

Back in the late 90's, I wrote a column in the *SERA Repeater Journal* titled "Getting Started." It was for new hams, because I really don't know enough to impress old hams. This is one... actually two, of those columns.

Getting Started: The Friendly Repeater

By Gary Pearce KN4AQ, sometime in 1999...

I'll bet you've heard this one before. "I just got back from a trip to West Boondocks, and the hams there are so unfriendly, I didn't make a single contact on the local repeaters. Sure makes me appreciate what we've got here. This is 'The Friendly Repeater'".

I've got news for you. I've been to West Boondocks, and they consider their repeater to be "The Friendly Repeater," too.

Not too long ago, my friend Jeff Wittich AC4ZO and I made a road trip to Kansas. Like Smokey and the Bandit, we had a long way to go and a short time to get there. Between meals stops at Krystals and Steak 'N Shake, we did a lot of hard driving. And we did a lot of hamming on local VHF repeaters. One particularly memorable contact occurred in the middle of the night, in the middle of no place, on some linked repeaters in western Missouri. I think we talked for over an hour as we barreled down the road. Almost everywhere though, in towns large and small, we managed to scare up repeater contacts.

How did we do it?

The standard method for announcing your presence and seeking a contact on FM repeaters seems to be to mumble your callsign and append the word "listening". That may be good enough to elicit a reply from someone who knows you on your local machine. But it doesn't do the job when you're out-of-town on a foreign machine. Ask yourself, how often do people go out of their way to reply to callsigns they don't recognize when rapidly dropped into your "Friendly Repeater"?

If you want a reply, you have to make a bit of a production out of it. Jeff's technique: after monitoring a bit to make sure a repeater isn't already in use, Jeff will key up and say something like "This is AC4ZO mobile. I'm from Raleigh, North Carolina, and I'm just traveling through the area on Interstate 40. Anybody available for a contact?" He'll say it in a calm, casual manner that makes him sound like he'd be somebody interesting to talk to for a few minutes.

Now perhaps we've just stumbled upon the crux of the problem. Making "First Contact" with someone you don't already know can be work, and it can be risky. Answer somebody, and you may be trapped in one of those pointless, inane conversations where neither of you have anything to say, and you're just looking for a graceful way out. (The Technician Class license exam has no questions about how to make good, casual conversation. I think there may be one or two questions about that on the Extra Class exam, but you can miss them and still get your license if you know a lot about satellites and Smith Charts and stuff.)

If you're lucky, you can begin a conversation with someone who has some interests in common. You may get to learn a little, or teach a little, or both. Sometimes, it really clicks. You're not suddenly "called to lunch," and you don't have to "concentrate on your driving."

Maybe what we need to encourage more people to take a chance on making that contact is a universally recognized exit strategy. Perhaps a Q-code. How about QBC? That would be interpreted as follows:

QBC? - Are we in the middle of a boring conversation?

QBC - We are in the middle of a boring conversation. Let's terminate immediately.

On the HF bands, hams have created solutions that allow them to making dozens or hundreds of contacts without fear of contracting "boring contact syndrome." They're called contests. Everybody knows exactly what to say, and they say it quickly. Routine DX contacts can also have the same rapid fire exchange: callsign, name, location, signal report, NEXT. Stateside HF contacts, though, have more in common with FM contacts. You are expected to actually say something for awhile. And I've been in a few HF contacts where QBC would be a welcome transmission.

Speaking of HF, the guys down their have a wonderful, traditional ham radio way of letting people know they want to make contact. They call CQ. Calling CQ was discouraged in the early days of Amateur VHF-FM. The rationale was that with FM and crystal controlled receivers, everybody who might be listening for your CQ began hearing you as soon as you opened your mouth. You didn't need a lengthy CQ to attract the attention of people who might be

tuning across the band. Instead, we were told to just announce our callsigns and say we were "listening." Too bad. If we had just modified the traditional CQ to a shortened version -- CQ, CQ, KN4AQ looking for a contact -- we might have made things a bit easier. But, we're stuck with "blah blah blah-listening," and I expect it's going to be that way for some time to come.

So you say yours is "The Friendly Repeater." Prove it.

