

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



Each month one of our members is randomly selected and asked to share their ham radio biography with all of us. Questions or comments should go to Paul, KD2MX.

DISCLAIMER: Any views expressed in this section are those of the submitting member and may or may not be those of the NAQCC or its officers.

MARK HOPKINS, NA4O, #368



This year, 2017, marks a milestone in my ham radio adventure as I celebrated my 50th year licensed as an amateur radio operator in June. That makes this a great time to look back and remember the days that have gone before.

As a youngster, I enjoyed building various electronic circuits on project boards. One board had 50 different circuits and I built each one. From that, I advanced to building a Heathkit GR-81 regenerative receiver kit that I used for several years. One night during that time, I remember my father brought home a book that someone in his office had sent to me. He said the coworker was a 'Ham' and this was a study guide to get a 'ham' license.

Well, I had been called a ham before and was not sure why I needed a study guide, but I immediately became fascinated when I looked at it. That was the beginning of my amateur radio adventures. In those days, one had to go to the FCC office to take the exam. I studied and rode into Atlanta one day with my father to take the exam. As a 15-year-old teenager in the office of the FCC, I still remember being a bit intimidated. I took the written Novice exam and the 5 WPM code test and was delighted to hear that I passed. In June, 1967, I was issued the call of WN4GDQ.

I had my station set up and was ready to get on the air. I called a high school friend who was a ham and had my first QSO using my regen receiver and a homebrew transmitter built on a TV chassis (CW, of course). I took advantage of the summer months to study for the General class test and, in August,

upgraded to the call WB4GDQ. All of the contacts in the early years were on CW using simple equipment and antennas because that was all my budget allowed.

Over the years, I upgraded to a Knightkit R-100A receiver that had a separate dial for the ham bands and later I built several Heathkits. I particularly remember how nice the HW-16 was. When I finally was able to get a Yaesu FT-101, I felt like I had arrived! After that, I began using SSB a lot more, but I never left CW behind as it always seemed to produce better results from my modest station. In February, 1981, I upgraded to Extra class and received my current callsign, NA4O. It has proven to be a nice one, on CW particularly.

Over the years, through college, working, marriage and family, I was not always active, but I did maintain my license. No matter where I lived, I always managed to put up some type of antenna. Ham radio provided opportunities at every stage to make friends and be involved in interesting activities like public service support and Field Days. Off the air, I have always enjoyed building projects and antennas, particularly wire antennas. On the air, I mainly enjoy jumping into contests and QSO parties and sprints where I can immerse myself in my hobby for hours or entire weekends.

In recent years, it was rare for me to ever raise my power above QRP levels. I guess I never feel like I needed to. I have won first place several years in the ARRL Sweepstakes for GA Section Single Op QRP and have won first place in the Georgia QSO Party for GA Single Operator QRP Phone for 10 years. QRP works fine for me. I am particularly proud of receiving the WAS Certificate during the W1AW Centennial in 2014 using QRP CW.

Once I discovered the NAQCC which combined my love for QRP and CW, much of my on-air activity has been focused on the sprints. I can also be found in the SKCC sprints (#5045T) and some of the FISTS events (#10158).

Though I have modified it a bit, the operating desk that I use today is the original one my Dad built for me as a teenager before I was even licensed. And, to this day, my antennas are still simple wire elements. My workhorse antenna is the AlphaDelta DX-LB+ up 45-feet and angled among three trees. The station equipment is vastly more sophisticated today than when I began, although the mode and power level is about the same. My current station equipment consists of the Elecraft KX3 as my main radio with a Vibroplex Straight Key attached. I also have a Yaesu FT-817 that I used for years. It is what really made me a convert to QRP. Once I put the 817 on the air, I found I never really needed to get back on the 'big' radio. Everything was fine and more fun with the tiny radio.

I recently added an Elecraft KX2 to take on trips and outings. (I also have an FT-847 for satellite work and an FT857D for the car.) The arrival of the KX2 just after I retired was bitter sweet because I lost my beloved wife at that same time. I was thinking retirement would bring many hours that I could devote to my hobby, but lately radio has been a bit on hold. I still try to make the sprints when I can, but I do look forward to being more active on the air before long (as well as doing more running, hiking, biking and other things I love).

One thing I have learned over my 50 years in ham radio is to hang onto that privilege known as my amateur radio license. There are times when one has to focus on other things, but to me it has been a constant that I have always treasured being available. From the very beginning, thinking back to the days of the Atlanta Society of Teenage Radio Operators (ASTRO), to more recent times with involvement in the local ARES group and orbiting satellites, ham radio has provided many fun times, friendships, learning opportunities and pure joy. Even with all the technology around, I am still amazed each time I make a contact using a measly 5 watts of power squeezed into a thin wire 45 feet in the air and consisting of carefully timed closures and openings of a hand-operated key.

I look forward to many more QSOs and making more friends on the air. Not only have I been in ham

radio 50 years now, but I am still using the same CW and low power that I used in my very first QSO and still thrilled each time I hear a station come back to my call. While I find it necessary to embrace advances, I also find comfort being able to connect with the many pleasurable QSOs and experiences from the past. I am looking forward to adding many more NAQCC numbers to my log.

