One Ham’s First Year Operating

By Michael Cartmill, ACØPR

On the one-year anniversary of my very first logged contact, I’ve been reflecting back on my first year on the air. By no means do I claim that it is typical, representative, or even normal of other hams; it’s just what my experience has been. I should start by explaining my situation. I’m not retired, being 40 years old I currently work as a professor at a small university, but my schedule is not overly taxing. I decided at the start to not operate on Sunday either, that’s for family and worship in my own particular case, so I don’t participate in most contests to win as almost all of them go Saturday and Sunday, it’s just to have fun. Also, I started on the air as an Extra. I earned my Technician ticket in July of 2008 and studied to take the next General test in my area, in Aug. of that same year, and thankfully passed. I didn’t have any radio equipment to speak of (just an old HT I given to me by my father-in-law, NØDIA) and lived in an apartment complex where an antenna was going to be a challenge, besides the fact I was trying to finish my degree and didn’t have any free time anyway. A year later I had graduated and gotten the job, so I was preparing to move. I didn’t know how difficult it would be to find testing in my new state of North Dakota, and since Salt Lake City had one monthly, I figured it would be best to cram for the Extra test and take it before moving just in case. Besides, I figured that way when I got on the air I could do it all without any restrictions from my license. We were all packed and cleaning the apartment out as I was studying at the last minute. I freely admit that I’m sure I passed the Extra exam just barely and only because I can take tests well, not because I was knowledgeable about electronics or had any practical experience to back it up. I was surprised that they came and congratulated me instead of telling me I’d have to take it again. I became ACØPR officially on Aug. 3, 2009. I had the two previous calls signs with the other licenses, but never once made a contact using them.

The smartest thing I did from the beginning was join the local radio club and attend the meetings. It was a large club with a program every meeting to talk about and teach some aspect of hamming (not to mention they met within walking distance of my apartment). I was very impressed. In fact, I consider my first Elmer to be Jed, AD7KG, although informally. He put on a demonstration out in the parking lot taking a Yaesu FT-897 and a Buddipole antenna and started making contacts to get people on the air. This being my first meeting, I stood back and watched instead of participating. Not long afterwards my first radio was a Yaesu FT-857 (being cheaper than the FT-897) and you’d better believe I have a Buddipole as well for portable operations. It’s the radio I’ve used this first year, and I’ve really enjoyed it. I know, I know, many have their brand loyalties, would recommend MANY other things. Again, this reflects what this year has held for me, it’s not an endorsement for any brand or type of equipment. All you Elmers out there have a great influence, especially with those of us who would be clueless otherwise. Jed put up with numerous emails and lots of questions before I moved, I truly appreciate his influence.

One of my first priorities was getting on the air after moving. I bought a 20 meter tuned dipole, hung it up between a couple of trees about 20 feet up, hooked it up and started listening. I wasn’t hearing lots, and if you check the sunspot cycle in Aug. of 2009, you’ll see it wasn’t the optimal time to start being a new operator. I finally heard a loud one and answered the CQ. I was a surprised at myself by how nervous I was, a little too much time for anticipation since first getting my ticket. He came back to me and hearing my own call was very cool. It was Jeff, AC5O, in Louisiana. I wrote the information down in my little log book sent from ARRL when I joined and had completed my first qso. After such a herculean effort I took a few days off—I don’t really know why. Then made a few more contacts the next time, and my first DX was qso number five, into Argentina, and was I ever hooked by then. It was a very short contact as he was trying to make a lot quickly, but it was exciting.

Since everywhere I talked to was new, I sent QSL cards to all of them along with an SASE. I’m quite thankful Jeff, AC5O, answered quickly as my first qso. With a few contests in the following months, and switching to a G5RV Jr. antenna on the roof, and getting a tuner, I was making what I considered ample progress in contacts. I was still sending cards out to all of them. I do have to say I was, and still am, very dismayed at the number of people who don’t reply to QSL cards even with an SASE. Unfortunately many are contesters who love to hear they’ve gotten North Dakota, but don’t follow up with a card. Certainly, most do reply eventually. But, even if you don’t “do paper cards” anymore, you have my SASE, you could write a note saying so or something, right? One card I received was just a plain 3x5 card saying just that, he didn’t have any QSL cards anymore, but he included the contact info on the handwritten card—I have great respect for that ham. As the year progressed I’ve noticed many contesters are the same group. I personally participate in contests for the joy of getting someone North Dakota using search and pounce since there are relatively few of us, and certainly not all enjoy contests. You contesters should know this, when I search and find someone in the log who has QSL’ed before, I’ll wait in a large pileup to make sure they’ve gotten ND; if they haven’t ever returned a card, I go find someone else...and I imagine I’m not the only one.

While I’m on the topic of things that have surprised me, I never believed there would be hams out there who deliberately and knowingly qrm others. I’m not all that taken aback by people arguing over who was on the frequency first or just ignoring requests to move, etc. It’s the weirdo who gets on and says gibberish or sings a stupid song just to make noise and qrm others. On one OMISS net there was a guy who would “fake” Spanish saying nonsensical words throwing in a “caca” or “hola” in there. I guess it’s hard to screen out the mentally ill, drunkards, or just pathetic idiots from getting a license. Anyway, enough of the little negative that is seen.

