By Parke Slater, N4KFT

Making the Media Work for You

Special-event station K4L hits a "grand slam" for history—and ham radio.

What started off as an innocent desire to perform a public service to preserve a piece of history developed into a concept that garnered unprecedented media coverage and put Amateur Radio in front of hundreds of thousands of Virginians. The same approach can work for you in bringing the media to beg for a story that includes Amateur Radio as a critical component.

At an impromptu breakfast meeting, Tony Day, KC4AUF, and his wife Becky, KS4RX, were presented with a proposal. I showed them a newspaper article about a Chesapeake Bay lighthouse and said, "Let's go do something good for them."

One month later, six hams met and planned a "mini-DXpedition" to a remote island on Virginia's Chesapeake Bay. What was unusual was that the primary mission was *not* to participate in the Amateur Radio Lighthouse Society's International Lighthouse/Lightship Weekend. The six members of the Richmond Amateur Telecommunications Society had but a simple desire to help Mathews County, Virginia (population 8000) raise public awareness about the little-known New Point Comfort Lighthouse, a structure that saw action in both the War of 1812 and Civil War. Ham radio and the special event call sign K4L were simply the vehicles to do it.

The New Point Light, while half a century older than its well-known cousin, the Cape Hatteras (NC) Lighthouse, is tucked far away from population centers that enabled the raising of $10 million that was used to move the latter structure inland. Sitting at the end of a peninsula in a county that has but one stoplight (on a swing bridge), the lighthouse was understandably out of the limelight.

The 197-year-old New Point Light, rich in maritime history, had fallen victim to time, vandals and the sea. In April 2001, the *Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal* ran an article describing the un-

Twelve-year-old General class licensee Andrew Slater, K4PUF (left), logs while Guy Carlsen, K4CNF, works the pileup.

The K4L team from left to right: Guy Carlsen, K4CNF; Andrew Slater, K4PUF; Tony Day, KC4AUF; Stan Sitnik, KG4JMY; Chris Waters, K4ADU, and Parke Slater, N4KFT.

The two stations (40, 80 and 2 meters) and one of the towers used by the K4L team on New Point Island.

certain future of the structure. In turn, the hams contacted the Mathews County Historical Society, to whom the county had ceded responsibility for the development of a master plan to save the lighthouse.

The Historical Society jumped at the opportunity to have help in their endeavor and requested permission from the county for the team of hams to occupy a 1.5 acre island adjacent to the lighthouse. Both parcels had been torn from land during a 1933 hurricane.

The team's largest obstacle to the mission remained transportation to the island, but because of the nature of the project, they were able to convince the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and the US Coast Guard to assist. In addition, the Coast Guard agreed to bring out the media for a visit during high tide on Saturday.

"Transportation for the press was a must," said assistant team leader Guy Carlsen, K4CNF. "Without it, they [press] wouldn't have been there." No doubt the fact that a boat was needed to get to the island had its own allure. The team also employed the talents of its youngest member, 12-year-old General class licensee Andrew Slater, K4PUF, to design a Web page. A "media link" was prominently placed on the page to explain the press transportation plans (see **www.qsl.net/k4l**).

While this could have been called little more than a special event station lasting just over two days, the K4L team treated it with the import of an extensive South Pacific DXpedition. "We were serious in the manner in which we treated K4L," said team member Stan Sitnik, KG4JMY. "Planning paid off where we lacked experience." The degree of detail and planning necessary gave the team much respect for full-blown DXpeditions such as Kingman Reef's KH5K and the recent YK9A DXpedition to Syria.

Richmond Times-Dispatch **photographer Alexa Edlund-Welch photographs Andrew Slater, K4PUF (left), and Tony Day, KC4AUF, for the Sunday edition's story.**

Organizing the Media Blitz

The team's first splash came in a Tidewater, Virginia regional newspaper as a "freebie." The county-sanctioned plans had been mentioned in a governmental board of supervisors' meeting and were picked up by the media six weeks before the event. Similarly, the Mathews County Historical Society informed the local paper of the team's intentions, prompting a second article.

The team developed a press release for distribution. We knew it had to be attention grabbing, to the point and kept to one page, since the story had to compete with every other. With a vow that our primary emphasis would be to let the general population know of the lighthouse's peril, K4L team went to work.

