

Hey Elmer – Is Ham Radio Really For Me?

“Elmer, I would like to get into HF but I don't really see how I can and what good it would do me. I don't have an extra two-thousand dollars laying around for a radio and antenna. Also, my wife and neighbors will not tolerate one of those big towers with a big Yagi antenna. Who do you talk to if I did get one?”

I have a tech license and have not upgraded because I don't see any advantage. I am also getting tired of just talking once a week on our net. Did I rush into this ham thing without thinking?”

Lets examine your question in a little different order than you have posed it. First, *“I have a tech license and have not upgraded because I don't see any advantage. I am also getting tired of just talking once a week on our net. Did I rush into this ham thing without thinking?”*

These are all very good questions and probably ones that many Amateurs have considered at one time or another, and to me they form the basis for the rest of your questions.

Like any endeavor, Amateur Radio can offer one a mear “taste” to excite for a moment or a “full meal” that can become part of who you are. Unfortunately, I believe, the way one typically enters the hobby these days is more likely to provide one with an enticing taste of the hobby, but not much more. The reason I say this is that the beginning license, the Technician license, offers a new Ham exciting privileges in an area that is also home to cell phone technology and Internet communications such as Email, instant messaging, twittering and the like; that is, localized communications with friends that could just have easily been communicated using one of these other technologies. When you gain that Technician license you find yourself in the realm of repeaters, weekly nets and drive time conversation which are all wonderful but which can all be mirrored by using your cell phone, IM'ing and computer based applications. So, the immediate excitement soon wears off and you find that you have a license that allows you to do things similar to those you already do with your computer and cell phone. This is likely to moderate some of the charm and excitement that seems to be what Amateur Radio is all about to those who know about it but are not licensed.

I believe that if you asked a large group of people who were not Hams but who knew at least what the term Amateur Radio meant, what it was about, the vast majority would answer that it was about talking to people far away, maybe across the country or in other countries. This perception is completely correct, BUT not what the newly licensed Ham with a Technician license finds once they begin to operate. Thus, in a way it must be a let down.

If you consider the difference to a newly licensed Ham who got the introductory license a number of years ago I believe you will begin to see what I am talking about.

When I was first licensed the beginning license was the Novice license. This license was only good for one year and you either had to upgrade or start all over. As part of the licensing process you had to learn the Morse Code at a rudimentary level, that is you had to be able to send and receive a message at a speed of 5 words per minute and demonstrate you could copy a solid minute of code with no mistakes. Once your license arrived you got on the air just as today, but at that time “getting on the air” generally ment that you had built your first antenna, often a dipole, and had it strung up in the trees somehow. You had your rig ready, which more often than not, was a used HF rig and you had your key. I remember the day my first license came and that first contact which was on 15 meter CW to a KB1 station in Connecticut. I can no longer remember

how long it lasted but it was probably pretty short and I probably copied very little of the code. I do remember the extreme excitement and elation when it was done and, quite frankly, that excitement persists to today whenever I get on the high frequency bands. I believe that the reason for this long love affair with Amateur Radio and HF operations is that it fulfilled and continues to fulfill that basic perception of "talking to someone far away".

Today, many may say and the FCC has determined that a working knowledge of Morse Code is no longer a necessary part of the licensing process. That this was an antiquated part of the licensing procedure and possibly a barrier to some people in terms of getting a license. I actually have no problem with this perception, BUT I would like to explain why I also believe it is a loss that has changed the hobby. If you think about other "groups" that have common interests and goals whether they are based on social ideas and concepts, ethically based, religious based, ethnically based, political based or some other commonality that forms the basis for the "group"; one thing they all have in common is that they maintain a connection with their beginnings, their roots, as well as their journey to the present by remembering and holding certain "historical" components that make their group special. I believe that in Amateur Radio two important and historical "roots" for our group are: (1) talking over long distances to someone we may never meet, and (2) the ability to use the Code, which is somewhat unique to our group, as one means of fulfilling that long distance communication. This is not to say that Amateurs today should use the code, it is to say that we should celebrate our connection to it by perpetuating it.

So, if we think about the newly licensed Ham of today and the newly licensed Ham of my day we have a paradox.

In my first days as a Ham each time I found time to get on the air it was the beginning of an exciting journey. I was using equipment that I had either made or gotten after much study and thought and as I got on the air I was fulfilling that basic principle that separates Amateur Radio from everything else. I was testing the air waves to find someone in a far distant place who I would probably never meet and actually "meet" them and learn a little about them. I was also using skills that I had studied and learned that were unique to my group. In the beginning my ability to effectively communicate and understand what was being said back to me was not always easy, but it was a challenge and meeting the challenge and becoming its master was a source of pride and fulfillment. I also found that because I was a "Ham" sometimes people, upon finding this out, would ask questions as if I were some type of famous explorer.