FRIENDLY REPEATER II: ROAD TRIP

Last year, I wrote a column called "The Friendly Repeater", with tips for making contacts on unfamiliar repeaters when you're out of town. This month, we put those techniques to the test, on a road trip between Raleigh, NC, and Chicago, IL. I took the trip to my old home town in August to visit my brothers and eat some Chicago style pizza and White Castle hamburgers. Given the choice, I'd rather drive than fly, and I had more time than money, so I plunked an extra magnet-mount antenna on the car (adding a fourth antenna) and hit the road.

COLUMNIS INTERRUPTIS

But first, we interrupt this column for an editorial. Sorry for shifting gears, but this is something I think **Getting Stated** readers, new hams and old, will be interested in.

Recently I was tuning around on HF, maybe on 75 meters, and I came upon a couple of old-timers. One of them was complaining to the other. What a surprise - a ham complaining. When I talk to the press or the public about ham radio, sooner or later someone always asks, "What do hams talk about." I'm tempted to say, "Well, mostly they just complain a lot..." I don't say it. Not the right image. But we do our share of complaining.

So this old timer was complaining about one of these new, whipper-snapper 5 wpm Amateur Extras, who plunked himself (or maybe herself) right there in the low end of the 20 Meter cw band and proceeded to send this slow code. Didn't she know that the low end of the band is supposed to be reserved for high-speed cw and the pursuit of rare DX?

Something struck me as odd about that. I'm not much of a cw man, but here on my home repeater, there are a handful of guys endlessly extolling the virtues of cw (some with more tact than others), and beating the drum for more converts to that ancient and honorable mode. And now I was listening to an obvious cw man talking about someone who was voluntarily operating cw, of his own accord, without FCC intervention or insistence. I would think our old-timer would want to shake that man's (or woman's) hand, pat them on the back, maybe even hug them and buy them lunch! Welcome, my friend, to the gentleman's mode! You're gonna love it here! Now, let's chat a minute about band plans and operating agreements. You know, they're not just for 2 Meters anymore... But no, this old-timer was so blinded by anger over this latest ruination of Amateur Radio that he didn't even know a victory when one tapped him on the key.

And now back to our regularly scheduled column.

About a year ago, I began **Getting Started** this way: *I'll bet you've heard this one before. "I just got back from a trip to West Boondocks, and the hams there are so unfriendly, I didn't make a single contact on the local repeaters. Sure makes me appreciate what we've got here. This is 'The Friendly Repeater'".*

I said that if you want to make contacts on repeaters where you aren't well known, you have to do more than simply mumble your callsign once so softly nobody could hear it even if they were listening with more than half an ear, which they aren't. You have to make a production out of it.

It was time to take my own advice. So I declared this road trip to be the "**SERA Repeater Journal Getting Started Column** International 'Friendly Repeater II' Tour". It wasn't really international, but I added that to sound impressive. And I set out to see if I could make some contacts. I equipped myself with my usual mobile rig and dual-band antenna, my 220 MHz mobile, an extra antenna and a scanner receiver programmed with all the 2 Meter channels, a recent copy of the **Repeater Journal**, a 2-year-old copy of the **ARRL Repeater Directory**, and a GPS. On some previous trips, I would spend a few hours with the repeater directories and maps, plotting a route and marking repeaters I would pass. I didn't have time to do that this trip. I'd have to wing it.

The Tour did not begin well. I did have a chat with some locals as I left Raleigh, but my first attempt to wring a contact out of the 146.67 repeater in Burlington, NC, was a dud. This is a lightly used repeater in a small town, it was mid-morning on a weekday, and I was just beginning to refine my speech, so I'll give them a pass. But when I failed to pull anyone out of the weeds on the big 146.76 machine in Greensboro, I began to get worried. I switched to the 145.15 machine, and Randy KR4QH responded right away for the first contact of the Tour. And he set the right tone by saying that he never liked to hear a traveling ham go unanswered. Thanks, Randy!

I was approaching the fringe of the territory where I know repeaters well. The scanner stopped on a conversation on the wide-coverage 146.82 machine in Fancy Gap. I broke in and passed along some information about I-40 traffic to a ham who was coming my way. When you're in West Boondocks, and the natives aren't seeming too friendly, it's

OK to ambush one and call them when they've finished a contact, or find another reason to wiggle your way into a conversation.