The news release headline read "Richmond area Amateur Radio operators will travel to Mathews County to help a lighthouse in peril." Immediately underneath, two photos—one, a sepia-colored early-1900s picture showing the structure on a sandy beach, and the other showing the lighthouse surrounded by the waters of the Chesapeake Bay. "There is no question that the side-by-side comparison of 'then and now' photos was dramatic," said team leader Tony Day. "I think it gave perspective and added realism, demonstrating the hardships the light had endured." Below the pictures was a brief history of the light that highlighted its importance in our national heritage, followed by a synopsis of what the team intended to accomplish.

Both in the release and during telephone conversations with the media outlets, New Point Comfort Lighthouse was compared to the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse. East coast residents could easily make the connection, which made it easy for the reporters to understand what K4L was trying to accomplish. There is no

The New Point Lighthouse as seen from the north end of New Point Island. This photograph was used for the team's QSL card.

You Can Do It, Too

Planning an event? There are a number of things that can be done to increase the odds you will pique media interest and gain exposure for Amateur Radio.

• **Find an arena where ham radio is not the end-all, but the vehicle that gets you there.** While there occasionally will be a riveting story where ham radio saves a life or plays a pivotal role in something as dramatic as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, those events and stories are the exception. Amateur Radio can get mileage by being incidental to the main thrust of a project.

• **Find a public service that ham radio can perform.** It is much easier to get coverage for public concerns of an everyday variety that may be historical or environmental in nature.

• **Think big.** Treat your event like you want it to be perceived. Make sure your Web page is concise, attention grabbing and easy to navigate. Be professional in your dealings with the media. Use printed not handwritten literature and envelopes. Take it on the chin if you are turned down. Develop a logo, banner and perhaps shirts for those hams involved.

• **Pick your media targets and personalize your releases.** Identify those outlets you want to include and put yourself in their shoes. Style your information so that they can relate to it. Create a log that includes the names of the outlets, the method of contact, the names of those you speak with and their response.

• **Keep your media release to one page**. Just like a resume, you want your information to be concise and only include pertinent information that will get you the attention you are seeking. Details can be furnished later.

• **The more unique angles you have, the more the media is likely to be interested.** Is there an element of danger or risk to what you are doing? Perhaps a different mode of travel or location? Accentuate any anomaly. Use photographs to show contrast.

• **Go for the weekday, if possible**. For the same reason that you enjoy ham radio more on the weekends, you are less apt to be able to get a reporter to cover your event then. Everyone likes a weekend off. News crews are relatively scarce. If it is possible to schedule your event during the week, then do so. Television reporters can often conduct interviews during the week and augment their report with file footage. The farther out your event is from the TV studio, the less likely the assignment editor will be willing to send them. With limited resources, they do not want to miss "the big one" in town while the crew is in Angola interviewing hams.

• **Schedule a press conference.** If access is restricted, arrange a time to meet and transport the press. Special accommodations to enable them to cover the event may entice coverage.

• **Timing is everything.** If news is otherwise dead, you may be in luck. By the same token, the absence of another Washington, DC scandal may dictate whether the story is a "lead" or a mere footnote. Send out your press information no more than three weeks in advance. Promises made two months ahead of time can fail because of interim events and changes.

• **Blitz the outlets**. Send your releases via fax, email *and* the postal service. The odds are that three different people will receive each of the three releases you send. All you need to do is catch the eye of one person. Be sure you include several means by which the media can contact you and do not be afraid to follow up with a telephone call when you have not heard back. The worst they can do is say, "No."

• **Do not lie to the press.** While you do want to portray your event in a manner they can understand, be sure not to embellish or mislead. Not only can doing so come back and bite you; it will also be remembered for years to come when you or another ham tries to gain coverage for a future event.

• **How unique is your station?** Is there something nonstandard about your operation, station or operators? Accentuate it. Is there a very young or well-known op? Place them at the station when the press arrives. How conducive is the layout of your operation to photography? Will the background and sun enhance the photogenic potential?

