

SOLID COPY FOR DECEMBER 1996

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HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

OUR ANNUAL HOLIDAY GET-TOGETHER DINNER: Saturday, December 14, 1996, 5:30 p.m., at the Derbyshire Baptist Church, 8800 Derbyshire Road.

This month is our annual holiday get-together. It's on Saturday, Dec. 14th, at the special time of 5:30 p.m. (this is a slight time change from that announced last month). Members are invited to attend, and may bring a guest.

There's also another change to report. RATS will be providing the food in a buffet-style dinner (except dessert). Members attending are encouraged to bring a dessert to share with others. The focus of the evening is a social fellowship gathering, with a small business session to vote-in new members.

Since RATS will be providing the food and drink, we need to know how many people will attend. Seating is limited. Please R.S.V.P. (make a reservation) before Thursday, Dec. 12th by calling 739-2269 and enter mailbox 6880. Leave your name and whether a guest will be attending with you. Or drop us an email with the same info to rats@rats.net.

One thing we do need is your help to make our get-together a success. Help setting up tables and chairs before the meeting is urgently needed. If you can help out, please contact Michelle Jacobsen at 222-7520.

NEXT MONTH

Our annual Richmond Frostfest will take place on January 19, 1997, at The Showplace, starting at 8:30 a.m. Heading up the show again this year is Frostfest Director Jim Clark, N3JJF.

About 60 of you checked on your renewal cards that you were interested in helping out. These cards have been passed on to personnel coordinator David Bell, KE4HJU. Volunteers will be contacted later this month and/or early in January. If you wanted to volunteer but haven't yet, give David a call at 264-4657.

As in past years, those volunteering will receive a free \$5.00 admission ticket to the show, plus get entered into the special volunteer prize drawing we'll hold at our February meeting.

If you haven't volunteered to help out (we only need an hour or two), please consider doing so. Putting on the Frostfest is a major task, and all the help we can get is needed.

CLUB CORNER

RATS GETS VANITY CALL

On November 4, RATS was awarded with the vanity call W4RAT. This call was submitted by John Tucker, WA4EAE, and was selected by a majority vote of members during our annual elections earlier this year.

Trustee Mark Huff, WA4DHY, had mailed the vanity form via overnight mail back in September. Our 610V was delivered on time and was handled in the first-day batch of vanity calls. Both the 146.88 and 442.55 repeaters were switched to the new W4RAT call on November 15.

It seems we weren't alone with our idea. The Radio Amateurs Technical Society club, with a mailing address listed in Glendale, Calif., requested and received the vanity call W0RAT.

W5YI EXAMS

The Chesterfield W5YI exam team took both November and December off from their busy exam schedule. Their regularly scheduled exams will return on each third Saturday of the month, at John Tyler Community College, starting on February 15.

The January exam session will take place at the Frostfest on Sunday, January 19 at 9 a.m. Details are in the Upcoming Events column.

NEWSWIRE

MORE HAM BUSINESSES FOLD;

AEA MAY BE NEXT

Back in October, Tucker Electronics closed its Dallas, Texas, retail outlet and mail-order business and sold its inventory to Ham Radio Outlet (HRO). HRO acquired Tucker's ham radio assets as well as those of Oklahoma Comm Center, which Tucker had acquired in July. Thus two more ham radio businesses are now gone.

HRO says it will continue to market the remaining Tucker brand of accessories. Tucker Electronics will still be around, but will only distribute new and reconditioned electronic test and measurement equipment.

But the big announcement that has rocked the ham radio community is the possible imminent closing of Advanced Electronic Applications, better known as AEA. Calls to the Lynnwood, Washington company's customer service line are currently being answered by a machine.

Earlier this year, company chairman Mike Lamb, N7ML,

took over day-to-day control of AEA, following the hasty departure of former president Rod Proctor, KI7ZI. Lamb had hopes of turning the company around and had introduced several new products on the Amateur Radio market, including the long-awaited DSP-232 multimode TNC, a 6-meter halo antenna, and a dedicated 9600-baud packet transceiver.

In recent weeks, Lamb has made no secret of the fact that he has been seeking a buyer or new investors for AEA. Over the past two months, the company has laid off most of its employees.

While the company no longer handles customer service requests, so far AEA is still taking orders and even continues to manufacture some items. AEA products also continue to be available from some dealers.

Most hams know AEA as the maker of various packet TNCs and the Isopole line of antennas. The company's three product lines include antennas, test (analyst) equipment, and data products/software.

