

May Madness

As I write this in mid-March, college basketball—along with its millions of fans—is in the midst of “March Madness,” the NCAA championship tournament also referred to as “the Big Dance.” Ham radio’s “big dance” comes later this month in southwestern Ohio. Between the 17th and 20th of May, more than 20,000 radio amateurs from around the world will converge on the somewhat rundown (what some may call “shabby chic” ... minus the “chic”) Hara Arena for the 61st annual Dayton Hamvention®.

It is three days (four, if you count setup day on Thursday) of controlled chaos, with packed exhibit halls, a monster flea market, non-stop forums, nearly-all-night hospitality suites and about 40,000 very tired feet. I’ve been there at least 25 times and it remains at the top of my ham radio agenda each year. Even though it’s virtually guaranteed that something will go wrong (last year, it took me nine hours to get there from New Jersey—by air!), something will break (hopefully, not the sewage line again), something won’t be where it’s supposed to be when it’s supposed to be there, I still wouldn’t miss it.

Somehow, every year, everything works out, it all comes together and 20+ thousand of us all have a great time mingling and shopping and swapping stories. If you’ve never been to Dayton, getting there at least once should be on your “bucket list” (things to do before you “kick the bucket”); if you’ve been there before, then you’re probably trying to figure out how you can get there again ... if you don’t already have your reservations made.

For the uninitiated, the exhibit area consists of nearly 500 booths spread across five exhibition halls and one corridor (“Audio Alley”), to be occupied by more than 250 different vendors showcasing and/or selling the latest and greatest in just about anything remotely related to amateur radio. The huge outdoor flea market has more than 2200 booths and as of mid-March, more than 750 different vendors were signed up to wheel and deal and socialize, as long as it isn’t raining or snowing or hailing ... too hard. It’s said that if you can’t find what you’re looking for in the Dayton flea market, it likely doesn’t exist! Then, there are the multiple simultaneous forums, spread across all three days, featuring leaders and top experts in virtually every phase of amateur radio; dinners and special events for various sub-hobbies within amateur radio, and even whole sub-events such as Contest University and the Four Days in May QRP gathering. If it’s happening in ham radio, Dayton is the place to find the people who are making it happen.

Ah yes, the people. To me, that’s the best part of going to Dayton. True, there’s all sorts of great gear to drool over (and hopefully take home with you), and all sorts of great activities to learn about; but at the base of it all—like everything else in ham radio—is the people.

Ham radio is often perceived and portrayed as a technical hobby. And there’s no question that everything we do has some basis in technology. But the reality is that this is a *people* hobby. We develop, modify, improve and use all that technology in pursuit of one overriding goal—making contact with other people. It’s what differentiates us from just about every other hobby there is. You can collect stamps by yourself. You can go sailing or hiking or biking on your own. Same with hunting or fishing. Of course, there are social aspects to these other hobbies, but they’re not essential. It’s very hard to

do ham radio completely by yourself. You *need* to contact other people, even if it’s just to prove that your latest engineering marvel actually works.

And our people tend to be some of the most wonderful, caring and fascinating people you could hope to have as your friends. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to be a ham, but there are plenty of rocket scientists who *are* hams. Add in the occasional Nobel Prize winner, admiral, ambassador and, well, you get the picture. But the best part is that, regardless of their status or position in “real life,” when they’re at some ham radio event (such as Dayton), they’re just plain hams. We’re all on a first-name basis, and our conversations revolve more around ham radio activities than the concerns of our professional lives.

To me, the best part of Dayton is that we get to meet and greet so many of these wonderful people, especially our fellow hams from around the world. The FCC tells us that one of the reasons ham radio exists is “to enhance international goodwill.” Every day of the year, we get the opportunity to do that on the radio; at Dayton we have the chance to do it in person. Each of us gets to be a personal ambassador, not only for amateur radio, but for our nation and our culture.

On an international scale, ham radio really is a form of cultural exchange. Think of the QSL cards you have in your collection. Probably the most interesting ones tell you something about the place where the other ham lives. Same with your most interesting QSOs. And when you get to meet a ham from another country, or another culture, in person at a place like Dayton, you have an opportunity to exchange more than a signal report and a QSL card. You really have the chance to get to know the person a little better.

I was reminded of this a few days ago at a more traditional type of cultural exchange—a concert. It was called Celtic Appalachia and was actually half concert and half history lesson. It focused on the Gaelic (primarily Irish and Scottish), African and Native American roots of “all-American” bluegrass and country music. Organized by the Irish Arts Center in New York City, it featured traditional Irish (and New York Irish) musicians, a bluegrass band from Virginia, and a West African “griot” (historian and storyteller) who played guitar like no one else I’ve ever heard, as well as gourd-based instruments that are the precursors of the modern banjo.

It made me think of ham radio. No, I mean it. There on the stage was a group about as diverse as any I’ve seen anywhere ... except at Dayton or on a multinational DXpedition. The bulk of the performers were Irish and Irish-American, mostly Catholics. The bluegrass band was descended from Scots-Irish Protestants who had settled in Northern Ireland, and then came to America because they couldn’t get along with the Irish-Irish. Plus you had the griot from Mali, who had no cultural connection to either of the other groups ... except through music. And there they all were, making beautiful music together ... just as groups of hams from different cultures regularly make music together on the ham bands (that’s not just an analogy; CW has a musical cadence, which is why musicians often have an easier time learning code than non-musical people).

Ham radio, like music, can help build bridges between different cultures in a way that no government can. It is our special contribution to making the world a slightly better place. And there’s no better place to start than in Dayton. Hope to see you at Hara for May Madness!

—73, Rich W2VU

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