• **Spreading coverage evenly.** While everyone would like to be mentioned, photographed or filmed by the press, it isn't likely to happen. Writing a release that quotes all or most of those involved will help keep your ops happy, whether it is actually used or not. Make someone's day, and insist that the most seasoned hams take a back seat while junior operators have their shot with the press. Not only might such tactics give newer hams greater appreciation for you, but the press at times seems more enamored with those who do not fit a stereotypical mold, much as they would with an interview with the famous.

Finally, keep your eyes set on the overall objective. While most hams see Amateur Radio as being newsworthy in-and-of-itself, most media outlets would probably disagree.

You may have attended a symphony concert. The purpose? to hear music. Think of news the same way. Music is what the reporter is after, but he cannot help seeing the instruments while listening. Let's make Amateur Radio the bow that plays the violin and "talk up ham radio."

doubt that the press's "discovery" that Virginia has its own "Cape Hatteras Light," was a story in itself.

The release ended with an invitation to make reservations on the Coast Guard boat by contacting a team member. Ease of contact being critical, the team provided a name, email address and telephone number with voice mail. "The last thing we wanted was prospective press not covering the event because they could not contact us," said team member Chris Waters, K4ADU.

By Every Means Possible

How did the team get the press release into the hands of the media? By every means possible. "We sent them two weeks before the event by the postal service, email and fax," said Guy Carlsen, the K4L Assistant Team Leader. "It was a shotgun approach, and when we did not hear back, we called them by telephone."

The K4L team targeted six television stations, including the three major network affiliates in the metro Richmond area, and three in the Hampton Roads community. In addition, one local paper in each of the two localities was solicited, as were one regional and one statewide newspaper.

This resulted in one immediate story in one of the local papers and a call from NBC affiliate WWBT 12. Team Leader Tony Day, KC4AUF, the group's most experienced ham, was interviewed in the studio. The reporter later traveled to the Chesapeake Bay to film the lighthouse and interview historical society representatives for the story that would later air during the event.

The local paper story that ran prompted another club to release information that they had plans to activate another tidewater lighthouse. That story in a regional paper also resulted in another mention of K4L.

In the follow-up telephone calls to the media K4L was largely turned down, with the exception of one local paper and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Virginia's

premier newspaper. Sending both a reporter and photographer, the latter paper was the sole media outlet taken to the island by the Coast Guard. "We were actually wondering if they would show up," said Guy Carlsen, noting the chronic series of thunderstorms that had plagued the weekend. "But media coverage was central to our effort, so the weather became secondary for us."

The weather may actually have played into our favor, demonstrating the tenacity and commitment we had for the lighthouse project. The message that was sent did not become apparent until the next day.

Success!

The story landed on the front page of the Sunday edition of the statewide newspaper with a 5x7 photograph and a title banner, "Mayday for A Lighthouse." The following article entitled, "Yes, Virginia, There Is A Lighthouse: Hams help get the word out," detailed the team's hardships and featured a photograph of Andrew Slater, K4PUF, and Tony Day, KC4AUF, operating one of the HF stations. On the preceding night, WWBT 12 had aired their two-minute taped segment over the central Virginia airwaves.

The following week, two local papers requested story information and photographs for their publications, resulting in articles as well. In addition, one magazine to which a press release was sent called, wanting information on the lighthouse for a book. K4L could not have bought greater coverage for the lighthouse project and Amateur Radio!

Photos by the author.

Parke Slater, 43, has been a licensed ham since 1999, having been encouraged to get his ticket by his then 10-year-old son, Andrew, whom he was helping study for his own test. The elder Slater is a police officer in Henrico County, Virginia, and is a board director for the Richmond Amateur Telecommunications Society. Both Slaters are Skywarn storm spotters and Parke's daughter, Amanda, age 10 is KG4NBF. You can reach Parke Slater at 1243 Grapevine Rd, Sandston, VA 23150; **jc4we@erols.com**.

