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## iHOBBY: Amateur radio - Fun with a serious side

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Members of Bedford County Amateur Radio Club are seen here at their Jan. 17 meeting.  
(Submitted photo)

*iHobby is a new feature in which we introduce you to someone with an interesting talent, hobby or pursuit -- and then tell you how you can get involved. We'd love suggestions of people and/or hobbies for future columns; send them to [tgnews@t-g.com](mailto:tgnews@t-g.com).*

Amateur radio isn't just a hobby, as James Curtis points out. During a normal week, sure, it can be fun making contacts with other radio operators from around the world. But in times of emergency or natural disaster, when other types of communication may be put out of commission, "ham" radio operators can play a vital role in emergency communications. Ham operators played a key role in the response to Hurricane Katrina, and to flooding in Colorado in 2013, according to the American Radio Relay League website.



"If all else fails, if local communications went down today, ham radio would get through," said Curtis.

### Many changes

Originally, amateur radio operators communicated only by Morse code. Later, they also became able to communicate by voice, and now they can use "packet radio" technology to send data or even video.

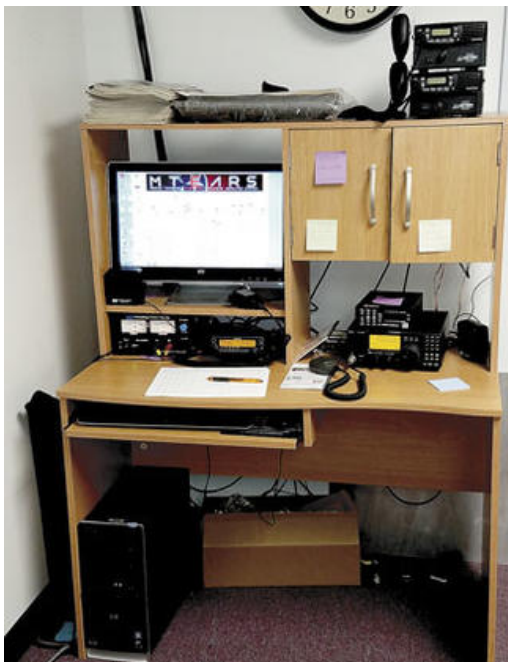
Some ham operators compete in "DX" contests, where they try to see how many ham radio operators they can contact in distant countries.

Ham radio operators can even communicate with the International Space Station.

Curtis compares the way that ham operators make friends to the way people can become friends on social media. And if you're curious about what the person you've been taking to looks like, they likely have a profile photo at the ARRL website.

Curtis is a member of Bedford County Amateur Radio Club, which meets on the third Tuesday of each month.

### Started with CB



The club meets at Bedford County Emergency Management Agency, where the club has its own radio setup. While amateur radio can be a fun and rewarding hobby, it can also play a part in emergency response.

He first became a ham back in 1978. He'd owned a citizens band radio at the height of the CB craze, but then a friend showed him his ham radio setup, and he was immediately interested.

Just about anyone could operate a CB radio, but Curtis learned that you had to pass a test to get a license from the government to operate a ham radio setup. But while a CB radio would let you talk within your neighborhood, an amateur radio lets you talk with people from much, much farther away.

"From that point on, I've really stayed with it," he said. He's made contact with operators in 15 different countries, as far away as Germany and Italy.

## TRY IT YOURSELF

-- Anyone thinking about amateur radio as a hobby is encouraged to drop in on a meeting of Bedford County Amateur Radio Club.

As stated above, the club meets on the third Tuesday of each month; its next meeting will be 7 p.m. Feb. 21. The club meets at the Bedford County Emergency Management Agency offices on Railroad Avenue, in the back of the building which houses the local driver's license testing station. Call Curtis at 931-205-0325 for more information.

-- The American Radio Relay League website is [arrl.org](http://arrl.org), and there are links for newcomers near the top of the main page.

-- GigaParts, in Huntsville, Alabama, offers ham radio equipment and books, said Curtis, and is probably the closest brick-and-mortar source.

The store is located at 1426 Paramount Drive, Suite B and can be reached at 256-535-4442.

-- How expensive it is to start in ham radio depends on how far you want to go said Curtis. There are three different license classifications -- technician class, general class, and extra class. Each step up the ladder gives you access to additional frequencies.

ARRL says study material for the test costs about \$40, and a basic radio setup can cost less than \$200 -- and there may be opportunities to obtain used equipment from other operators for even less than that.

-- When Curtis first got involved in amateur radio, the license tests were administered by the Federal Communications Commission, which issues the licenses. Now, the FCC allows the Amateur Radio Relay League, the national organization for amateur radio, to give the tests.



JAMES CURTIS

There are study courses for each class of license; the course can take anywhere from 3 to 10 weeks depending on your schedule. You can take a practice test at the end of the course before

signing up to take the test for real at an ARRL testing site.

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