

There's a science to getting wired

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On a steamy Saturday at King's Landing recently, seven antennas stood in the grass with their metallic limbs outstretched toward the heavens. Inside an old tobacco barn, disembodied voices filled the air, resonating with ghostly static. The hams were having a field day.

Several amateur shortwave radio operators gathered at the Huntingtown park June 23 to set up field radio communications. They got on the airwaves and started reaching others throughout the United States and Canada, each of them participating in the American Radio Relay League's Field Day.

"It's a combination of a big day

out and a drill," said Dave Moore, president of Calvert Amateur Radio Association. "It's also like a contest." The hams worked as a team during throughout the day, into the night and finishing on Sunday. Each time they contacted an operator in another region, it counted toward a final tally. Ultimately, the club earned a score for its performance.

Each licensed operator is given a call sign. Moore, 25, is known to his wireless friends as N3TZO. The field operation used 100 percent emergency power, he said, and part of his job that day was supplying the juice. To support the various radio equipment and computers, he fired up two generators that morning, keeping another on reserve.

An electrician by trade, he got

the category of his power supply (battery, commercial or emergency).

"Have you seen the world's ugliest antenna?" Bailey asked, smiling. Outside, the jury-rigged aerial looked like an industrial spider web on a stand. It was built for the occasion out of bamboo, an old bed frame, water pipe and wire. It worked well, but its appearance caused the hams to give it fond names like "the monster" or "the beast."

Before the field day, Steve Hempling, also known as N3IPN, erected the antenna in the backyard of his Huntingtown residence. After it had been there a few days, the neighbors started asking, "what is that thing?"

In one corner, Debbie Hempling, 37, is trying to confirm a contact. "That's a QSL," she

into amateur broadcasting during high school when he started "fooling with radios and CBs." He found it interesting, he said, "talking to people on the other side of the world with no wires connecting."

Inside the barn, operators were camped in front of their radios at wooden picnic tables, talking to people in other states. Nourishment was not in short supply: various dishes filled with food, crockpots and coolers covered one table. The waning light shone harshly through the cracks in the walls. They were hoping it wouldn't rain.

Mark Bailey, a 35-year-old electrical engineer, sat in front of a Kenwood transceiver, an SWR power meter, a speaker and a Gateway 2000 computer. The com-

See RADIO, Page A-2

Ham radio operators reach out around the world

RADIO, From Page A-1

puter, he said, kept track of his contacts. With his fingertips, he touched a small metal paddle rapidly, alternating between thumb and forefinger.

Bailey, whose call sign is KD4D, was transmitting in the complex sequence of dots and dashes known as Morse code. After sending a message, he heard the reply from southern Texas, listening to quick, high-pitched tones on a headset. The exchange is fast and simple. Each operator tells the other his location, how many transmitters he's using, and

Debbie Hempling reaches out to someone wirelessly.

Bruce Hamilton

says, "please give me yours?" She listens quietly for a reply. "I copy three alpha western PA, is that a QSL?" She waits, writes something down and after a few minutes tries again. "CQ field day, CQ field day. Kilo delta for delta?" she calls.

Women are usually answered faster than men, Hempling (N3PZI) says, because their voices are sharper. She likes using the radio, she jokes, because she likes to talk. She also makes friends on the air. She met a woman in Germany and a missionary in Guatemala who now writes her. "I talk to people all over the world," she said. To learn more about Calvert Amateur Radio Association, contact Brian Blizzard at (301) 855-7233.

tools like radio have an enduring charm. As Bailey said, "this is a lot more fun." It's a comparatively cheap tool and easy to use. The operators are quick to point out that when other things fail or don't work, the radio does. In fires, floods, earthquakes and other disasters, it prevails.

"We're a national resource," said Moore.

At a time when the Internet, e-mail and fax machines make widespread telecommunications easy,