And now I was polishing my routine, too. I would appear on a new repeater, and announce "This is KN4AQ mobile, heading from Raleigh, North Carolina to Chicago, Illinois, passing through Winston-Salem and listening on 146.64. Anybody around to keep me company?" Like I said, you have to make a production out of it. Kn4aqlistening is not as likely to catch the attention of the locals. However, even this elaborate pitch failed on the 64 repeater.

The Forsyth County club didn't let me down entirely, though. I tried again on their 145.47 machine on Sauratown Mountain, and got into a long chat with Fred NA4P, who was also driving cross-country. It was now about 4 pm, and your columnist had a new problem: I was beginning to get horse from all the talking. This was working a little too well.

Fortunately, my voice recovered a bit, and by 6 pm I was driving by Beckley, West Virginia, and I found James KC8GGF on the 146.85 repeater. I was pulling these repeaters out of the *Journal*, and wishing that I'd taken the time to make some notes in advance. Studying the *Journal* and a map while driving solo isn't easy or safe. On this trip, the problem was reduced because I kept finding so many loooong contacts that I didn't have to look up very many repeaters.

James and his wife Doris KD8DOR kept me on the air for well over an hour, and he moved me to the 145.23 repeater to extend coverage. That's the machine owned by Alex N8FWL, SERA's Vice Director for West Virginia. Thanks, Alex... nice repeater! Where were you? James drives what he called a "rock truck" - I think that means he hauls rock around the countryside - and he's always looking for a ragchew to pass the time. James admitted that he is not currently a SERA Associate Member, but he'll look for the *Journal* at the next hamfest. If you know James, tell him he's now famous!

I wrapped up this long day at a motel west of Charleston. As I was heading to dinner, I monitored a very energetic Trader's Net on 146.64 that used a link system to bring a lot of hams together.

Thursday, back on the road, and another immediate reply from Steve W8AFX on the Huntington 146.76 repeater. Steve is retired, and operates all bands 160 through 2 Meters while mobile.

Steve pointed me to a couple of repeaters that I would be passing, saving me the trouble of looking them up. On 146.94 in Ashland, WV, I met Harriet WA4AXN. She's was a Tech from the 60's, and said she was "grandfathered" into a General with restructuring last spring. I decided she must have been "grandmothered" into the general, and she agreed. We had so much fun that I timed out the repeater, and somebody jumped in and said "I'm glad he's not a local - he's pretty windy!" That is unusual for me. While I have qualified for the ARRL's Rag Chewer's Certificate more than a few times (that requires a 30 minute contact), I'm not usually much of a talker. You couldn't prove that by the hams I met along this trip.

I was now aimed at Lexington, KY. Some research on the Internet revealed that there is a Krystal Hamburger place in Lexington. Going through Lexington was not the shortest or fastest route between Raleigh and Chicago, according to my Street Atlas map program. And when I described my plans to some locals as I left Raleigh, they made fun of me for going out of my way for a hamburger. But Cliff KD4VYA, who replied to me quickly on the Lexington 146.76 repeater, understood completely. We don't have a Krystal's in Raleigh, and the little, square "onion sliders" are worth going out of your way for! Cliff said that Lexington is blessed with both Krystal's and burger-clone White Castle. I regret not taking time for a comparison test.

During most of my trip, I kept one receiver going on 146.52 simplex - the National Simplex Channel. Lexington was the first place I heard anyone using it. 52 is the subject of complaints and debates. A recent letter in *QST* carried the complaint that the writer made a long road trip and never heard any activity on 52. He thought more people should monitor it, or we should stop calling it the National Simplex Channel. Here in Lexington, the local hams were debating whether hams should ragchew on 52, or just monitor it and move to another channel to talk. Actually, it wasn't much of a debate... all agreed that they should ragchew on 52 to "keep it active" in case hams traveling through needed a contact.

I didn't break in because I was just arriving at the Krystal's for lunch. But when I finished (4 double-cheese, fries and a Coke), I decided to call their bluff. I announced myself, and sure enough, Ted WB4ERL responded. We talked until I drove out of range. I listen to 146.52 from my home much of the time, and there's sporadic activity in the Raleigh area, but I'd hardly call it busy. A local group uses 146.505, and when they're talking I hear unpleasant spatter on 52 (see last issue's column, *Elbow Room*, for an explanation). The Raleigh club uses 147.42 as the "official club simplex" channel, but we won't find many traveling hams there.

