

A Message from the Editor

Where Did the DX Go?

You can't help but notice something when you spin the radio dial on many of the high bands these days. Actually, it's the *absence* of something — signals! There aren't as many to be heard. The salad days of hearing dozens of fluttery signals from around the globe coming in at all hours of the day and night on 10 and 15 meters are over. Cycle 24's demise has come on with a vengeance, and if the solar minimum isn't here yet, it's mighty close.

Every cycle is different, and so is this one. As Carl, K9LA, explained in a recent issue of *NCJ*, this cycle has featured plenty of cosmic ray ionization from the Sun, and that's taking the shine off the one thing we have to look forward to during low sunspot years — better low-band conditions.

Another factor that's making this solar downturn different has very little to do with the sun — it's operating behavior. Outside Europe, where the tradition remains alive, hardly anyone calls CQ anymore. A few stalwarts remain, but tuning the bands these days when there is no propagation to Europe reveals plenty of wide-open spaces. That's altered the operating experience.

How are things different? Consider that those chasing awards such as 5BWAS have a very small chance of hearing stations in rare states calling CQ on the low bands, especially from other continents. (Is it any wonder that those of us who *live* in those rare states receive so much e-mail requesting schedules?) Or consider that from the North American side, at times you are likely to hear more Indonesian fishing boats on the low end of 40 meters than hams. Or that a receiver monitoring the JT9 or JT65 windows on 160 on any given night will decode 50 or more signals, while you are lucky to see one or two blips of CW on your spectrum scope.

We've become a collection of listeners. Better yet, we have machines like skimmers to do the listening for us. There is more action and conversation on the

various Internet chat channels *associated* with 6 meters or 160 meters than there is on those bands. Unless a band is open to Europe, that is, in which case you'll hear stations calling CQ and making contacts every few kilohertz, as always.

It's interesting, but probably futile, to question why this is so. Perhaps it began with repeaters, where the old-fashioned CQ was looked on with scorn. Perhaps it's the ubiquity of the Internet, with its noisy, messy, sometimes vulgar conversations that make us want to pull back and only talk with those we already know. Or perhaps the information you get when you call CQ — seeing where the band is open to — is now easily obtained by just looking at skimmer spots.

It's a bit strange when you think about it, because I seem to remember a time when you couldn't get hams to *stop* transmitting! The whole idea of a license is the authority to transmit. The net effect here is that for new folks trying to experience the bands, there's less to hear. And with fewer sunspots and less propagation to Europe, it's probably going to get worse.

Bringing Them Up Right

When was the last time a youngster called you to say, "I'm your contest operator." But that's just what happened to Lew Gordon, K4VX, after he ran a classified ad in *QST* that read: "K4VX is moving to Missouri and is looking for operators." The then-kid who made that statement has more than lived up to his claim. Jeff Steinman, N5TJ, ranks as one of the most accomplished operators around. The fact that he got his start at the station where plenty of other now well-known operators cut their teeth demonstrates that some solid lessons — as well as a lot of RF — emanated from that QTH.

Perhaps you were fortunate enough to learn under the tutelage of a master as well. I was. In my traffic-handling youth, it was not uncommon for the family phone to

ring after the night's net to hear from one of the old sages about what I did right and what I did wrong. A little heavy handed, perhaps, but the lessons were learned. And I will never forget traveling to the station of contest hero K4GSU (now N4AR) to operate. The raw, long-haired kid at the controls of that big station called everything that moved on the band. A silent tap on the arm and the quiet example of figuring out the call sign *before* calling was a lesson that has stayed with me for life.

Operating the right way — ethically, efficiently, and with consideration of others — is something we could use a little more of. The idea of sending inexperienced operators to spend a contest season with folks who do it right comes to my mind when I witness such things as the mindless calling of packet pileups or the hordes jumping on the end of Sprint QSOs before the exchange has been acknowledged. Further, it would put to the lie the frequently expressed excuse of those who stretch the rules: "Everybody cheats."

Perhaps some of us should be posting one of those "operators wanted" ads!

Its Only Paper

The arrival of *NCJ* in a contester's mailbox is a welcome opportunity to settle into a comfortable chair and breathe in the "lingua franca" of our complex, specialized, and extremely rewarding hobby. When subscribers opened the January/February, though, they found something different. The paper stock was lighter and glossier, similar to what is used in *QST*.

One challenge for any print publication, if not for most of them, is purely economic. ARRL, as publisher of *NCJ*, bears the brunt of rising costs, especially for postage and printing. We're doing everything possible to preserve the enjoyment you get from perusing these pages. If we have to tweak the product from time to time to protect its financial future without jeopardizing that enjoyment, we hope you'll understand why.