

Whitman Times

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COURTESY PHOTO

Jeff Lehman of Hanson – who operates N1ZZN – is the youngest single HAMS radio operator in the Whitman Amateur Radio Club.

Frequency fliers

HAMs control airwaves around the world

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The parking lot full of cars, several outfitted with additional antennas, should have been a dead giveaway.

Once a month, on Wednesday evenings, amateur radio enthusiasts from around the area gather at the Whitman Public Library for the regular meeting of the Whitman Amateur Radio Club.

Club President Paul Burbine, of East Bridgewater, has been working with amateur radio for about 12 years.

"I'd heard about it on television, but didn't know who to talk to for years and years," he said.

All that changed when he happened to bump into some members of the Whitman Amateur Radio Club. From there, he embarked on a series of training sessions and tests to attain three different amateur radio licenses, administered by the Federal Communications Commissions.

Now, he drives one of those cars with an antenna, and goes by the call sign N1VTI. He also has an antenna in his trunk.

Amateur radio operators, also known as HAMs, must be trained on things like radio theory, safety, electronics, and rules and regulations before they are assigned a call sign and authorized to use the airwaves.

HAM radio frequencies, for example, cannot be used for commercial purposes, and are supervised by the Federal Communications Commission.

In recent years, Morse Code was dropped from the list of requirements, Burbine said. HAM operators also are no longer required to keep written logs of their communications, but Burbine said he and others still do.

For Burbine, the appeal of HAM radio is the ability to talk to people over great distances.

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PHOTO/TOM MCGINTY

Paul Moss, KB1MT, of Whitman demonstrates a SWR meter to measure the efficiency of the club's 2-meter antennae after the monthly meeting of the Whitman Radio Club at the Whitman Public Library.

Frequency fliers

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"I talked to this gentleman from Moscow several times," he said. "He seemed to think everyone here played baseball."

He likened HAM radio to the party telephone lines, where multiple users were connected to the same phone line.

"It's a very different," Bill Hayden of Whitman said. "It's a hobby that's diminishing. It's really difficult to find new people who (are willing) to learn something new."

Emergency communicators

In addition to the networking possibilities, HAM radio also has public safety benefits. It can be sued in the event of emergency - whether it's a natural or man-made disaster - when traditional power, phone and commercial airwaves may cease to be communication options. In those cases, HAM radio operators can use their frequencies to commu-

nicate with other HAMS to send and receive message. Gulf Coast area HAMS stepped up to send on-the-scene messages after Hurricane Katrina.

Most of those, Burbine said, are health and welfare messages and travel from radio operator to radio operator until they get local enough to be transmitted by a telephone, without a charge.

Whitman Club members also volunteer with their local Emergency Management agencies. Because of those efforts, Burbine said HAM groups have found it easier to get funding.

The Whitman club, as well as their Bridgewater and Taunton counterparts, also help provide eyewitness reports of weather conditions to the National Weather Service. Burbine said that HAMS' accounts help the service to confirm or deny their satellite readings and make accurate warnings for the area.

The system is known as Skywarn, club secretary Jeff Lehmann said.

The club also participated in drills during which it runs through scenarios where equipment may have to be set up in less-than-ideal conditions to send and transmissions.

Last month, 25 area HAMS participated in an exercise to see how many other amateur radio stations could be contacted in a 24-hour period.

The team was able to set up six independent base stations and make a total of 411 contacts with amateur radio operators in 29 states and three Canadian provinces.

Beyond disaster

The club also provides sideline communications for area events like triathlons and road races, as well as setting up a booth at the Marshfield Fair every summer for the last 12 years.

It even offers training courses for those interested into breaking into amateur radio, and members looking to refresh their skills.

Courses usually are held in the fall.

Those classes also prove that it is possible for a broom handle, outfitted with copper wires and a small outlet, can be transformed into an antenna.

Paul Moss of Whitman said it is the length of the wires that determines the frequency on which the antenna can operate.

"I liken antennas to stereo speakers," he said. "Speakers are what make everything else work."

"One aspect of amateur radio that a lot people find interesting is building equipment themselves," Ross Hochstrasser of Whitman said.

A collector of 1950s radios, Hochstrasser said some people like to buy radios that are ready to plug in and go, while others prefer to buy a pile of parts and work on building one from the ground up.

"There's a little something in this for everyone," he said.

Hochstrasser, who also restores clocks, has been a member of the club for approximately three months. He said he got interested with radios when he was 4.

The club, founded in 1962, now boasts approximately 100 members from nearly a dozen communities. New members are welcome. The club meets every first Monday at the Whitman Public Library, 100 Webster St.

For information, visit www.walnpo.org.

Lets have a serious QSO

Although amateur radio operators do speak in fairly plain, straightforward language, there are some conversational abbreviations that HAMS use regularly. Whitman Amateur Radio Club members Paul Moss and Ross Hochstrasser said the abbreviations developed because of Morse Code and are recognized all over the world.