

Participating in a Public Event to Sell Ham Radio

By Steve Pituch, W2MY

This story is about my first real effort to sell amateur radio to the public. I feel it worked and I want to tell you about it. If I can do it so can you.

I became the local ARES emergency coordinator at the beginning of 2010¹. Like anyone in a new job I wanted to make a difference. Getting one or two new ARES members every month is OK, but these new recruits became hams first and then joined ARES, so I really didn't have to do that much work to get them to join ARES. If there were more hams there would be more ARES members. So the big question is how to get more people to become hams.

About a month after I became EC I received an email from the manager of the local airport² requesting an amateur radio presence at an event they were having. Always anxious to make more contacts in the name of EmComm I said yes and agreed to attend a meeting. The only thing that I knew at the time was that it involved Cub Scouts.

I started to research scouting in general and how Amateur Radio might fit into it. After doing a bit more homework I decided that the area could use another Boy Scout Radio Merit Badge Counselor, so I filled out an application at the local BSA office. But that was for the future. The current task was to put together something about Amateur Radio that a Cub Scout, his parents and leaders would take note of and appreciate.

I decided to first make a brochure about Amateur Radio. The general public really doesn't know what hams do. So I wrote an article that describes who we are and what we do. This brochure is not meant to be part of a lecture or a teaching tool. It is just meant to give someone an idea of what Amateur Radio is all about after their curiosity has been wetted by some other event. It also has contact information: how to contact me, the ARRL, and when the local club meetings and VE exam sessions are. It turned out to be a five page document. It is certainly not something you would want to read to a group of Cub Scouts and expect them to stay awake, but it was aimed more for adults such as parents, teachers, and Scout leaders.

Next I wrote a document based on my research about scouting (specifically Cub Scouts) and Amateur Radio. I really believe Amateur Radio and Scouting are very similar. They were established about the same time in the early 20th century. They both have creeds that are very similar³. However, I discovered that the radio merit badge only pertains to the Boy Scouts and not the Cub Scouts. Cub Scouts have what are called Belt Loop Achievement Awards. There isn't a Belt Loop for Radio, so I looked at all the awards to see which ones were related in some part to Amateur Radio. I came up with the following list of awards (and their relationship to Amateur Radio): Citizenship (Public Service), Science (Electronics & kit building), Astronomy (Radio telescopes), Collecting (QSL cards, keys, etc), Communicating (Speaking on a radio), Computers (digital modes), Geography (QSO contacts world-wide), Map & Compass (Azimuthal maps and pointing directive antennas), Mathematics (Ohms law and the dipole formula), Photography & Reading and Writing (Writing articles about Amateur Radio), Weather (Skywarn), and Wildlife Conservation (radio tracking wild animals).

Next I wrote up very short talks on: 1) my QSL card display and how hams are interested in geography and different cultures, 2) a comparison between an Azimuthal map and a Mercator map in reference to finding the true direction and distance to India, 3) a brief description of the differences, advantages and disadvantages of Morse Code and Voice communications, and 4) the difference between a contractor grade generator, and an inverter generator for sensitive electronics.

With all this documentation I felt I was ready to face the scouts. The next step was to get my gear ready. On the day of the event I got up early to pack the truck with all of the equipment we would need to set up an EmComm station at the airport. I arrived at 7 am and met three other ARES members who had volunteered to help. I had been pushing the event on the local nets for about a month, and was happy to have these three very capable hams for assistance. My pickup truck was allowed to pass through the gates and was escorted to a grassy field on the side of the tarmac next to a large hangar. We unpacked the truck and then positioned the truck at the location where the antenna mast would be set up, since the truck rack initially supports the mast. After we set up the mast and guyed it down, we set up a canopy and then all the equipment. During this time the scouts were participating in the opening ceremonies in the hangar. Just as we finished setting up at 9:00 am the first batch of scouts approached our canopy. Now was the moment of truth. This was to be the first of four one hour sessions with the scouts. We had no idea whether we could keep their attention for the entire hour.

My very first impression as the cub scouts approached us was how young they appeared to be. I knew we needed to relate to them on their level, and adjusted my mindset since these kids were younger than I had imagined. I got them all to gather around the table for the beginning of my presentation. The parents and leaders appeared to be quite interested but the scouts were more interested in talking to each other. It was going to take something special to get them to listen to me.

I gave everyone in the group the handout. This way the scouts had something to do besides listening to me. I then asked them to go to the page where I was going to compare ham radio to scouting, and that's where I started. We talked about the Boy Scout oath and law even though they were cub scouts and then I showed them Paul Segal's Amateur Code. We talked about the radio merit badge, and then I asked the scouts to show me their belt loop awards. They were actually teaching me something, but they really enjoyed showing off their patches and belt loops. This got their attention and I then started to quickly go down the list of the belt loop awards that were related to Amateur Radio. We talked about public service, and the VLA radio telescope. When we got to the Collecting Belt Loop award I pulled out my large tri-fold QSL card display. I started to ask them about different countries and then asked them to find the appropriate card from that country. I asked them if they knew where Bailiwick of Guernsey was. By this time the adults were interested in what I was saying. I mentioned how hams can become interested in geography and learning about different cultures every time they contact a ham in a new country. I told them about some of my contacts with interesting people in far away places. Now everyone was listening.