It's still too soon to say whether AEA will survive or fold. If it does close, it will join a continuing number of amateur radio ventures that have gone out of business over the past two years.

An editorial on Page 3 of this newsletter takes a more in-depth look at this disturbing trend, and some of the possible factors behind the problem.

VANITY CALLS ISSUED

The Vanity call sign dam broke on November 4, when the FCC issued nearly 3800 new vanity licenses to the approximately 4500 first-day vanity applicants.

While some applicants got their initials for call sign suffixes, others obviously applied their imaginations. For example, W4FEZ was issued to the Yaarab Shrine Temple Communications Unit in Atlanta, Georgia. The call sign NS4DX went to the North Shenandoah DX Association in Boyce, Virginia. And of course, RATS got W4RAT.

A spokesman in Gettysburg estimated that "between 500 and 550" applications were dismissed. Most of these were due to all an applicant's call choices already being issued to someone else. Others were held up because the application contained "inconsistencies," some as simple as a date of birth missing on the application.

But some FCC gaffes also turned up among the vanity call sign assignments. The call sign AT6A was issued to KK6VY in Santa Rosa, California. Unfortunately, the AT prefix belongs to India, not to the US. A California club station got a new call sign bearing an Alaskan AL6 prefix, not permitted in the lower 48 states. The FCC says it has dealt with these mistakes.

After the first batch, issuing additional vanity calls was held up for a while. This was because several hams petitioned the FCC, and some had threatened to sue, over

their applications being rejected. These amateur's vanity applications arrived too early and were dismissed.

An FCC spokesman in the FCC's Wireless Telecommunications Bureau in Washington said the affected hams all had used the same express service and had requested delivery on Saturday, September 21, so they would be in the queue for the opening day of Gate 2 on September 23.

Instead, the courier was too efficient, and all of the applications arrived on Friday, September 20.

The FCC had said that any application received before September 21 would be rejected, so this group of 610V's was designated as "untimely filed" and dismissed by the Commission. The hams then fought to get the FCC to reverse its decision.

After pondering the early delivery issue, the FCC ruled against the complaining amateurs. An FCC spokesman in the Private Wireless Division said the petitioners failure to get their applications to the FCC on the correct date was a matter for resolution between the petitioners and the courier service involved (the same in all cases) and not the FCC. The Commission said that the petitioners did not show that either Mellon Bank, the FCC's fiscal agent, or the FCC itself was in error in how it handled the applications.

The Commission also cited a 1984 public notice that stated the FCC would not consider any claims of this type where a delivery service was blamed for an application's not being filed on time.

After clearing that matter, the FCC again started issuing vanity calls to those amateurs who had filed after September 23. Things now seem to be running smoothly.

If you plan in the future to file for a vanity call, the Commission asks that you please be extremely careful in completing your paperwork. "We are seeing a lot of errors," a FCC spokesman said. "Please double check before you submit. It creates a lot of extra work for us and delays the issuance of the license if you don't."

Among the common errors are a name that does not agree with the FCC's database, call sign incorrect (i.e. people actually writing down their own current call sign incorrectly), putting first and last name in the wrong order, or a license that expires within a year and the renewal box is not checked.

The FCC has not announced when it plans to open Gates 3 (Advanced Class) and 4 (Novice, Technician, and General Class) of the vanity program. But many feel Gate 3 may open sometime in January.

EXAMS FEES TO RISE

The ARRL/VEC has set its 1997 Amateur Radio test fee at \$6.25. The W5YI group is expected to follow.

The increase is in accordance with an October 31, 1996, FCC Public Notice setting the maximum volunteer examiner

expense reimbursement at \$6.26 for 1997. The current maximum is \$6.07. The new figure is based on a 3.13% increase in the Department of Labor Consumer Price Index (CPI) over the period September 1995 to September 1996.

As an ARRL/VEC policy, examinations which include only Elements 1(A) (5-wpm code test) and/or Element 2 (Novice written examination) will not be charged the standard fee in 1997. Morse code exemption applicants will be charged the standard \$6.25 fee in 1997.

GOOD GRIEF!

The Tucker family (AA6ET, AA6KT, AA6TK, N0YRY, and N6TK) of La Mirada, California, has a "call collection." After club calls were again made available, the family managed to amass over 30 club licenses between them. Various members of the family each hold several club licenses, most of which seemed to just have the name of the club altered slightly from the others.

