out. I finally dropped an e-mail to kit designer Rex Harper, W1REX, who asked me if I

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*The Summits-on-the-Air (SOTA) portable station with which Anthony “Goody” Good, K3NG, contacted W2VU, who was putting out a half-watt from a “Tuna Tin Two” transmitter. (Photo courtesy K3NG)*

had done a modification that was in the manual ... but that I thought didn't apply to me. “Do the mod,” wrote Rex, “and it will work fine.” So I did ... and it does!

Now, making contacts with a half a watt isn't always easy, and to make sure the Tuna Tin Two was getting out farther than the antenna port on my receiver, I again turned to Richard for help. Being in California, he was a little too far away to tune in a 1/2-watt signal from New Jersey on 40 meters in the middle of the day, so he spent another hour or so, spread across a couple of days, listening for me on several internet-accessible receivers along the US east coast. He finally found me, and that gave me enough confidence in the rig's ability to be heard that I stuck with it and was eventually able to contact K3NG. I've got to tell you that there is nothing quite like making a contact with a radio that you've built yourself, especially at flea-power.

Doing it yourself, or DIY as it's often called today, is a tradition that's as old as ham radio itself, and the satisfaction it can bring is being discovered by a new generation of tech-savvy young people who are rebelling against the trend in consumer electronics toward sealed cases and “no user-serviceable parts inside.” Many of them have gotten together under the banner of “makers” and “hackers” and have put together cooperative workshops called “hackerspaces” for building and experimenting. Amateur radio is a perfect fit for “makers” who are interested in electronics and wireless communications, but many of them are not familiar with ham radio, just as many hams are not familiar with maker groups and hackerspaces. They need our century of experience with building radios, and we need their youthful enthusiasm and 21st-century technical knowledge to strengthen the technical side of ham radio for the next generation.

There is a multi-pronged effort going on to try to bring the two groups closer together. The ARRL has just released a new DIY video (featuring our own Kit-Building Editor K0NEB) focused on introducing makers to ham radio, and here in *CQ*, we are introducing with this issue a “Makers” column to get hams better acquainted with the maker/hacker community (see page 54). We welcome maker columnist Matt Stultz, KB3TAN, to our staff. His column, along with our already-established kit-building and QRP columns, will continue to strengthen *CQ*'s commitment to promoting building as a major part of our hobby's present and future as well as its past.

Bottom line: If you haven't built anything lately, get out that soldering iron! If you've never built anything, find a fellow ham—or a maker group—and get some mentoring. If you haven't operated CW lately, spin that dial toward the bottom of the band. You'll find plenty of people happy to slow down to whatever speed is comfortable for you. If you've never learned code, find a fellow ham to teach you, or check your local club for code classes. You just might be surprised at how much fun you find yourself having with these old-but-still-new ham radio traditions.