The next town down the pike, Louisville, KY, brought another first for the Tour... my first UHF contact. I had one side of my mobile rig scanning the UHF band, and it stopped on the 444.50 machine, which is a wide coverage machine on a TV tower, actually just across the Ohio River in Indiana. Once again, I talked for well over an hour with several hams, beginning with George WB4ZZD. I messed up my tape recorder and didn't log the other names and callsigns! But about four of us talked about everything.

UHF is not popular with travelers. Even though there are almost as many UHF repeaters as VHF repeaters, activity is much lighter. It is rare to hear someone from out of town pop up on a local UHF machine, and when I'm traveling, I surprise locals when I find them on UHF. By comparison, 2 Meters is a beehive of activity. On this trip, and most others I've taken, I usually scan all the 2 Meter channels while driving along. Did you know that there are about 100 FM "channels" on 2 meters. The SERA band plan shows 73 repeater output frequencies, and 27 simplex

frequencies. Most of the time, my scanner stops on at least one busy repeater within my range, no matter how far out in the boonies I am.

During that UHF contact, I finally left SERA territory and headed toward Indianapolis, Indiana. There, I decided to forego the easy 2 Meter fish-in-a-barrel contacts and try my luck on 220 MHz. It was two strikes and I was out. I got strong repeaters on 224.92 and 224.98, but no amount of pleading could elicit a contact. I'm guessing that nobody was listening. Usually, if there's anyone there at all, 220 operators jump on a traveler, because they are so rare.

Most of the repeaters I used during the Tour were in metro areas, so as I headed west from Indianapolis, I decided to try a small-town machine. Two of them, actually, in Crawfordsville, Indiana. 146.685, and 147.225 were both on the air, but there were no humans inhabiting them except me. However, the Danville, Illinois 146.82 was lively. There, Terry KB9REE invited me to a hamfest and their pre-fest steak dinner. Sadly, I wouldn't be able to stay.

Next, I reached my first destination, Champaign, Illinois, where my brother Jay is the program director of WILL (580 on your AM dial), the NPR station at the University of Illinois. I turned my attention away from ham radio to listen to his cut-ins during *All Things Considered*.

And finally, Chicago. A huge metropolis, a place I called home for many years. In the 70's, I was President of the Chicago FM Club, and frequency coordinator for 2 Meters for Northern Illinois. CFMC was a huge club - 400 members - on the leading edge of the 2 Meter boom. Their wide-coverage repeater on 146.76 seemed constantly busy, and was host to nearly every ham who traveled through the city with an FM rig. But on this Saturday morning, I couldn't raise anyone who knew the autopatch code to call my brother and tell him I was late - stuck in a weekend traffic jam that is now typical of this big city. Finally, someone answered who couldn't help me with the autopatch, but did make a phone call and relay a message.

This was now family time. My brother Andy used to be WA9SBF, but lost interest in ham radio in the 70s and finally let his license lapse. He is an engineer for several CBS radio stations, and I got a tour of some of them, including some time at the top of the John Hancock building, over 1000 feet above the downtown streets. While driving, I did scan 2 Meters, and I heard surprisingly little activity. There is a repeater on almost every channel somewhere in the metro area, but few people were using them. With company in the car, I didn't try to scare up contacts.

While in Chicago, I dined at Lou Malnati's for pan pizza, one of the few things I really miss and can't get anywhere else (Pizzeria Uno/Due, and Gino's, have equally good pizza. Uno's has branched out around the country as a chain, but somehow what they make outside the city doesn't compare). And I hit White Castle. It wasn't a side-by-side comparison, but I decided that Krystal was just a little better. Maybe.

The weekend went by quickly, and it was time to head home. I looked at the antennas, the dual band mobile, 220 rig and scanner, and the map. I decided to meander my way home, taking an extra day, and skip the interstates. And I was talked out. The **Friendly Repeater II Tour** was a success. I had proven beyond a doubt that you can make contacts almost anywhere, any time of day, if you just work at it a little. But now I didn't feel like talking. I cranked up the broadcast radio, found some mellow jazz, some back roads that took forever, and headed home.