

# The Calvert Recorder

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Calvert County, Maryland

# Hobbyists keep old tech viable

■ In the age of cell phones and the Web, ham radio operators remain relevant

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Staff writer

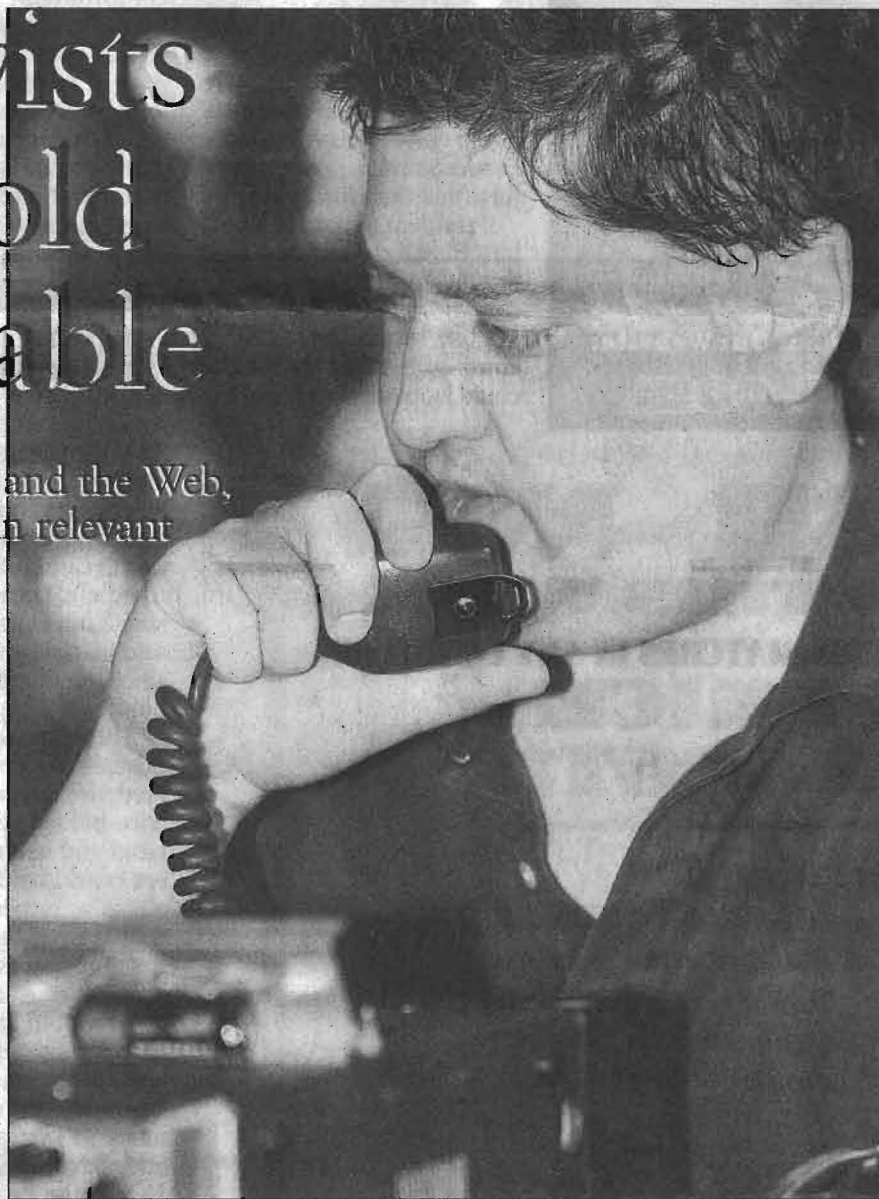
Trying to ignore the forest's wet heat, Leslie Dickey of Prince Frederick hunches over a picnic table, twirling a radio dial from one alien-sounding voice to another.

He's searching for new contacts, people he and his friends haven't yet spoken with today.

"K three Charlie, Alpha, Lima," Dickey says when he discovers an amateur who announces in a distorted voice that he hails from Maine.

Dickey's greeting sounds like gibberish to the uninitiated, but K3CAL is a call sign, the name the Federal Communications Commission assigns amateurs or clubs when they become licensed. A handful of Dickey's fellow hams, the nickname for amateur radio operators, from the Calvert Amateur Radio Association are also using the

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Staff photo by DARWIN WEIGEL

Richard Browne of Dunkirk, secretary of the Community Emergency Response Team, takes part with the Calvert County Amateur Radio Club in the National Field Day for ham radio operators. Browne is a newly licensed ham radio operator.

