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Get on the Air with History

“NPOTA is over, but the opportunities to activate historical sites are endless.”

National Parks on the Air, affectionately known at ARRL HQ as “EN-PO-TA,” finished its scheduled run on the last day of 2016. Many of us were sad to see it end, because it brought so much pleasure to participants. And, by all accounts, it was very helpful in promoting the centennial celebration of the National Park Service’s (NPS) breathtaking portfolio of the nation’s parks, historical sites, and other venues. ARRL and the entire Amateur Radio community played a role in that success. More than 1 million QSOs were logged with virtually every NPS location, from Florida’s Dry Tortugas National Park to Washington State’s San Juan Island National Historical Park. At least one side of these QSOs involved portable antennas — 100 W (or fewer) and a wire — so portable operators acquitted themselves with pluck and skill. But, as planned, even good things eventually come to an end, otherwise they become old and tired. There are no guarantees, but I hope we will briefly revive the NPOTA activity annually on, or about, the 26th of August each year, the birthday of the National Park Service. By popular demand.

One of the more valuable collateral benefits of NPOTA derived from learning the history of the national parks, especially smaller, less-well-known NPS units like Minute Man National Historical Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts. Everyone knows Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Acadia — Minute Man is less prominent. Last June, ARRL Media and Public Relations Manager Sean Kutzko, KX9X; ARRL Emergency Preparedness Manager Mike Corey, K11U, and I stopped off at Minute Man National Historical Park on our way to some meetings in Boston. As we activated the site in mid-morning, we were surrounded by a team of NPS rangers. One ranger thanked us for publicizing an example of these lesser-known locations. (Truthfully, you could miss it passing by at the speed limit.) He spoke eloquently about the site’s history. Seems that after Lexington and Concord, the colonial militia moved east to engage British troops in Boston. The British moved west and met them at Lincoln on April 19, 1775. On this site occurred the first battle of the American Revolution.

Listening to the ranger’s narrative, I gazed into the quiet woodland summer of Minute Man, sunlight on its dappled trees. The story brought a chill to my spine, thinking about a moment nearly 240 years ago and contrasting the violence of that April day with the peaceful summer morning. For so many of us, rangers throughout the National Park Service added a deep resonance to the NPOTA experience. I reminded myself that Amateur Radio enriches the lives of all who touch it.

NPOTA took us places we never contemplated we would go. In the snow, in the rain, out on the trails, in the blazing desert sun. And there were mosquitos. Lots of mosquitos. Lewis and Clark trails and boundary waters, the South Lawn of the White House, the house of John Muir (father of the National Park Service), and more were activated in 2016 for NPOTA. For an overview of the year-long event, see Sean Kutzko’s, KX9X, article in this issue.

At the end of the year, ARRL co-sponsored another history-laden, get-on-the-air event. Together with the Radio Society of Great Britain (RSGB), the Radio Club of America, and DX Engineering, we were able to reenact an important milestone in the history of Amateur Radio — the 95th anniversary of the first shortwave reception across the Atlantic. This time the venues were Greenwich, Connecticut, and Ardrossan, Scotland, UK.

Through an accidental meeting on 75 meters, I persuaded Clark, N1BCG — whose call sign resembles the original call of Edwin Armstrong and Minton Cronkhite’s 1921 station, 1BCG — to lead the event. RSGB’s General Manager Steve Thomas, M1ACB, obtained the call GB2ZE for the Scotland side, due to the call’s resemblance to the original call of ARRL’s ace operator, Paul Godley, 2ZE, whom the League sent to Scotland in the summer of 1921 to listen for the signals from Greenwich.

At 1531 UTC on December 11, 2016, GB2ZE acknowledged the Greenwich station’s call from the very same salt meadow where Godley first heard the signal. N1BCG then sent the original message from December 11, 1921: “To Paul Godley, Ardrossan Scotland: Hearty congratulations, signed Armstrong, Cronkhite et al.” Shortly thereafter, ARRL Field Services Manager Dave Patton, NN1N, sent the original message again in CW.

Paul Godley’s grandson, David Littleton, and his sister were on hand in Greenwich to witness the exchange. David brought Godley’s original logs from that December 1921 transmission and also presented the League with high-resolution facsimiles of the logs and other related documents to memorialize what was arguably the birth of HF DX for our archives. The special event station made more than 500 contacts. BBC Radio played back the initial contact on the Monday morning news.

The men who first spanned the Atlantic with shortwaves in 1921 were the giants of our community. Without much external financial support, and using their own resources, they demonstrated, empirically, the value of wavelengths below 200 meters. For all the participants on December 11, for one brief moment, it was exciting to walk in the footsteps of these giants. As exciting as walking in the footsteps of Minute Men. History in the air.

Hams need to do more of these events. Special on-air events offer hams an opportunity to be teachers and students of history. Dig into your local history to find places and dates that are worth commemorating on the air. And, as always, I invite you to share your plans with us at ARRL HQ.

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