

Where there are hobbies, businesses emerge

By: Bob Van Enkenvoort - Wisconsin State Journal - Business - April 19, 2015

We have jobs. We have hobbies. Those hobbies can create jobs for others.

Ask Scott Cole, owner of Tower Electronics, Green Bay, who had two long rows of tables stocked with inventory of interest to ham radio operators at the April 11 Madison Area Swapfest, put on by the Madison Area Repeaters Association — one of the state's largest amateur (ham) radio clubs — at the Mandt Community Center in Stoughton.

Swapfests like this one pull in people from around Wisconsin and other Midwest states to look for equipment, visit with like-minded people and possibly meet face-to-face with people they've spoken with over the air.

Just 10 percent of business comes from walk-in traffic at Cole's retail store, which opened in 1978. Fifty percent comes from the 43 or 44 annual shows that he or his wife, Jill, attend in states east of the Mississippi. (They once covered more states and attended 131 shows yearly between them.) Forty percent of business comes from catalog or online sales.

Others come to swap meets with the goal of selling as well. Some are selling their own excess equipment. Others are selling as part of an estate

Meanwhile, ham radio junkies canvassed the aisles seeking either bargains or that special piece of rare equipment to fill out a collection.

Wikipedia defines amateur radio, or ham radio, as "the use of designated radio frequency spectra for purposes of private recreation, non-commercial exchange of messages, wireless experimentation, self-training, and emergency communication."

The number of enthusiasts is growing, according to the American Radio Relay League, the national association for amateur radio.

According to the ARRL, in the past 40 years, the number of amateur radio operators in the U.S. has grown from 285,000 in 1971 to 709,500 in 2012.

The reasons people get involved are many, according to Gary Sorensen, Oxford, local ARRL section manager:

Some want to provide a public service such as storm spotting or civil emergencies.

Others want to check off on a map all the places around the world where they've conversed with another ham radio operator.

Some like the technology and are involved in pushing it forward.

Some like going into public schools and demonstrating the technology, which is especially impressive when they can demonstrate the range of communication that can be reached with the proper equipment. For instance, astronauts on the International Space Station use ham radios to converse with people on Earth, Sorensen said, and sometimes agree to speak to student groups

Mount Horeb's Frederick Baguhn is president of the Four Lakes Amateur Radio Club, which meets 7:30 p.m. the third Thursday of the month at the University of Wisconsin Space Place, 2300 S. Park St.

He always was interested in amateur radio, but he wasn't moved to jump in with both feet until the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"I'm not going to take up a gun and defend the country, but I can do radio," he said.

Besides the camaraderie that visiting with fellow hobbyists can offer, the local club offers people interested in ham radio the chance to take tests for the three levels of licenses a ham radio operator can earn that give progressively more broadcasting abilities and privileges.

Meanwhile, the Stoughton hamfest — which is in its 43rd year — is a means for the Madison Area Repeaters Association to raise money for equipment and to rent tower space in Madison on which to mount repeaters, which help boost ham radio signals, according to Stoughton resident Paul Toussaint, as he helped sell coffee and other treats to the crowd at the show.

Such communication is helpful during large-scale events, such as a marathon or a citywide bike race.

Toussaint, Madison Area Repeaters Association president, said this show pulls in people from around Wisconsin and other Midwest states. He expected 650 to 700 people to attend the fest.

"You see a lot of the same faces year in and year out," he said.

And those same faces have been the bread and butter for people like Cole, who travel from show to show to sell equipment.

"At this point in time, we're not going to get rich doing it. We've been in it for so long though that we've got inventory built up so well that it will probably take 10 years just to sell off the the stuff we have in inventory now.

Cole, his wife and employees schlep containers of connectors, adapters, microphones, audio plugs, batteries and other ham radio equipment from city to city and show to show to drum up sales.

"It's a highly specialized thing so its not something you can take to a flea market or sell in a newspaper."

Cole and his wife are also licensed ham radio operators. Maybe in their case, they've found a nirvana where hobby and job are one and the same.

"Its pretty much a kind of a labor of love," he said.

If we all could be so lucky, that would be worth broadcasting.