Many hams wondered why. It seems we may now have the answer.

ARRL Director Hans Brakob, K0HB, reports the Tuckers paid at least \$960 in fees and have received the following vanity calls attached to the club licenses: K5HO, K6GND, K6HO, K6MTR, K6TXB, K6WOW, KK6USA, KK9DOG, NN6LM, W6AAA, W6BAH, W6BUB, W6BUG, W6CAT, W6FUN, W6HI, W6KAY, W6MTR, W6NNN, W6NUT, W6RRR, W6TNT, W6XYZ, WW5HI, WW6CQ, WW6DX, WW6FM, WW6HAM, WW6LM, WW6TXA, WW6USA, and WW6WW. There could be more that were just "missed" in Hans' search.

Normally, a call relinquished would have to stay unissued for two years. But Joe Subich, AD8I, says he's guessing the following could happen, circumventing the two year wait.

"Now that the vanity calls are locked up," writes Joe, "someone wanting that call at the right price pays the current trustee a fee and the club files for a change of trustee. Then, after an appropriate period of time, the new trustee files to have the club call assigned as his personal call. All 100% legal and definitely under the table."

Many hams are now watching to see just what becomes of the Tucker's huge collection of ham radio call signs.

EDITORIAL

THE FUTURE OF HAM EQUIPMENT SUPPLY by Bill Pasternak, WA6ITF

The apparent failure of AEA is literally sending shock waves throughout the ham radio supply industry. This is because AEA was considered to be one of the most financially sound of the U.S. ham radio equipment suppliers.

Why did AEA fail? Some industry analysts say it's possibly because of the failure of no-code to attract the kind of business that was expected.

Even with up to 4,000 new hams being licensed every

month, overall sales of all ham gear are way down. Most newcomers are entering the hobby through the code free Technician Class license. Their single purchase is the lowest priced two meter FM handheld or mobile they can find. With very few of these newcomers bothering to upgrade, that \$200 to \$300 purchase is the only money they spend on ham radio.

But what about the pre-no-code hoopla about a data communications revolution in ham radio? The public relations campaign said there would be tens of thousands of computer literate people coming to ham radio to communicate by packet and other keyboard modes.

Simply, this has not developed. Probably due to low cost access to the internet that emerged at about the same time. Data oriented people have found the World Wide Web more to their liking. They already own a computer. They can communicate at 28 kilobaud instead of an agonizingly slow 1200 baud. There is a limitless choice of entertainment and information available. Most of all, there is no study, testing or license required.

As a result, most of those coming into amateur radio these days are hams who want to talk locally using FM voice. Hams who are content to spend their entire amateur radio careers sitting on one repeater, talking to the same people day after day.

For manufacturers who specialize primarily in data based ham radio communications equipment, the lack of interest by newcomers is bad news. For the ham radio supply business as a whole, it means taking a long look inward to see if the industry itself can survive.

The big question is will the ham radio industry try to again organize and work together? It has attempted this twice before. Both times the loose knit organizations have dissolved into oblivion. Now we ask, will the departure of AEA be enough to bring the ham radio industry together, once again? The Miami Tropical Hamboree next February will probably be the place where the answer becomes known.

(Editor's note: Just over 20 years ago, the main entry point for ham radio was the Novice license. It also was a two-year ticket that was non-renewable. If you didn't upgrade within two years, you lost your call and license, and had to start all over again. This created a situation where the upgrade rate was nearly 100% for those who kept ham radio as a hobby for more than two years.

But since 1991, the main entry point has been the Technician Class license. WA6ITF's point that the majority of new hams are "content to spend their entire amateur radio careers" talking on repeaters does seem to hold true.

A review of the FCC data of hams who came in at the Technician level during 1993-95, finds that only about 25% have ever upgraded beyond their original license class. Also of interest is the fact that the vast majority of those

that do upgrade, usually do so within a year to 18 months of first being licensed.

It appears that if the "bug doesn't bite" to upgrade soon after first being licensed, odds are an amateur won't upgrade in the future. Most say the main stumbling block to more people upgrading remains the Morse code and not the written examinations.

(Thanks to W1AW, the ARRL Letter, and Newsline for the various news items in this month's issue.)

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Internet E-mail Address: rats@rats.net

Web Site: <http://www.rats.net>

Voice Mail System: 804-739-2269, mailbox 7287.

Bulletin Board System (BBS): 804-744-9335.

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