

Legion forms new amateur radio club

By Denis House

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There are more than 760,000 amateur radio operators across the nation, with 128 of those in Nelson County, including members of the newest club.



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Here is an amateur radio setup that show both of the station's VHF and UHF radios, the general coverage receiver and the power supply.

The American Legion Nelson County Post 42 Amateur Radio Club held its first official meeting on Jan. 13, but the seeds of the club had been planted about a year earlier.

"I went to a district meeting last year where the post commander from Danville Post 46 talked about the club they had, and at the time it was the only post in Kentucky with a club," said Christopher Gootee, commander of Post 42. "I talked to him a little more and then I called John and Bud."

John Czerwinski and Bud Hightower are members of Post 42 and also ham radio operators. They were already members of another amateur radio club in Nelson County, but Gootee asked them if they would be interested in starting one up at the post.

"We had several other members of the post who were ham radio operators," Gootee said.

"We went down to Danville last January and started working on getting our club going," said Hightower, treasurer of the Post 42 club. "We wanted to work on getting the club here. There was a group of us who had been members of another club that was no longer active."

Amateur radio, also known as ham radio, is the use of radio frequency spectrum for purposes of non-commercial exchange of messages, wireless experimentation, self-training, private recreation, radiosport, contesting and emergency communication.

Both Hightower and Czerwinski, who also serves as the club president, have been active in amateur radio for many years. Hightower got his first license in 1977. Though his interest began in high school, he didn't take it seriously until after he got out of the military.

"I first got interested in it in 1966," Czerwinski said. "But I didn't get fully involved in it until around 1994. My father had a radio and he left it to me. It had multiple bands on it and I could listen to people all around the world. Then I found out you could talk to them also."

To talk using a ham radio, you must first be granted a license. In the United States, there are three sequential levels of licensing exams: Technician Class, General Class and Amateur Extra Class. There used to be six class levels, but in 2000 the FCC restructured its licensing, though individuals who had already held Novice Class, Advanced Class and Technician Plus Class were allowed to maintain those licenses under a grandfather clause.

"It takes more than just a license to talk to people," Czerwinski said. "You have to know amateur radio, the legal basis, the concepts of electronics, RF safety, and you have to know your radio equipment." He added that all communication is open and none of it is encrypted. "The easiest way to get involved is to get your Technician Class license. You will buy your own manual to study, and we will hook you with an existing operator who will mentor you, what we call 'elmering,' to help you along."

One aspect of amateur radio that a lot of people overlook is the use of it during emergency situations. When a disaster strikes, many times landline and cell phones along with the Internet are rendered useless, or at least compromised. That's where amateur radio comes into play.

"The bush fires in Australia caused a lot of the country to lose landlines and the Internet," Hightower said, providing an example. "Ham radio operators set up communication for them. We have a saying, 'when all else fails.'"

Czerwinski noted an event closer to home, when the flood of 1978 left many stranded in Nelson County, including the town of New Haven, where ham radio operators set up communications so news could be broadcasted on high-frequency transmitters.

"We would like to get enough operators in Nelson County where we could set up an emergency network," Czerwinski said. "I lived in Huntsville, Ala., the tornado capital of the United States. I've seen how helpful these networks can be."

In many instances, ham radio operators work closely with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to help get the word out when severe weather strikes.

"People on the ground level can spot things a lot quicker than NOAA's radar can," Hightower said. "You can take spotter's training. You can take Sky Warn training. NOAA has weather ambassadors, and I would like this club to go in that direction. NOAA doesn't have classes in Louisville but they do in Lexington."

He also noted that ham radio operators have the ability to send an email through their system if the Internet is down to someone who has Internet. He also said the club hopes to eventually be able to test people of their license, but that's "down the road."

Gootee said that the radio club is open to anyone who is interested. One does not have to be a member of the American Legion to join, but must be a Legion member to hold a position in the club. Other post members can join this club without leaving their old post.

The club meets the second Monday of the month at 6 p.m. at the Keystone Bingo Hall at 126 Keystone Avenue.