By the time November rolled around with Sweeps, I was quite comfortable with my rig setup and being on the air, and I really had a good time. I made just over 100 qso’s to say I had participated. I also like the random contacts of just turning on the radio and seeing who’s about that day. I also thought the idea of a Special Event Station was pretty interesting and would try and find them whenever possible. It was one of those days of just spinning the dial when I came across the OMISS (Old Man International Sideband Society) net. I joined the net with my now good friend Joe, AD7XZ, as the Net Control Station. I made 15 contacts from all over the country that first time and loved the group of hams on it. At the time I could come home for lunch, get on the net, make a contact or two while having a sandwich and then head back to work. I continue to meet with that great group any chance I get. I hadn’t really considered nets before, but because of that net, I looked for others like it and have joined the 3905 Century Club nets as well. They’re different, each which advantages. The OMISS net is very accommodating to newcomers and take great pains to find checkins (which can also be its disadvantage), the 3905 CC net moves very quickly and efficiently, but if they don’t hear you, they move on. That’s one of the great things about amateur radio, there is just so much out there. I have yet to discover many more things and that makes it exciting to continue on. I have yet to get into the UHF/VHF activities or satellites or experimenting, etc.

All along the way I learned more about what else it out there—I attended my first local hamfest and had a good time and liked the swapmeet aspect, the homebrew projects, the raffles, etc.; I was attending the club in my new town and getting interested in the ARES net they held and learned a bit about repeaters; I met more Elmers Bill, KØUB, Stan, WDØDDJ, and Ken, KØHL; and I learned a lot more about my own radio and its capabilities. I did notice that my activity on the radio rose and fell like qsb, in waves. I thought I’d get on a lot more during free time like the holidays, but then I would get busy or travel or have other activities. After the spring semester was over instead of getting on all day, I found myself working outside in the yard or a number of other things. I’m sure many can relate, especially when you see how many get off the air for years before coming back.

In March I decided I needed to “explore” some of the other modes. I had purchased a soundcard interface from MFJ to try digital, but I had trouble getting it to work, getting the settings just right with the computer. It was frustrating and never did get it to work for me, I gave up for a while and checked reviews before buying a SignaLink USB, and then was on the air right away. I tried PSK31 and really enjoyed it. They contacts came quickly (as a new ND on digital I had a lot of fun). I went to RTTY at times for a few contacts, but there just weren’t many on it and it wasn’t quite as intuitive as PSK was for me. After setting up the macros, I was able to converse without delays and started my next string of info as I was reading the transmission sent to me. I found that my phone activity dropped considerably as I made lots of new digital contacts. I didn’t explore far as I never got into some of the other digital options out there.

At the same time as playing with digital, I had wandered into the world of CW. I received the suggestion from Ken, KØHL to try the course produced by Chuck Adams, K7QO and made available through FISTS. This was a world I wasn’t really prepared for. Have you been to it? If not, go! Go today! I became a member of FISTS as I was learning the alphabet. I’m still a tenderfoot in this world, but I absolutely love it and find it almost addicting. I have no doubt that when I become more proficient, it will be my main operating mode. After having gotten my feet wet working my buddy Ken, I could spend 45 minutes with one qso and it felt like five, just because of how fascinating it was. Of course, that’s going pretty slowly so it takes time to say anything. If you’re avoiding it because it seems hard or not worth the effort to learn, I’ll just say I think it’s the coolest thing on the radio and it’s not hard at all—just look at how many have done it. There are a number of CW contacts I’ve made who on their profiles on qrz.com state that they work CW 95% of the time. At first that didn’t really register with me, but then I realized that once you’ve really gotten proficient going back to phone it almost like a let-down. It’s something special that not everyone does, and it’s just a cool way to communicate.

Nearing the end of my first year, with my focus becoming solidified on CW, I decided to treat myself to a nice quality key. Since I had made some extra radio money translating this summer I got a Begali Magnetic Classic, then purchased a CW machine from them as well—it’s a keyer that logs callsigns plus info as you make contacts, has a learning program, transcribes as you key, and has a UTC clock plus a bunch of things I haven’t looked into fully yet. Finally I bought and old Kenwood TS 440-S and got the Auto Tuner separately as a backup and experimental rig. It comes with some CW filters so I’m thinking of making it my main CW rig if all goes well.

Overall I’m quite pleased with my first year’s experience on air. I’ve tried a number of things and had some success. I received a few awards and have made contact with 78 countries—I was hoping to make DXCC my first year, but with my drop in activity numerous months, (and I’ll put some blame on the sun spots as well) I didn’t make it. But I’m happy with what I have from running barefoot and using just a G5RV Jr. as my antenna. I’m ending my first year with 2,000 qso’s, some 330 of those were DX. Some contacts were memorable, like getting a new DX country or working HQ station W1AW a few times, and almost all my CW contacts (which are few and most recent). My number 2,000 was a CW contact with Don, K0MLF, living right near Zion’s National Park, it was the late afternoon of completing my one-year mark, but before the actual anniversary. It was a great chat and I’m very happy to have finished out the year that way. I’ve worked aeromobiles, bike mobiles, and even a tractor mobile in ND. It’s been fun and a hobby I hope to continue well into my retired years if I make it that far. 73 all es dit dit.