Waking the Dead, Unruding the Rude

Recently I had the opportunity to drive through a region of the country I have not had reason to visit for about ten years or so. In looking over my logs I recalled the area to have quite a few fine and very active repeater systems. Consulting the current edition of the ARRL *Repeater Directory* revealed almost a dozen machines that should have made my stay in this area lots of fun for amateur radio. In preparation for the trip I programmed all the aforementioned systems into the memories of my handheld and looked forward to many hours of relaxing rag chewing.

What I discovered, however, did not speak well of the state of VHF/UHF repeater activity in 2005, at least in that particular part of the country. I shall keep the region nameless, because I know the situation to be similar in more than a few locations around the country.

As I drove through the area and set up shop in a number of bed & breakfasts and motels during my travels, I found incredibly little repeater activity. On many of the machines my calls went unanswered, even during peak *drive time* hours. (This does not bode well for travelers in need of aid in an unfamiliar part of the land.) Those machines where my call was answered almost always resulted in curt responses, sometimes with an overt indication that outsiders were not all that welcome. Roundtables consisted of a handful of friends talking only to one another and not opening up matters to general discussion.

I recall passing through this area in the past and being invited *twice* on two different repeaters to meet some local hams for coffee at local eateries. Now I find only dead air or the cold shoulder.

Something is not healthy in ham radio land. While most areas are not in as dire straits as the part of the world I was visiting, I think we can all think of one or two machines near our QTHs that are either unfriendly or have been so inactive that dust comes out of the speaker when you key them up.

❖ What Happened?

I guess we could begin the analysis by looking at how the area might have started down the road to radio hobby entropy. The most common excuse I hear folks give is, "The Internet is to blame!"

I suppose by some stretch of the imagination an argument could be made that some folks have stopped playing radio in favor of playing with computers. My experience, and that of most of my friends, does not reflect that scenario. I cannot think of any ham who has become inactive due to the addition of a computer in the shack. Every radio person I know – ham or otherwise – has seen the computer as a tool to enhance their hobby fun. While computer technology is a convenient target, I just don't see anything that really supports this notion. Have you ever seen an ad in the ham radio press stating "Must sell my ham gear to buy a PC?" Nope, me either.

A more reasonable argument might be made for the growth of the cellular phone industry cutting into ham repeater activity. Many repeaters sprang up around the use of, and access to, a viable area telephone patch system. I know more than a few folks (whose ham activity is mainly in the HF bands), who bought a 2 meter rig and supported a local repeater just for the security of being able to make an emergency call from the road. Today, for most folks, cell phones do the job instead. So, the lack of need for phone-patch based systems and their group support brings us to where the problem probably really comes home to roost.

I think we have nobody but ourselves to blame for the lack of repeater activity. Most metropolitan areas (with the reduction in phone patch use) probably have more repeater systems than they reasonably require. In the late seventies and early eighties, everyone who could get a channel off of their regional frequency coordinator (and even some who didn't) put a repeater system on the air. So, instead of a large number of folks sharing the fun in a few good places, smaller and smaller groups broke out onto the different machines and, over time, there just wasn't enough activity to keep folks interested. And, with fewer folks depending on phone patching to let their significant other know when they would be home for dinner, a lot of machines have gotten awfully quiet. Quantity is seldom quality.
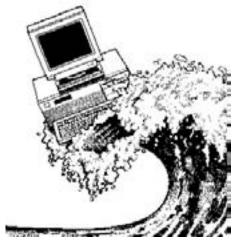
❖ No Ham is an Island

So, we have addressed the dead systems: What about those unfriendly ones? That might be a tougher nut to crack, but it's something we need to look at, because, along with a drop in repeater system use, has come a drop in the interest in emergency service activity. In spite of efforts to tighten up emergency response for increased homeland security, many local groups still find it hard to get folks out for ARES/RACES nets and field activities. Sadly, even some of those groups that are active can tend to be rather insular. While they may pay lip service to the desire for new participants, their actions and attitudes treat newcomers like outsiders.

This is actually a fairly complicated subject that goes well beyond the ham radio world. An excellent book that looks at the problem and some of the solutions is called *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* by Robert D. Putnam (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). I commend it to you for further study.

Some systems that were once open, with gregarious memberships who encouraged new activity, have turned in on themselves, feeling little or no connection with hams outside of the local group. I once drove through an area and made a call on a system listed in the ARRL *Repeater Directory* as "open." Before the squelch tail dropped, someone (who, by the way, neglected to give his callsign), felt the need to inform me in no uncertain terms that people who did not pay dues on the system were not allowed to talk on it. Even if this was a case where the system had gone "closed" for some reason (it hadn't), I am sure you can think of quite a few ways that interaction could have been handled with better amateur radio spirit and camaraderie!

So how do we get these inactive and insular repeater systems to wake up and operate in the best traditions of the amateur radio fraternity? In checking out matters with some of my local repeater groups and talking with folks in other parts of the country, I think there are lots of ways

Contrary to popular belief, the wave of interest in personal computing did not kill off repeater use.

to turn dead and unfriendly systems around. Let me outline a few that might be useful should you run into similar situations in your area.

❖ Join Your Local Repeater Group

Regardless whether a system is considered open or closed, the people who pay the bills always have the most say in how a system is run. Contributing membership in your local system(s) allows you to have input into matters, or at least have direct access to those who set policy.

