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Longmont, Colorado
Tuesday, September 30,
2008



Publish Date: 9/29/2008

Boulder County radio club gathers in Longmont

By Scott Rochat

Longmont Times-Call

LONGMONT — When you're a radio buff, there's nothing like a bit of ham before breakfast.

Plenty of amateur radio operators — known popularly as “hams” — were at the Boulder County Fairgrounds before 8 a.m. Sunday for BARCfest, the annual swap meet of the Boulder Amateur Radio Club. The gathering, which continued through 1 p.m., usually draws about 400 people each year.

“We're missing bargains already!” one man said with a laugh as he passed another man walking out of the Exhibit Building around 8:30 p.m. “That guy's got my antenna!”

Even in an age of cell phones, ham radio still holds a strong appeal for many. By some estimates, there are about 3 million ham operators in the world; the Boulder club has about 170 members and had to move the BARCfest out of the National Guard Armory in Boulder 10 years ago because it was getting too crowded.

“It's not a dead hobby,” said BARC president Jack Ciaccia, an Erie resident. “Everyone thinks of their grandfather with his radio, but there's so many aspects to it.”

Some of those aspects have been around for a long time. From the beginning, hams have been part of the emergency communications network, helping out during fires, tornadoes and floods. In this area, that role's covered by the Boulder County Amateur Radio Emergency Service.

At the more recent end of the timeframe, some of ham radio repeaters have been tied into the Internet. Programs like EchoLink allow hams to reliably connect with and speak to other users worldwide.

“Some of the neatest things that are happening are in the merger of the Internet and ham radio,” Ciaccia said.

Ciaccia himself got into the hobby 50 years ago and found it too fun to quit.

“I signed up in the Boy Scouts,” he said. “I was going for my radio badge and ended up with a shortwave receiver that I sold my AM/FM clock radio for.”

John Reilly of Louisville, on the other hand, flirted with the hobby as a child but only came back to it in a big way five years ago.

“The biggest difference in being a ham when you're 13 and being a ham when you're 50 is you have more money to spend,” Reilly said as he looked over products at the swap meet. “I'm kind of a dilettante, sampling it all and finding things I like before pushing it further.”

It's the promise of long-term impacts like that that keeps BARC Jr., the club's youth chapter, in business. The junior club started 16 years ago and in that time has licensed 180 young hams.



Cal Warnecke of Berthoud looks over a piece of electronic equipment Saturday during the Boulder Amateur Radio Club's 55th annual BARCfest in Longmont. **Lewis Geyer/Times-Call**

“Everyone else is still trying to figure out what we’re doing,” Ciaccia said. “We’ve never recruited. The kids keep recruiting themselves.”

For several people, BARCfest is also a chance to get or upgrade their operator’s license — testing began around 10 a.m. But the biggest appeal of the event, Ciaccia said, may be the chance to put a face to a voice.

“A lot of guys who have only gotten to talk to each other on the radio finally get to meet each other face to face,” he said.

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