

Going global on the airwaves

Local residents use amateur radio to socialize, assist in emergency situations

By Julie Perine Lifestyles Editor

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Clarksburg – Dick Wilt is not a surfer; but he does like catching a good wave – a radio wave, that is.

Wilt is one of 37 locals and of million people worldwide who claim amateur radio as their hobby of choice.

“Amateur radio – or ham radio as most people know it – has to do with owning and operating equipment so that you can talk to people locally and all over the world,” Wilt said.

The Bridgeport resident became involved with the form of wireless communication more than 50 years ago. “I was in naval communications, located in a remote area 1200 miles southwest of Anchorage,” he said. “It was about the only way and individual could communicate back to the states.”

Since then, satellites, cell phones and Internet have become commonplace. But Wilt is still intrigued with earlier scientific wonder.

“I can turn on my radio and communicate with people within 1,000 miles or, if conditions are favorable, I can go to a higher frequency and talk with people farther away,” he said. “It depends on what we call sun spots –sun explosions on the sun. Electromagnetic energy from the sun strikes the atmosphere and builds up what we call Ions’

Wilt said his main interest with amateur radio is the camaraderie with fellow radio users far and wide.

Locally, he shares that enthusiasm with other members of the Stonewall Jackson Amateur Radio Association.

Serving as president of the club is a 16 year old Jason Hatfield. Introduced to amateur radio through Scouting the Grafton High School sophomore has had his license since age 13. “I just like talking to people from other countries and different parts of the world,” he said. Another aspect of amateur radio interests Hatfield is the Skywarn weather reporting system.

“When there is a thunderstorm or winter weather warning, it is announced on local repeaters in different counties across the state, and weather reports are gathered and transferred to the National Weather Service,” he said.

“That lets them be able to issue more accurate warnings and to inform people about the weather. Instead of working off Doppler radar, they have an actual report of it.” Because of their skills, amateur radio operators are sometimes placed on alert to assist with communication efforts through the Harrison County Bureau of Emergency Services. During inclement weather when phone lines are down, they can be called upon to set up at emergency shelters or to man amateur radio equipment in place at the bureau, Wilt said.

The American Radio Relay League, to which many locals belong, has a like memorandum of understanding with the American Red Cross.

Ham Radio operating is about social networking community service – and technological variety, Wilt said.

“It’s not just about voice communication, but also several types of digital communication, including teletype, digital voice and TV.

Each radio operator and association has its own call sign, communicated with precise clarity through the same verbal/phonetic alphabet used by police and armed forces.

The call sign of the local association is K8DF – or Kilo 8, Delta, Foxtrot, Wilt said.

There are three levels of licensing for amateur radio obtained through classes and testing offered through amateur radio organizations.

Levels range from entry-level technician class to the general class to the “Cadillac” extra class. Each successive class requires additional knowledge and results in access to higher frequencies, thus longer distance of communication, Wilt said.

An operator since 1983 Harold Tate has been a fan of amateur radio since he was a kid. Tuning into AM stations he was amazed to clearly hear conversations between people in different countries.

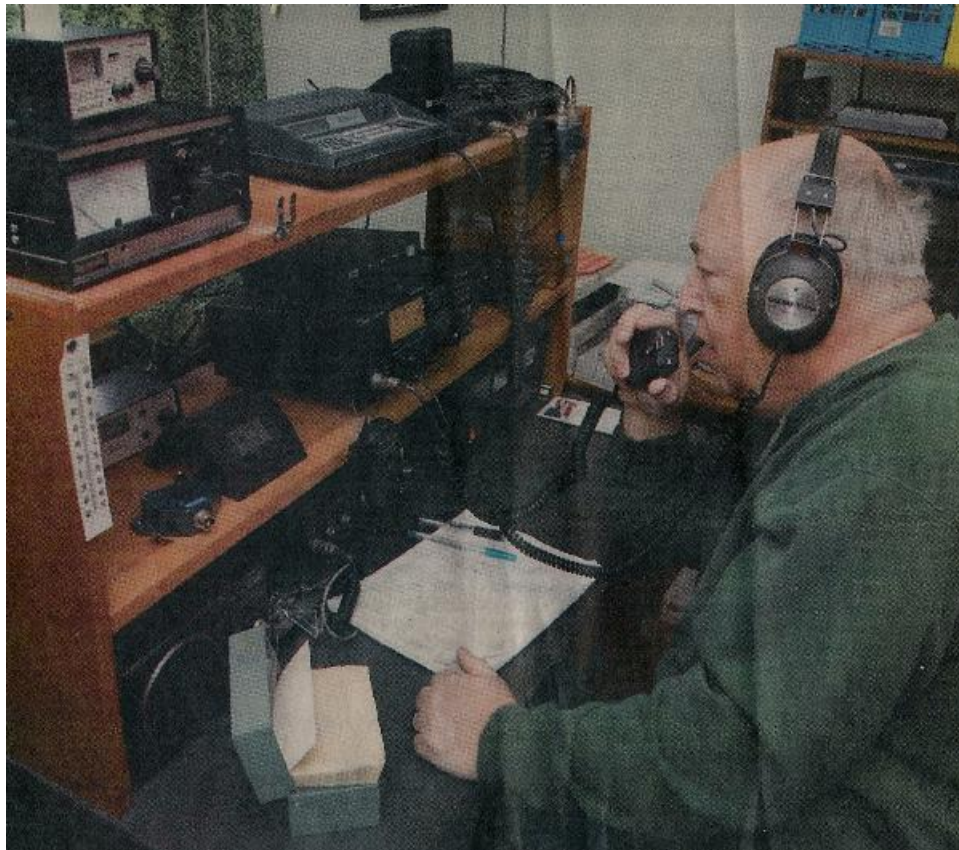
The thrill of amateur radio has not lost its novelty Tate said. “My favorite thing is to just get on and see what foreign stations are on.” He said “Also a couple times a year I get into contests through the West Virginia QSO Party, the idea being to make as many contacts as you can with as many West Virginia counties. Amateur radio field day is a hobby highlight, Tate said.

“That’s when we go off to a location and use generator or battery power to set up antennas and operate for about 24 hours,” he said. “The idea is to make as many contacts as you can anywhere in North America or even overseas.”

The exercise also serves as practice for emergency set-up situations, Tate said. Retired from AT&T, Dave Anderson has found amateur radio a perfect fit for his technological interests.

“It gives me a way to play around with the equipment and stay involved with technology.” he said.

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