Now, how about you .. the newly licensed Ham of today. You have studied and passed your test and your license arrives and you can get on the air. Your first rig is probably some model of HT that has so many bells and whistles and does so many different functions and modes that getting through the manual is a challenge in itself. But, that initial excitement is still there and that anticipation that the overarching premise that Amateur Radio offers, to talk to someone far away, is still present. You study your radio manual and program a few frequencies of local repeaters and begin to listen. Often they are quiet for long periods of time but when there is activity it's exciting to hear and you yearn to become part of it. Finally, you "throw your call out" often at a time when the repeater is quiet as you begin testing the waters. More often than not no one replies, but you persist. You find some local nets and check in and begin to meet new people. You may even get involved with a local club and attend a meeting or function. But, day after day as you use your new privileges you hear the same few people on the same few frequencies. Quickly, everything becomes "routine" and in a short time the initial excitement and magic you expected becomes much like drive-time to work. The same cars, the same road, the same scenery day after day .. not much new ever happens and you begin to wonder if you have made a mistake or have missed something. And, you find yourself asking, *"I have a tech license and have not upgraded because I don't see any advantage. I am also getting tired of just talking once a week on our net. Did I rush into this ham thing without thinking?"*

So, we see that the basic answer to that part of your question has to do with what you do with the hobby. If you get stuck at the introductory license stage and get stuck on VHF/UHF repeaters you will find that there is not much difference between Amateur Radio and cell phone and Email. Please don't misunderstand me, I love the repeaters and listen to my club's repeater all the time. It keeps me in touch with all of my local Ham friends and is always fun to use. It also gives me the opportunity to answer an unfamiliar call and make a new friend.

BUT, if you realize that the Technician license is just the gateway and that repeater operations are only a small fraction of the world of Amateur Radio, you will find your way into the heart of the hobby that does fulfill that excitement and wonder that you felt you would find by getting your license. Once you have made this leap you quickly realize that even with a Technician license you had a lot of frequencies that make the worldwide group of Amateur Radio operators available. You have high frequency privileges on the 80, 40, 15 and 10 meter bands. Today, right now, on 40 meters you can talk from coast to coast and to Europe, Asia, South America and beyond. In a year or two 15 and 10 meters will become more active as solar cycle 24 begins to amp up. Once that happens it won't be long until 10 meters will be your doorway to the world. The only problem is that on 80, 40 and 15 meters with the Technician license you must use the Code. On 10 meters you have both code and phone privileges.

So, this brings us to the remainder of your question. *"I would like to get into HF but I don't really see how I can and what good it would do me. I don't have an extra two-thousand dollars laying around for a radio and antenna. Also, my wife and neighbors will not tolerate one of those big towers with a big Yagi antenna."*

What good would getting on HF do for me. Well, first it would allow you to travel using your license and skills across the country and around the world. It would open new vistas and connect you with people and places that you may never ever have the opportunity to visit. It would teach you that people the world over have more things in common than they do that separate them and you would find that you quickly have new friends everywhere. You would also find that turning on the radio and getting a little air time was so exciting that you can hardly wait until the days routine is done and you have a few moments to yourself and your hobby. As you become more skilled at high frequency operations you would also find that new components of the hobby present themselves and slowly, Amateur Radio becomes part of who you are. It begins to define you as an individual and it broadens your perspective of the world and its people.

I don't know about you but I personally don't have a bunch of uncommitted money that I can spend on Amateur Radio. But, I have knowledge and skills that allow me to find a used piece of gear and with it and a little of my own ingenuity get on the HF bands and work the world. You can easily find a good sound HF rig for the price of a new dual-band HT, or maybe even less. You can use some of the knowledge you learned to attain your license to build some simple but effective wire antennas and you can fairly easily hide them in the trees or in other ways so they do not create a problem with family or neighbors.

I have worked thousands and thousands of contacts both in the continental US and around the world with simple wire antennas that are only 20 or so feet in the air and hidden in the trees. I have never used more than the basic 100 watts that most HF rigs produce and, until I finally retired from teaching after 36 years I never had a new HF rig .. always a good effective used one that I could afford without stressing our family budget. No one in my family or extended family has ever been a Ham or, I believe, wants to .. but, because I have never abused the hobby in terms of family, work or commitments my wife and children have always been completely supportive of my interests in Amateur Radio. I listen to the repeater every day and enjoy talking to my friends here in St. Louis. I operate every day on the HF bands and meet both new friends and old and always, always .. the most exciting part of Amateur Radio for me is and has always been turning on my HF rig. Using my knowledge of bands and propagation to pick a good starting place and throwing out a CQ. For me there is nothing that beats it and I believe that if you were

to begin using the HF bands you would find you have much more fun and the hobby will become an exciting thing every time you turn your rig on.

Finally, "Who do you talk to if I did get one?" Talk to other Hams who operate HF. In doing this you will quickly find that there is a wealth of knowledge available from people you know. And, if you think that because you live in an area where there are antenna restrictions or you just don't want to put up permanent antennas for whatever reason there are a number of great portable and temporary antenna configurations that will do the trick.

If this article sounds like I am trying to tempt you into expanding your Radio time into the high frequencies and all they offer, your right. I would feel like I was not being honest with you if I did not make every attempt to convince you into expanding your radio interests and become proficient on the HF bands. There are many local resources as well as resources available on the Internet. Again, start by talking to one of your club members or Ham friends who operates HF. Visit their HF station and get on the air. If you don't have someone who can give you some exposure to HF then contact me and I will help you find someone. Participate in the club workshops and club station days, and above all, use your knowledge and skills to make the move into the high frequency bands.

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