# Radio

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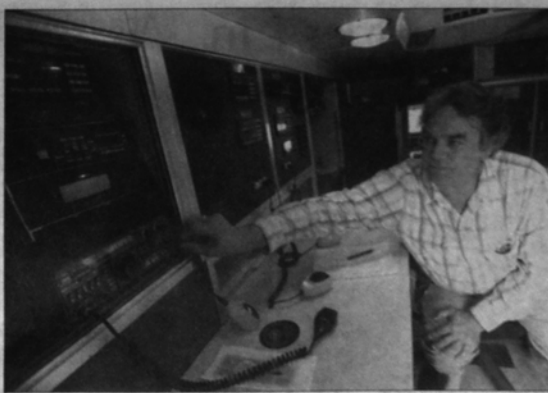
chill sign at other crackling radios under the pavilion. Branches of cords lead from them to their antennae, stationed in the forest.

"This is what you call organized confusion," said Steven Urquiza, a CARA member.

The day before, club members arrived at the forest pavilion behind Crossroad Christian Church in St. Leonard with their antennae and an air cannon, which they used to shoot lines up into the trees. In a couple hours, the hams had set up their equipment for Field Day, the annual event for hams nationwide.

Field Day, which was on June 27 and 28 this year, is intended to help hams prepare for emergencies. They use generators, vehicles or the sun to power their radios and practice contacting each other in a variety of formats. The exercise is important, they say, because ham radio gives them independence, a way of getting through when all else fails.

It seems that many times, this is what draws the hams



Victor Curtis of the Southern Maryland Amateur Radio Club uses the radios in the "Hambulance," an emergency communications response vehicle, at the Southern Maryland chapter of the American Red Cross in La Plata.

to their hobby.

Not only do they enjoy speaking with people from afar or offering help during an emergency, but the amateurs like understanding what it takes to send a simple greeting from one person to another and doing it without the help of Verizon or Metro-

Cast or Comcast.

## Offering a hand

When the La Plata tornado hit in 2002, the regional chapter of the American Red Cross had just one radio, and after the machinery weathered the storm, it barely

counted, in the opinion of Vic Curtis, a local ham.

"I was like, 'Dear Lord,'" said Curtis, describing the moment when Mike Zabko, executive director of the local Red Cross, showed him the equipment, which had formerly been installed in a vehicle.

The same radio is now shamed, unplugged and collecting dust on a top shelf in the La Plata Red Cross headquarters.

"This is our museum," said Curtis, president of the Southern Maryland Amateur Radio Club.

Now, the Red Cross has an entire room of its headquarters dedicated to amateur radio equipment, as well as a former ambulance — nicknamed the "Hambulance" — that's been fitted as a mobile communications center.

But why bother? Why not just text or call or send messages on Twitter or Facebook when there's an emergency?

Because, Curtis said, "when it really hits the fan ... if you want to get the message through, go find one of us."

After Hurricane Isabel in 2003, Curtis, 51, of Croft and his son drove the Hambulance to Leonardtown, where the phone lines were down, the power was out and a generator at Leonardtown High School had blown. The emergency workers were able to communicate through ham radio, which can be used to ask for supplies, let worried family members know their loved ones are safe or call for emergency assistance.

Even during national disasters, hams can lend a hand, Curtis said.

After Sept. 11, 2001, when cell phone calls overwhelmed the system, Curtis helped relay messages from inside the Pentagon, which had been hit by one of the airplanes the terrorists hijacked, to the Red Cross and Salvation Army.

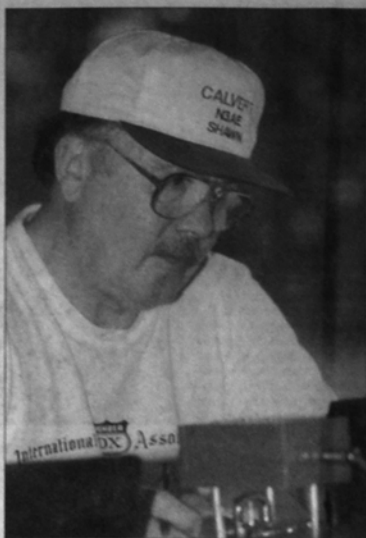
Zabko said that after the La Plata tornado hit, he felt the Red Cross could use some of that radio dependability. He passed the test for his amateur radio license in 2002 and forged a relationship with Curtis and the other area hams.

"I feel about 500 percent better," said Zabko of the chapter's ability to send messages during an emergency. "I'm trying to make sure we're prepared for disasters. We needed to have some sort of communication that's fail-safe."

Other agencies also rely on ham radio. Emergency services departments have contacts with the clubs in Charles, Calvert and St. Mary's counties and can call the amateurs into action if needed.

## On air for fun

In ham slang, Curtis is what you'd call an "alligator," someone who's on the air loud and often, he said. He's well-supplied with radios in



Shawn Donley of Huntingtown takes part with the Calvert County Amateur Radio Club in the National Field Day for ham radio operators. Donley, a longtime radio operator, still communicates in Morse code with other code operators.

