

There's Always Somebody Listening



73 LAST WORD

Steve Herman, W7VOA

The social isolation of the year-long lockdown, due to the coronavirus pandemic, was a stressful interlude for many around the world. An upside for hams, amid the hiatus from classrooms and workplaces, was an opportunity to spend more hours on the air and an antidote for the forced withdrawal from society.

"I don't think there's a single lonely amateur radio operator in the world," I quipped during an interview with my fellow VOA correspondent and ham, Mike O'Sullivan, WA6KIC, when he remotely interviewed me for a TV report (voanews.com/episode/radio-hams-keep-touch-through-pandemic-4305171) about how the virus lockdown had renewed interest in hobbies, such as ham radio.

Nearly a half century before COVID-19, ham radio had given me a virtual community that stretched far beyond my middle school peer group in Las Vegas. After passing the Novice and General tests, I never experienced a moment of boredom — or loneliness. With a second-hand Swan 500-C transceiver and a three-element rotatable Yagi my father

mounted atop a telephone pole he deposited in the front (!) yard, favorable sunspot conditions allowed me to make DX contacts in Asia nearly every afternoon.

I joined local ham clubs, including one that placed remote base stations on nearby mountaintops. A technological trend-setter with linking systems, Wayne Schenk, K7WS, (now a Silent Key) became my mentor and big brother. Thanks to our system and the magic of the ionosphere, I even enjoyed trans-Pacific contacts from my handheld (linking VHF simplex to 10-meter FM) in supermarkets, tagging my call sign with "shopping cart mobile."

Years later. I credited some of my academic and professional success to my boyhood hobby. Time in the ham shack taught me physics and geography, fueling a thirst for eventual foreign travel and overseas postings. I picked up the basics of several foreign languages on HF. Increasing my Morse code speed sharpened right-brain skills. Casual conversation (known among hams as *ragchewing*) gave me confidence to initiate conversations with strangers — a critical attribute for any aspiring journalist.

When the pandemic compelled me to limit my reporting duties at the White House, I began teleworking and added to my home broadcast studio a VHF/UHF 50-watt transceiver connected to a rooftop ground-plane antenna. Although I can hit a couple of dozen repeaters, I mostly monitor 146.52 FM and answer any voice I hear calling on the simplex frequency. I would not want any fellow ham to conclude, during a pandemic or any time of loneliness, there's nobody listening.



Steve Herman, W7VOA, is the Voice of America's White House bureau chief. He was previously posted in Asia and active as 7J1AIL (Japan), VU3USJ (India), HL9VOA (South Korea), and HSØZLK (Thailand), in addition to operating mini-DXpeditions as A52SW (Bhutan), T6AD (Afghanistan), and T88SH (Palau).