NEW BOOKS

KENTUCKY FARMER INVENTS WIRELESS TELEPHONE! BUT WAS IT RADIO? FACTS AND FOLKLORE ABOUT NATHAN STUBBLEFIELD

By Bob Lochte

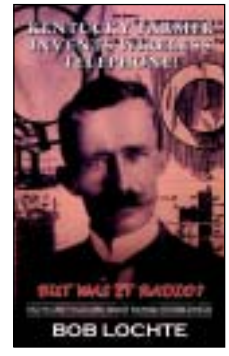
Published by All About Wireless, PO Box 1194, Murray, KY 42071; ***www.nathanstubblefield.com****. First edition, 2001, softcover, 5½ x8½ inches with black and white photographs and drawings. ISBN 0-9712511-9-3. $16.95.*

Reviewed by Gil McElroy, VE3PKD

•The United States has its own homegrown Marconis, inventors who staked an early technological claim on ways of communication that dispensed with the annoying need for connecting wires. Amos Dolbear, Mahlon Loomis, and even Alexander Graham Bell all developed competing systems of wireless communication in the late 19th century that ran the gamut from the use of induction to light.

And then there is the case of Murray, Kentucky's favorite son, Nathan B. Stubblefield, an eccentric farmer and self-taught inventor who died in 1928. Legend has grown up around Stubblefield as the result of a series of inventions, experiments and media coverage he received in his lifetime, as well as some outrageously self-serving claims made by others after his death.

Author Bob Lochte, a professor at Murray State University, has tackled head-on the messy tangle of truth and fiction that surrounds Stubblefield, and attempted to sort out just what's what. The first part of *Kentucky Farmer...* is a relatively brief factual account of Stubblefield's life and achievements. Ambitious beyond his rural farming background and self-educated about things electrical, Stubblefield made his debut in the fledgling telecommunications realm by supplying telephone services—of a sort—to his neighbors in Murray in the 1880s. His "Vibrating Telephone" was little more than a slightly sophisticated variation on the child's toy of tin cans connected to one another by a taut string. But at a time when Bell's telephone system hadn't yet spread to more rural parts of the country, Stubblefield sold enough of his contraptions to make a living from them for a time.



But the cause of all the controversy that exists to this day has to do with Stubblefield's invention of what amounted to a wireless telephone system that operated via earth conduction using rods inserted into the ground, a device he publicly demonstrated in Washington, Philadelphia and (unsuccessfully) New York City in 1902. Stubblefield received much media coverage over the system, but Lochte reminds us that others had trod this path before; both William Preece and A. Frederick Collins, for instance, had previously invented (and patented) similar systems. At a time when a number of other early wireless pioneers (Lee De Forest preeminent among them) willingly engaged in shady stock promotions, Stubblefield, to his great credit, recoiled from the dubious dealings of a promoter with whom he had become involved. Abandoning his efforts to commercially market his earth conduction system of wireless telephony, and after failing to interest the world in an induction coil wireless system, he ended his life a secretive and desperately poor hermit living just outside of Murray.

It is here that the second part of Lochte's story begins: the construction of the mythology of Stubblefield as a misunderstood and neglected wireless genius, a process that began during his lifetime but which took off in earnest after his death from malnutrition in March of 1928. Journalists, the civic leaders of Murray, and even Kentucky politicians relied heavily on gross exaggerations of a few facts and out and out untruths in their efforts to package and market Stubblefield. Enormous misunderstandings arose, for instance, over the fact that, since Stubblefield's earth conduction system employed telephony rather than telegraphy, it must therefore have amounted to the invention of radio. Accordingly, the community of Murray began to heavily identify itself as the "birthplace of radio." Lochte's account of the entire business makes for a fascinating case study in how legends and myths emerge from embellished truths and simple lies.

Bob Lochte has been studying Stubblefield and his legend since 1990. His research even led him and television engineer Larry Albert to build a working replica of Stubblefield's earth conduction telephone system and successfully demonstrate it. If anyone should get the Stubblefield story right, it should be he. And he doesn't disappoint. The thoroughness of his scholarship is evident throughout his book (though the text would have benefited from the use of footnotes), and the inclusion of Stubblefield's patents in the appendices, as well as reprints of some of the period articles (including one from *Scientific American*) that helped get the whole Stubblefield myth started, are particularly useful for those who want to see exactly what the fuss has been all about and how it got started. At a time when Nathan Stubblefield's minor (but notable) achievements in early wireless communication have become so overblown as to rank him up there with Nikola Tesla in the eyes of many contemporary conspiracy theorists, Bob Lochte's *Kentucky Farmer Invents Wireless Telephone!* proves to be a much-needed and welcome setting straight of the historical record.