I then changed the subject by showing them my key and paddles that were both connected to the HF rig on the table, and mentioned that some hams collected them. I then changed the subject again to why it is sometimes better to use CW on HF instead of

voice. By this time the scouts were chomping at the bit, so I started to demonstrate the difference between the paddle and the key, and at the same time chose one scout's name to start sending individual letters. The scout was shown how to use the paddles and was able to send his complete name using it at 10 WPM. Everybody was now hooked. I had figured that only one or two scouts would be bold enough to try the paddles, but every scout that day insisted on sending their name in Morse code.

We had to tear the scouts away from the CW demo to have them do the map comparison. They first looked at the Mercator map and guessed that India was due East of where they were. We then went over the Azimuthal map that was centered on their location. This also got the adults interested again. They then learned that the direct route to India was north and discovered that the distance to a remote place could be determined from the appropriate Azimuthal map.

We needed to switch gears again to keep the scouts interested. The secret is not to stay on any one subject for too long. So now it was time to have each scout talk on the local 2 meter repeater. We were forewarned that intermod at the airport might foil this effort, but having the antenna up at about 35 feet seemed to help and we had a good signal to two local repeaters.

I really didn't know how we were going to get the scouts to converse over the repeater. I had written up a little procedure for the scouts to follow but ditched it at the last moment and just put out a call letting everyone who was listening know that I had a bunch of scouts at a special event who wanted to make their first contact. The first ham who responded to my call did something that saved the day. He asked the first scout two questions about scouting. This elicited immediate responses from the scout at the microphone, but it also got every other scout's attention. That was the secret! Why hadn't I thought of that myself? Now every scout had to get his turn on the repeater, and answer a few questions. Now everyone: the scouts, parents, leaders, and the hams present were into this activity. We finished the QSOs at about 45 minutes into the presentation with all the scouts and adults saying thank you to the ham at the other end of the QSO.

I think everyone was a bit drained at the end of the QSOs. To break things up a bit I asked the scouts where the electricity was coming from. Were we plugged into the power at the hanger?...no.... Well what about this thick yellow extension cord?...At this point I told all the scouts to follow me. We had marked all the rebar stakes and guy ropes with safety tape, but still it was quite possible that someone could get hurt if they ran off. So they slowly followed me as we traced the path of my 100 foot long 10 gauge extension cord as it ran around my truck, and when we got to the end of it, they discovered that it was attached to a red thing. Only one scout knew that it was a generator (Honda 2000i) so we had to explain what a generator did and why a contractor generator is OK for a table saw or a refrigerator, but not for powering a computer, TV, or radio. The adults were interested in this also as where I live a generator is almost a necessity. This gave everyone some time to stretch their legs. By this time we were coming up on the hour and it was time for this group to go to another exhibit. So we said our goodbyes. The adults knew that they could call on me to give a presentation to their pack. As hams we had accomplished what we wanted to do. *We just had to do it again three more times!*

Well we got better every time we gave the presentation. By the end of the day everyone was quite tired. We took everything down in an hour. When we were ready to leave the airport management told us that they were very happy with what we did. We had shown the airport staff what we could do as hams in an emergency, and we also showed many scouts, parents and leaders that ham radio was ready to help them when they were ready to ask. It doesn't get much better than that. The four of us: Fred, AK5U, Albert, KF5ARJ, Joe, N5STH and myself were all very tired but happy. We all said that we would do it again.



Photo 1 – Getting Started



Photo 2 – Map Reading



Photo 3 – QSL Cards & Geography



Photo 4 – QSL Cards & Geography



Photo 5 – CW on a Paddle



Photo 6 – Communicating on the Local Repeater



Photo 7 – All About Generators



Photo 8 – General Setup



Photo 9 – General Setup

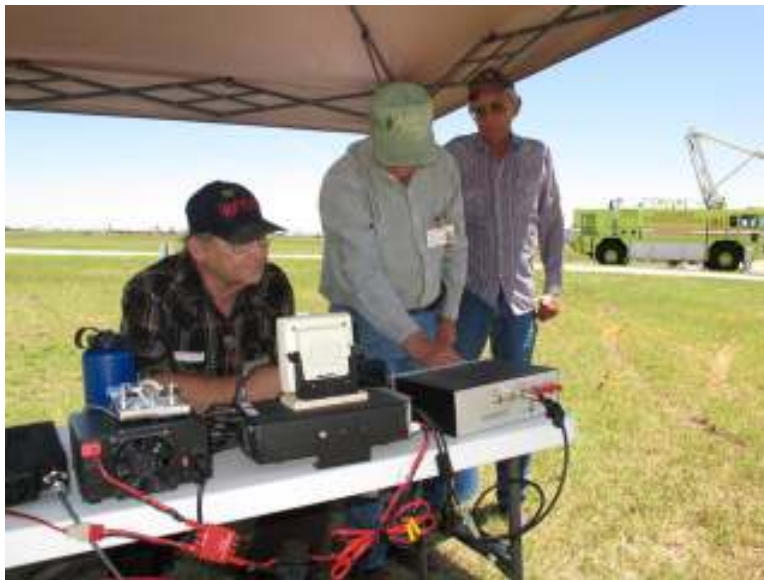


Photo 10 – The crew, L to R: Albert KF5ARJ, Fred AK5U, and Joe N5STH/

¹ ARRL West Gulf Division, South Texas Section, District 4, Nueces County.

² Corpus Christi International Airport, <http://>

³ Paul M. Segal's Amateur's Code, written in 1928, and the Boy Scout Oath and Law.