

A Clocks Tick Away From Obscurity?

By Steve, W0SJS

Prologue:

This story begins in 2003 as a very good friend of mine, Jay Schwartz, K0JFI, moved into a new home near St. Louis. Jay has been licensed for over 50 years and as he and his wife picked out the lot for their new home he took into consideration the terrain so that he would have a nice high location but also so that his future tower and antennas would be as unobtrusive as possible to the neighborhood. Settling on a lot on a cul-de-sac that backed up against a tree line he felt he had found a location that would promote good conditions and be blocked from view from many vantage points. With his home completed in early 2003 he wrote a letter to the city government requesting a building permit for a tower and antenna for amateur radio. His initial request was rejected as he specified a 70 foot tower. Jay and the city came to agreement on a 35 foot tower and antenna system. During the in-suing months he provided all information requested by the building and review board including a meeting with a ten member panel to answer questions. In the spring of 2003 Jay was issued a building permit and new occupancy permit for his residence that included a 35 foot tower and amateur radio antenna system. Within a month or two his new tower and antenna had been erected, inspected and approved. From the summer of 2003 until the winter of 2005 Jay operated and enjoyed his long time love of radio, DX'ing and the 20, 15 and 10 meter phone bands. At that time the lot next door that had lay vacant for those years was purchased and a home was built. Even before it was completed the new owner and neighbor begin complaining to Jay and other members of the cul-de-sac that the antenna was disrupting his home, causing interference and a myriad of other assertions. From 2006 until the spring of 2008 the complaints along with personal innuendoes and other comments I will not mention here were leveled. Jay, as any good Amateur will do, offered to work with the neighbor regarding any interference issues and was soundly refused. By the spring of 2008 the neighbor had made such a fuss and pressed the city government so hard that from May 2008 through August 2008 Jay received 102 tickets, a ticket each day delivered by certified mail and was visited each day by a representative of the city who took a picture of his home and tower system. During this time he sought legal council and contacted the ARRL regarding his antenna woes. Finally, in August of 2009 the entire five and one half year ordeal came to a jury trial.

The Ticking Clock:

As I begin, the scene around me is all too familiar. As I arose to begin this article the view out of the window of my shack shown the trees in my back yard still silhouetted against a dimly lit eastern sky not yet bathed by morning light and the computerized voice of the club repeater reminds me quietly in the background, "W0SRC the time is 3 AM". For me and I believe many of you my Amateur friends this scene has been repeated many times and feels familiar and friendly. Not all that uncommon rising at this hour and clicking on the rig and placing headphones on so as not to disturb or awaken family or spouse and then dialing across those familiar bands .. listening and searching in a state of both excited anticipation and assuredness that comes from years of experience for that signal from afar.

As these words begin to flow and my tale unfolds the setting is familiar yet my mission today is one that begs that "familiarity" and, at the same time realizes that for those that live around me .. my neighbor to the left and the one behind, the one with the two little dogs, and others .. that what I am doing is something that challenges their understanding and experiences. This fact and the implications were brought to the forefront of my thoughts yesterday as I spend the day sitting and listening in the county court house as one of my friends, Jay, K0JFI, attempted to defend his right to do what I have just described.

For me, yesterday, watching the lawyers juxtaposition as the myriad of pieces of evidence were spread out for the jurors and used and reused in that game of chess all pointed in an attempt to sway twelve people, all of who could be the person that lives next door or behind me, toward one side or the other in another "antenna" case brought to the forefront of my attention the need to reach out to those "neighbors" that form the community in which each of us lives.

Recently, I believe, the clock that marks change and progress made another tick and in that tick put just a little more distance between us, the Amateur community, and the general community at large. That "tick" was the adoption of D-TV as the standard for the greater part of the television watching public. The reason I say this and the reason that I believe it is an integral part of my friends antenna woes is that the switch, just like the widespread use of cable TV has taken us one notch further from what the general public might understand and recognize in terms of Amateur Radio and its operations especially on the high frequency bands.

When I was a boy I can remember the first TV in our neighborhood and can remember that television programming did not last 24 hours a day .. it actually came on in the morning sometime around breakfast and the time to leave for school and by the late afternoon or early evening the programming for the day was complete and the station actually signed off the air with some flurry and song and then there was only the "test pattern" until the next days programming began. I remember you could identify those lucky households that had television by the neat new antenna on the roof .. and, everyone understood what that antenna was for! The guy next door who also had some other antennas and wires up in addition to the TV antenna was someone we supposed who was able to do some other type of listening or maybe even talking over a radio. We supposed that those other antenna's and wires were for shortwave listening, and, if we pursued our speculations and actually talked to that neighbor about the other antennas it was interesting to learn that "he" (and I use the male gender here as it seemed to me that at that time so long ago the only Hams I ever new were men unlike today where my amateur friends and club members span the widest gamete of gender, age, background and interests) also talked or transmitted to other places and people. The idea of an antenna was something that was part of my realm of experience and understanding even though it would still be many years before I became part of that more mysterious group, the Amateur Radio Operator or Ham Radio guy.

