

Amateur Radio 101

By Bob Frost, Jeff Hahn and Don Parrish

Sometime in the past, you've probably known an amateur radio operator, otherwise known as a ham. Maybe it was your granddad, dad, uncle, a childhood friend or a neighbor down the street. If you ever ventured into their "ham shack," it probably looked like one of the strange labs from the 50s-60s TV series *Buck Rogers*, *Mr. Wizard* or *The Outer Limits* – lots of wires, blinking lights, static, radio sounds and tech stuff.

Ham radio is still very much alive and well today. At last count, there were over 770,000 licensed ham radio operators in the U.S. with well over 30,000 new hams joining the ranks each year, some as young as age six and others well into their 90s. In Sun City Texas there are about 100 licensed hams, roughly 60 percent of whom are members of the Sun City Amateur Radio Society (SCARS).

GET A LICENSE

In 1912 the U.S. Government required an individual to be tested and licensed to legally transmit on amateur frequencies – simply talking on a CB radio doesn't make you a ham. Obtaining a ham radio license isn't difficult. There are three classes of licenses, each of which requires more skill and knowledge than the last. Proficiency in Morse Code is no longer required to obtain a ham license.

TURN ON AND TUNE IN

Once licensed, amateur radio operators have access to specifically allocated radio frequencies. Within those frequencies, hams can communicate over-the-air, locally, regionally, to each other or worldwide to distant stations. Today's hams have options beyond traditional voice communication and may choose to experiment with other modes, including computer-aided digital communication.



PHOTOS BY BOB FROST

SCARS radio room (the "shack") at the Texas Drive Activity Center.



SCARS member Jeff Hahn stands by for emergency communication in the Georgetown Police and Fire Training Center.

For emergency communications, there are national systems that include amateur radio and are managed by the states and implemented by local government. One of the best examples of amateur radio emergency communications occurred in Williamson County on May 27, 1997, when a deadly F5 tornado struck Jarrell, Texas. Amateur radio filled the communication gap until traditional infrastructure was restored.

Williamson County took that experience to heart. Today, the county has invested over \$150,000 in amateur radio communications facilities and equipment (including a mobile communications trailer) ready to be used in case of an emergency. Fully equipped radio facilities

can be found in the police and fire training center on D.B. Wood Rd., Fire Station #3 on Texas Drive and at all Williamson county hospitals, all staffed by trained amateur radio operators.

One of the ways hams train is by providing communications support for public service events. One of the largest local events is the annual Red Poppy Ride where SCARS members make up more than half the radio operators providing communications for race organizers and managers.

INTERESTED AND WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HAM RADIO?

Sun City's Amateur Radio Society gives radio enthusiasts and ham operators a place to meet monthly and stay in touch. Membership provides access to a fully equipped radio room where licensed hams can "get on the air" and talk locally or around the world. A club-sponsored 440 MHz UHF-band repeater allows members to communicate in and around Georgetown using simple and inexpensive hand-held pocket-sized radios.

To learn more about amateur radio and meet Sun City's active hams, simply drop in on one of the first Wednesdays of the month meetings at 7 p.m. in the Texas Drive Activities Center to see what it's all about. We hope to see you there!