## Become a ham

According to the Federal Communications Commission's Web site, operation of an amateur station requires an amateur operator license grant from the FCC. Before receiving a license applicants must pass an examination administered by a team of volunteer examiners. The volunteers determine the license operator class for which an applicant is qualified. Applicants can contact a VE team to make arrangements to take the tests. According to the Web site, the closest volunteer examiners to Southern Maryland are in the Laurel Amateur Radio Club Inc., P.O. Box 0146, Laurel, MD 20725-0146; Call 301-637-0394 or 301-572-5124, from 6 to 9 p.m. only; e-mail aa301@arrl.net.

his home, and for when he's on the road, Curtis keeps six more radios in his pickup truck.

He just likes to talk.

That's nothing new in the Internet and cell phone era, but according to hams, there's a different kind of talk happening on air.

For example, Hollywood, Md., resident Joseph "Gene" Talley said most hams avoid talking politics or religion, especially with people from far away. Talley has made hundreds of contacts in foreign countries, some as remote as Mongolia. He's even spoken with someone inside North Korea, although the totalitarian Asian government only allowed the man there to use the radio for a short time.

The on-air conversations are often simple: How's your day going? How's the weather? How's your family?

"I've talked to people in Iran, Iraq, China," Talley said. "Most people stay away from ideology and just socialize with each other."

Talley, a member of the St. Mary's County Amateur Radio Association, said some club members have formed lifelong friendships with people they met on the radio, even traveling to "Hamventions" to match faces to voices.

But according to Curtis, and like any blog worth reading, the airwaves have their own set of tensions and tiffs. The amateurs will even sometimes hide in the static from people they don't want to speak with.

And every once in awhile, Curtis said hams might even catch other amateurs trading barbs about them over the radio.

But mostly, it's all in good fun and PG-rated.

"We always know that anything we say, there could be thousands of people listening," said Dickey.

So, although radio is yet another form of communication amid the clamor, Dickey described it as a place to get away and to have "civil discourse."

Talley, 66, who spends about three hours a day on the hobby, said he unwinds

sometimes by turning on his radio and just seeing who's out there. Browsing the Internet isn't the same, Talley said, and he likes the fact that on air, it's harder to hide your identity than online.

Your voice gives you away, Talley said.

"You can hear things in people's voices. You can hear insincerity," he said. "I guess you have a better feeling for that person."

You can also often detect sex and age, and Curtis claims that an unlicensed person would "stick out like a sore thumb" over the airwaves.

## Thinking ahead

But many of the hams said the advent of the Internet and cell phones has taken a toll on their hobby. Although in recent years, the FCC has decreased the requirements for becoming a licensed radio operator — dropping mandatory knowledge of Morse code, for instance — the technical aspects of the hobby can still overwhelm young people.

"Kids are too tied into the electronic world," Talley said.

He flipped open his Razor phone and placed it screen-up on a table.

"To me, that's one of the best and worst inventions every made," he said. "Mentally and technically, what does it take to use this?"

The hams aren't exactly curmudgeons who hate new technology. In fact, lots of amateurs use advanced and innovative equipment, said Dickey and Urquiza.

"We don't always rely on Internet, phones, cell phones. ... We're not dead in the water when the Internet doesn't work. The average person is dead in the water," said Urquiza, 57, of Huntingtown.

"I wish people were more aware of how fragile the system can be," said Dickey, 58, of Prince Frederick.

Still, they see the future as bright for ham radio. Since Sept. 11, more people have been getting involved in the community and taking an interest in using amateur



Staff photo by REID SILVERMAN

**Amateur radio operator Joseph "Gene" Talley surrounded by his equipment, new and old, inside an old shed in the backyard of his home in Hollywood. Talley claims to have contacted 312 countries of 388 throughout the world using his ham radio.**

## Ham

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radio for emergency communication.

Once people get involved, amateur radio offers something to everyone, said Dickey and Urquiza. Some hams like to bounce radio signals off the moon, while others enjoy building their own equipment or simply chatting with people. Dickey said that some amateurs compete to speak with people from different countries or try to make contact with someone from every county in the United States.

"Amateur radio is like a spider web; it takes you in all different directions," said Dickey.

### Talking to the world

"WA3YUV monitoring," Curtis says into a handheld microphone at the Red Cross headquarters.

"I just said I'm listening," he translates into everyday-speak. For a few seconds, he stands next to the radio, waiting to see if anyone is listen-

ing on the other end. It's the tense, alert look people get when they're waiting to see if they'll win an award or a hand in poker.

The only response from the radio is static, so Curtis goes on talking about the relationship between hams and the Red Cross. All of a sudden, a few minutes later, he stops mid-sentence and a smile spreads across his face.

He's got company.

"I heard you were monitoring," the voice says through the radio.

The speaker is John Foote, a fellow member of Curtis' club. The two talk briefly about the radio quality and joke around a little before they finish.

Curtis says he likes chatting with his friends and new people throughout the day. It's his thing; why he sometimes accidentally addresses friends by their call names during in-person conversations and why a giant antenna branches off his pickup.

"The first thing I do when I start the car is I get in and push the button. The world knows I'm there," he says.  
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