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MAKING WAVES

Dan Starcher

Participation in amateur radio has ebbed and flowed over the years, but there has been a renewed interest in the hobby recently. Wayne Amateur Radio Club members Russ McQuate, left, Aaron Frazier and Eric Mast prepare their radios for the 24-hour American Radio Relay League Field Day event held recently. See page 4.

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**inside
the news**

2 High honor
Rittman nature preserve
named for mayor.

3 Screen dreams
Nonprofit group purchases
Wooster theater.

11 Fantasy reading
Local author's latest book
is released.

MAKING WAVES

Amateur radio club experiences growth in membership

By Dan Starcher
TheBargainHunter.com

Amateur radio is a hobby that has existed, in one form or another, since the 1800s. According to the American Radio Relay League website, the early days consisted of landline telegraphers who left their offices to operate communication stations at sea and along the coast.

Interest in the technology has ebbed and flowed over the years. Today, it competes with other communication services like mobile phones and email. But there has been a renewed interest in the hobby recently, thanks to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

Using an amateur radio requires a license. In the U.S. it is valid for 10 years before needing to be renewed. There are three classes of licensing, according to www.arrl.org:

technician, general and extra.

Technician is the entry-level license and consists of passing a 35-question test on radio theory, regulations and operating practices. Users with the designation have access to all radio frequencies above 30 megahertz with limited privileges on HF or “short wave” bands used for international communications.

General licenses grant users some privileges on all radio bands and operating modes. The test consists of a 35-question examination, and the licensee must have passed the technician examination.

Earning the extra license is more complex and requires passing a 50-question examination in addition to having passed the technician and general tests. Users with the extra license have operating privileges on all bands and all modes.

“At the end of 2019, we had

about 80 members, and now we are up to 121,” Silvercreek Amateur Radio Association President Jason McCormick said. “A lot of the new members said they were interested in becoming licensed, and when the pandemic slowed things down, they had the time to dedicate to studying for the test.”

McCormick said one testing session he administered drew around 40 participants. “That is huge,” he said. “Normally, a session is only about five to eight people.”

Interest in becoming a licensed user was evident at the annual ARRL Field Day held recently at the Rittman American Legion. The event officially began at 2 p.m., but visitors interested in becoming operators began showing up around noon as members set up for the 24-hour event.

Field Day is an annual two-day exercise that tests club members’ ability to operate under abnormal conditions such as a power outage or other catastrophic situations when more traditional methods of communication are ineffective.

Club members showed off some new equipment including an antenna capable of hosting up to five radios simultaneously without interfering with each other’s signal.

“We want to have as many people as we can operate a radio,” McCormick said during the event. “Our goal is to provide a positive experience for everyone and get them on the air.”



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Jason McCormick, Silvercreek Amateur Radio Association club president, shows off the latest addition to the club, a custom-built antenna. The new antenna will allow five simultaneous connections without interference.

While the concept of amateur radio may seem complex, McCormick broke it down in easy-to-understand terms.

“We operate similarly to AM radio,” he said. “We operate on a very low frequency, and we depend on the atmosphere. Our signal goes up and bounces off of the ionosphere and comes back down. Those signals can travel halfway around the world.”

Amateur radio operates on frequencies designated for the non-commercial transmission of messages for personal use or public safety. Users must identify themselves with their unique call sign, granted through the examination process, during transmission.

Another reason the service is effective in emergencies is the radios can operate on the equivalent power of a car battery. They can work remotely, making them perfect companions to marathons, bike races and other events, regardless of terrain, where communication is needed.

Aaron Frazier, a new member of the Wayne Amateur Radio Club in Wooster, was busy on Field Day testing some unique features of the communication medium called Raspberry Pi.

“I have become interested in the computer side of amateur radio,” Frazier said. “With Raspberry Pi you can interface a computer with a radio.”

Frazier said sending data such as email and text messages over airwaves is possible using a Raspberry Pi device.

The inexpensive component allows listeners to access various frequencies including air traffic control and can be used to track satellites.

“I can send and receive text messages from my radio, and you can also track through it,” Frazier said. “There is a lot of interesting things you can do on amateur radio. Some people are really into Morse code; there are many paths you can go down.”

Frazier also became more active during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Early in the pandemic, we were checking in on each other and seeing if anyone needed anything,” he said. “When the toilet paper shortage hit,



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we were trying to locate stores that had it.”

Anyone interested in learning more about becoming an operator can visit SARA online at www.w8wky.org or WARC at www.w8woo.org.



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Members of the Silvercreek Amateur Radio Association prepare for the annual Field Day exercise at the American Legion Hall in Rittman. Club President Jason McCormick, right, has seen a renewed interest in the hobby.