Remember that system I spoke of where I was told to get off the air because I wasn't a paying member? I made a point of finding out who the system trustee was and getting in contact with him. That gentleman assured me that this unknown individual was not speaking for the repeater group, that the system was open and use by travelers was encouraged. He assured me that the matter would be discussed at the next quarterly repeater group meeting and that he would advise regular users to keep an ear out for anyone making such inappropriate statements on behalf of the group.

I wasn't a member of that group and my concerns were still well heard. Think of how much more clout a ham's position would have if he was a card carrying member!

❖ Go to Group Meetings

This is sort of a chicken and egg situation. I know of some repeater groups that, as they have become more inactive, have held less frequent meetings. This is 180 degrees out of phase. You need to hold *more frequent* meetings to discuss how to improve system participation, to meet and welcome new hams to the group, and to find out about any emerging matters that could have a negative effect on the system. More meetings will produce more activity. A more active repeater will have more members, who will come to more meetings… Get the picture?

And while you're at those meetings, be a voice for the kind of repeater group you would want to be a member of. Remind folks of the public service aspects of the hobby as well as the brotherhood and sisterhood all hams should show for each other.

❖ Lead by Example

As a bona fide member of your local system, make a point of getting on the air frequently and taking the time to greet and reach out to newcomers and travelers you hear on the system. Often, these folks will be amateurs just starting out in their ham radio experience. Not only can you help them to feel welcome, you can help them to learn correct practice and procedures and make them a better ham in doing so.

Since the general demise of the Novice Bands, newcomers have no safe place to cut their amateur radio teeth. New folks need support and encouragement. A little effort on your part will go a long way and probably even bring in a new member to your local group. You may even make a friend for life.

❖ Consider System Consolidation

This can be a touchy subject, because some folks have a lot of sweat equity as well as personal finances tied up in building and maintaining their particular systems. But what good is it to have a bunch of systems with nobody to talk to? In areas where the need for multiple systems has fallen off for the reasons mentioned above, repeater groups need to reach out to on another for their mutual survival. Most areas of our country could be better served if repeater groups would begin to look at consolidation seriously and reasonably.

❖ On Air Activities

It easy to encourage repeater system use through organized activities. How about a weekly swap net? Code practice? Technical discussion? Encourage taking turns moderating the activities to get more people involved.

Here's a great activity that allows for participation by retirees and shut ins: Set up a schedule for repeater monitoring so that as many hours as possible of the day or night are covered by someone from the group. It's easy enough to do: just get folks to sign up for an hour or two where they promise to keep their rig on and answer any call that comes in. Even if you can't get 24/7 coverage, try to see that your machine is covered during peak commuter hours and on weekends. What a great service to travelers and newcomers!

No repeater has to fall into disuse or, worse yet, rudeness. With a little effort and some reflection on what makes the amateur radio hobby great, any repeater can become a popular place that performs good service and is fun to hang around.

I'll see you on the bottom end of 40 meters – that is, unless you answer my call on your local machine!

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value of the US dollar is plunging rapidly. The cash defrays postage for mail forwarding and a souvenir QSL to your mailbox. Letters go to these addresses, identified above in parentheses: PO Box 1, Belfast, NY 14895; PO Box 69, Elkhorn, NE 68022; PO Box 28413, Providence, RI 02908; and PO Box 293, Merlin, Ontario N0P 1W0.

Some pirates prefer e-mail, bulletin logs or internet web site reports instead of snail mail correspondence. The best bulletins for submitting pirate loggings remain *The ACE* ($2 US for sample copies via the Belfast address above) and the e-mailed Free Radio Weekly newsletter, free to contributors via *niel@ican.net*. The Free Radio Network web site, another outstanding source of content about pirate radio, is found at **http://www.frn.net**, and a few pirates will occasionally QSL a web site report left on the FRN.

Thanks

UNCLE SKIP'S CONTEST CALENDAR

AGCW QRP/QRP Party
May 1 1300 -1900 UTC
MARAC County Hunter Contest (CW)
May 7 0000 UTC - May 8 2400 UTC
Nevada QSO Party
May 7 0000 UTC - May 8 0600 UTC
10-10 Int. Spring Contest (CW)
May 7 0001 UTC - May 8 2400 UTC
Microwave Spring Sprint
May 7 0600 - 1300 Local Time
Oregon QSO Party
May 7 1400 UTC - May 8 0200 UTC
Indiana QSO Party
May 7 1600 UTC - May 8 0400 UTC
New England QSO Party
May 7 2000 UTC - May 8 0500 UTC
May 8 1300- 2400 UTC
Mid-Atlantic QSO Party
May 14 1600 UTC - May 15 0400 UTC
May 15 1100 - 2400 UTC
FISTS Spring Sprint
May 14 1700 UTC - 2100 UTC
50 MHz Spring Sprint
May 14 2300 UTC - May 15 0300 UTC
CQ WW WPX Contest (CW)
May 28 0000 UTC - May 29 2359 UTC
QRPARCI Hootowl Sprint
May 29 2000 UTC - 2400 UTC
MI QRP Memorial Day CW Sprint
May 29 2300 UTC - May 30 0300 UTC