

Amateur radio lets Butler travel the world from home

By ALICE PAULSEN

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It's the pleasure of meeting new friends which draws Beverly Butler to his ham radio every morning about 7.

Then, he says, sunlight activates the circuits for prime reception to and from Europe.

On a recent morning, for example, he chatted with a Englishman named Jim who lives near the legendary Sherwood Forest. They plan to exchange postcards, which will join Butler's collection displayed near his operations center in a spare bedroom.

Since he became a "ham" 1½ years ago, Butler has contacted more than 400 fellow amateur operators in Chile, Ecuador, Germany, Japan, Wales, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Argentina, Yugoslavia and throughout the United States.

"I never know when I call somewhere who is going to answer," Butler said. "You get a variety of people with interesting experiences to share."

Estimates place the number of ham radio operators at more than 800,000 worldwide, more than half of them in this country. Directories list call numbers, names and addresses.

Butler hopes to acquaint others with the hobby when he leads a class

in ham radio operation at the Northeast Wisconsin Technical Institute. It will meet from 7-9:40 p.m. for six Wednesdays starting Jan. 20.

Butler, 59, was introduced to radio codes and operations at the Army's radio school during World War II.

Instead of becoming a radio operator, though, Butler's expertise as a photographer landed him a job transmitting Signal Corps radio photos from the Pacific theater.

More than 30 years later, he acquired his novice's license from the Federal Communication Commission at the suggestion of his wife, Nancy, and after attending a meeting of the local Mike and Key Club.

Butler taught himself to operate his transmitter-receiver, mike and key. A novice is only allowed to communicate with CW (code) or dots and dashes. Five months ago, he advanced to general status, enabling him to communicate by voice on additional frequencies.

Atmospheric conditions and other hams on the same frequency may interfere with clear contacts, but Butler is satisfied with those he has made.

"I was told there were very rude people who would hog the frequencies but that just isn't true. There is so much courtesy and tolerance among hams."

To keep in touch during the Butlers' frequent travels in the United States, Butler developed a collapsible dipole antenna. When not connected in the front yard to his home system, it goes on the road for hookup at camping sites.

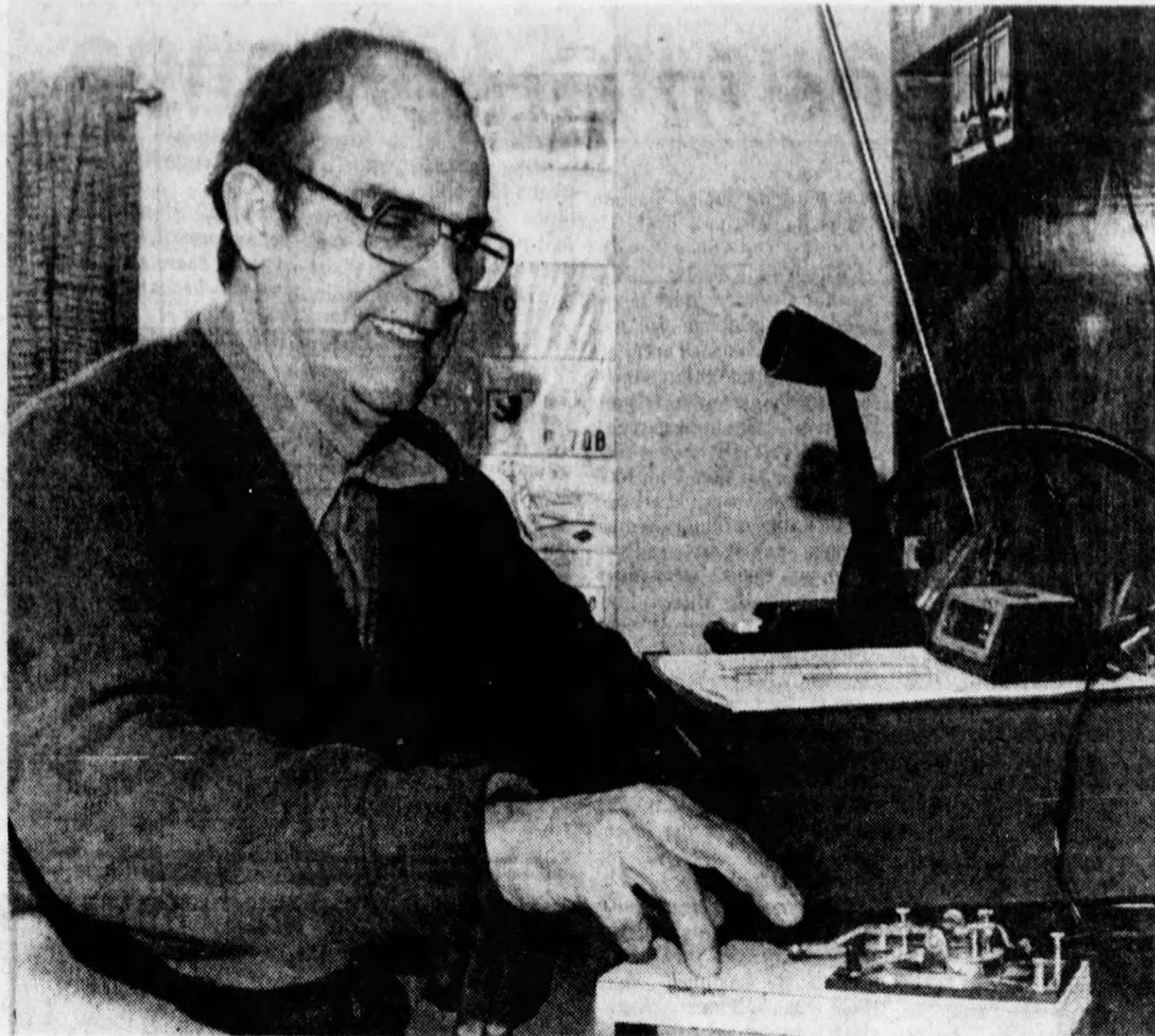
The antenna, "my own concoction," is made of plastic water pipes and holds wires 16 and 22 feet long. It doesn't improve reception of various bands but holds the wires so they can be adjusted by pulleys from the ground, 30 feet below.

He is intrigued by the intricacies of ham radios. "No matter how much you learn, there's no way you can learn everything there is to know. They're inventing new things faster than you can learn, to say nothing of the history of it."

When contact is made with a foreign or domestic operator, the hams exchange information on readability, signal strength, tone, equipment, location, etc., and their names, or "handles."

Butler always makes a joking reference to his first name. "I warn people that if they laugh at my handle, I'll come over and hit them with my purse."

The basics out of the way, the conversation usually flows to the weather and branches from there.



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Beverly Butler taps out a message in Morse code and sends it on to a fellow ham radio operator.