

The World That Passed Us By

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Think back, if you are old enough (and if you're a member of AMSAT, demographics suggest you most likely are), to the exciting days of October, 1957. The world's first artificial satellite, Sputnik 1, had just been launched. It was launched by the USSR (they had been known by this acronym for two generations, although they were still collectively known as 'The Russians.'). The USSR, we Americans were told, were an enemy nation. The Russians were an enemy people. Our enemy was in space – we could hear them on 15 MC (this was in the days before MHz)! America was suddenly a paranoid nation (so what's new?)

Think back, if you are old enough (and if you're a ham, statistics suggest you most likely are), to the frantic days immediately post-Sputnik. The United States was trying frantically to play catch-up. Your high school guidance counselor was telling you, "You're good at science. You're good at math. Go and become an engineer; we can never have enough engineers to catch up to the Russians." (At the same time, you learn years later, your friend Sasha Zaitsev was being told by his high school guidance counselor, "You're good at science. You're good at math. Go and become an engineer; we can never have enough engineers to stay ahead of the Americans.")

Think back, if you are not yet senile (and if you're able to read this, there is still hope), to when you first got your ham radio license. The world that Sputnik had made smaller was suddenly shrinking even more. You could talk (OK, so it was probably via Morse code) to other hams, halfway around the world – maybe even to the dreaded Russians. Maybe they weren't your enemy after all.

Think back, if you are old enough (and if you've read this far, I know you are), to the excitement of December, 1961. With a little help from your USAF friends, hams had just launched OSCAR I, the world's first non-government satellite. You could hear it on 145 MC (this was still in the days before MHz)! Suddenly schools (the same ones that were training Americans to catch up with the Russians, and the same ones that were training Russians to stay ahead of the Americans) were activating ham radio clubs, building antennas, and pointing them ... up!

Now think back to last week. Surely you're old enough to have noticed your kid (or maybe your grandkid) Instant Messaging to his buddies in Russia. Maybe she doesn't remember what USSR stood for, but she knows all the countries in the world by their email suffixes. Never mind that those same international suffixes used to be ham callsign prefixes. What matters is that your offspring are talking to the world – by IM and e-mail and VOIP and cellphones – and yes, even by satellite links. Links invisible to them. Do you think they have any need for ham radio? Probably no more than we have need for spark. The world has passed us by.

Or has it? Are there still a few things we can still teach our kids, our grandkids, before they put us out to pasture?

I like to think there are.

Think forward to a world linked by a telecommunications infrastructure that rivals Science Fiction's boldest predictions. Every man, woman, and child carries a communicator (possibly implanted) that links him or her to everyone else on Earth. Instantly, and cheaply, via satellite. In whatever language the participants choose. You thought Paramount Studios held all the patents on the Universal Translator/Communicator? So did I. But it wasn't long before this technology permeated our society. And transformed it.

Now think about a civilization in decline. For generations, our descendants had taken for granted a technological base that unified their world. Nobody needed ham radio; it was obsolete, overtaken by progress. Nobody needed AMSAT; it was a vestige of a bygone era, a footnote in the history books. All anybody needed was to think the right words, and the neural interface self-activated, putting any individual in instant contact with any other, at the speed of thought. The omnipresent satellites were invisible not only to their eyes, but to their mind's eyes as well.

Until they began to fail. Our machines, like ourselves, are mortal. Suddenly, there was nobody on Earth who remembered Keplerian elements. There was nobody alive who remembered Maxwell's Equations. The global net fell silent and not a soul had a clue about how to fix it.

Fortunately, a group of anthropologists and historians remembered something from their school days. A primitive creature, cryogenically preserved, who had roamed the Earth in those prehistoric days when satellites were new, and Russians and Americans thought themselves enemies. A being who used ancient, stone-aged tools like Yagis and keyers and frequency synthesizers and digital signal processing, to force crude, low-data-rate communications between himself and other primitives.

So they thawed him out, and put him to work, and he saved the world.

He was a radio ham.

He was an AMSAT member.

He was you. 



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