Hams: The original global chatters

By Rosalind S. Helderman
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From several miles south of tiny Lovettsville, Va., down more than a mile of unpaved roads, inside a barn and alongside a battered canoe and a tractor, Gary Quinn called out to the world.

Turning a dial slowly, he hit a button on a laptop computer and sent out his Morse code call sign — K4LRG — again and again, beckoning to any other ham radio operator who would listen. Then his speaker crackled and spit out the dot-dash beeping of a fellow enthusiast.

"He's from North Texas," Quinn translated, tapping out a radio hello, making careful note of the call and then starting over.

Quinn has been at it all night, collecting contacts from all over the United States. The middle of the night in this peaceful perch was best, he said.

"It's just you and your radio and the quiet of the night. The coolness of the night air keeps you up," said Quinn, 56.

In late June, the annual on-air Field Day brough in tens of thousands of the country's amateur radio users. Broadcasting continuously from 2 p.m. Saturday to 2 p.m. Sunday, clubs of radio operators from across the nation and Canada competed to talk to as many other users as possible.

They also brushed up on radio skills that can be used in emergency situations or, as hams like to say, "when all else fails."

"The Internet is cool and all, but the last two people on Earth will be communicating like this." said John Westerman, 40, who, like Quinn, is a member of the Loudoun (County, Va.) Amateur Radio Group.

Hams can run their radios off car batteries, power generators or even solar panels. They can rig antennas on simple fiberglass towers, up ladders or between treetops.

That means their radios can be used when natural disasters knock out electricity or, as on Sept. 11, 2001, when heavy use jams up cell phones. They can communicate in Morse code or speak directly to one another through microphones.

A sign at Field Day
The Washington Post

Larry Hughes of Leesburg, Va., said ham radio operators have been assisting firefighters battling the Arizona wildfires. They also set up stations at the Pentagon on Sept. 11, helping emergency workers communicate with one another.

"In an emergency, you grab your box, put it in your car and get out there and get on the air as soon as possible," Hughes **said.**

The American Radio Relay League, which sponsors Field Day, requires clubs to set up their antennas outside and run radios off self-contained power sources during the event as practice for emergencies.

Usually, ham radio operators work out of their homes or even their cars. They must be licensed by the Federal Communications Commission, which assigns each ham a call sign and has set aside chunks of bandwidth for the hobby.

The technology allows operators to pick up signals worldwide. Jeffrey Horlick, 58, of Gaithersburg, Md., once had a long conversation with a shepherd in the Orkney Isles off northern Scotland.

John Unger, 60, of Hamilton, Va., has collected 36,000 contacts since 1996 — including one of the most famous names in ham radio, the former king of Jordan. King Hussein, father of Jordan's current leader. King Abdullah II, was an avid amateur radio operator. He died in 1999.

"He was very gracious. You didn't have to call him 'Your Highness' or anything," Unger said. "Could you imagine the president of the United States just getting on in the evenings and chatting with people?"

Unger's daughter Hilary, 27, is an operator. Though the operators said the hobby draws more women and young people each year, she remains something of a rarity. She said she sometimes has more luck picking up contacts than her father because other hams are more likely to respond to the rare female voice.

Horlick said the excitement of worldwide communication, available free any time, anywhere is still what draws many new users.

"With modem-day cell phones, it's really hard to wow a child with local communications," he said. "But to say, 'Here, come and talk to someone in Brazil' — that'll get their eyes a little wide."