So the widespread use of cable for TV and now D-TV have, in effect, clicked the clock of time a few more degrees away from that familiarity and have thus isolated us, Hams, a bit more from the understanding and realm of experience of the average neighbor and there understanding of what we do and how it works. TV like commercial satellite radio is no longer communication and entertainment forms that arrive via the "air waves" as the average person understands it and with this idea and understanding of the antenna has taken another step towards obscurity. And it is this step that I watched yesterday in the court room as my friend and his lawyer attempted to describe and explain to a public that was so far removed from the world of waves and antenna that the words we understand and find so familiar about what we do and how it works were for them a complete puzzle and no longer part of there life experiences. Even the simplest things such as the difference between a tower and the antenna atop the tower were out of there plain of experiences and understanding. I felt sorry for those twelve who will later decide the fate of my friend Jay's antenna system as they were being asked to make decisions of right and wrong about something for which they had absolutely no understanding or experiences. I felt equally sad for Jay and for all of us there who came to support him as he sat and listened as the lawyer for the city, who also had very little understanding for antennas and waves and there relationships, attempt to act as pro-active for his client. He referred to pictures and wording on legal and official documents that were part of the evidence in the case without really understanding himself what it was all about and how they related to each other and worked to produce an effect.

All of these experiences have brought me to this point so early today as I realized just how important it is for each of us to reach out to those neighbors and to the communities in which we live and make ourselves and what we do more visible and therefore more understandable. How important it is that we find ways to reconnect to the every day experiences of those people with which we live and work so that the things we do and the equipment we use and antennas we erect are not such a mystery and not so foreign from there everyday experiences that our presence and our equipment become suspect.

I can see a time where our inaction or complacency about how the general public views us may become our downfall or at least add to our undoing. If we let the clock tick away to many moments between what we understand and experience as active amateurs and what the non-

amateur public understands and experiences about us we may allow such a large gap to develop that we can no longer bridge it with words and actions. I believe it will take more than just our involvement in public service, however wonderful that publicity is and feels as we read about it in our magazines and occasionally hear it reported on the news networks, to maintain contact with the day to day experiences and general understanding of the public at large. And, as this understanding and knowledge about us wains it will become increasingly difficult to live equitably with our neighbors and in our home communities and effectively pursue or radio interests.

As I think about the current situation as highlighted by my friend, Jay's legal problems with his neighbor and home community I realize that we need to reattach ourselves with the general public by becoming more familiar, by reaching out to explain and answer questions, by inviting those who express interest into our shacks and to our club meetings and events. We need to become a familiar presence at our city governmental meetings and community events. For example, I will be willing to bet that if we are talking about community groups or organizations and I say, "Its cookie time!" that the vast majority of you along with everyone else will visualize and remember Girl Scout Cookies. The Girl Scouts have created a common experience and common understanding based around there yearly cookie sales that almost everyone can identify with. What a wonderful way to keep your organization in the public mind.

Is there an event or phrase or symbol that we, as amateur radio operators, can say and use as effectively?

I think not .. and that is what I am talking about. Later today I will find out what the outcome is for my friend as a jury of 12 uninformed citizens, just like the people that live next door or across the street from you and me, make a decision about an issue that they have no real understanding or experiences of. That decision will determine the future operating and I dare say happiness of my friend Jay.

We owe it to ourselves to find ways to make those inroads back into the the minds and experiences of the non-amateur public if for no other reason than to protect our common future.

I belong to several wonderful clubs here in the St. Louis area. The Mississippi Valley DX/Contest Club (MVDX/CC), and The St. Louis and Suburban Radio Club. Both of these groups are totally immersed in the hobby and between them represent and offer just about every possible venue of experience to a licensed Ham to become involved, learn and experience all of the wonderful and exciting things that Amateur Radio offers. One of the promises that I have made to myself as I finish this tale as the sun still sits below the horizon is to take to my two clubs this idea of finding ways to re-connect and become "familiar" again. And, then once identified to pursue them to the benefit of both the amateur and non-amateur communities to which I belong.

Epilogue:

My friend, Jay, KOJFI won his case and all of us are happy for him and feel vindicated, to an extent, that the courts upheld what was right. But, at the same time with victory in his pocket he still returns every evening to a home with a "hostile" neighbor living next door. A neighbor that throughout the five an one half years was completely unreceptive and often rude and outright nasty and who did some things to augment the division between him and my friend that to me seemed unbelievable. In fact, painting a line on the grass between the two homes to indicate exactly where his lot began. The long sorted story relayed by Jay and the days in court along with that realization that the only people who actually understood what was being talked about were the amateurs present in the court room has led me to believe and understand that we must become a pro-active force for ourselves. We must take the initiative to paint a true picture of who we are, what we do, how its done and the benefits it has for a community so that we do not allow ourselves to "tick" away into an obscure history of what once was but is no longer.

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