NPOTA Adventures in Paterson Great Falls National Historical Park

A New Jersey club’s operation, run in conjunction with the park’s Science Fair, resulted in hundreds of children learning about ham radio.

Susan Frank, W6SKT

I fell in love with America’s National Parks in 1961, when I was 12 years old. Embarking on our obligatory family road trip, our parents packed us into our 1955 Ford Country Squire “woody” station wagon in Los Angeles. We visited Sequoia, Kings Canyon, and Yosemite National Parks. My father was also a history buff, and travels soon expanded to include National Historical Sites.

Visiting at least one National Park is now an essential part of every vacation. I have found that few moments in life can compare with the thrill of driving through the hallowed gates of a National Park...that is, unless it is the opportunity to meet new people and travel in the virtual world of Amateur Radio.

I became interested in Amateur Radio in 1983, largely in response to hearing Owen Garriott, W5LFL, the first “Ham in Space,” transmitting from the space shuttle. I heard W5LFL on a friend’s scanner, and my disappointment at not being able to respond to Garriott’s CQ motivated me to get my Novice license in 1984, then upgrade to Tech and finally, to a General class license. Today, my husband and I are both members of the Fair Lawn Amateur Radio Club W2NPT (flarc.net) in Fair Lawn, New Jersey.

In 2015, when the ARRL announced the National Parks on the Air (NPOTA) event, which coincided with the National Park Service’s Centennial, I couldn’t imagine anyone being more excited than I was — two of my favorite activities combined in one event. I knew our club had to participate in this event. I also knew I wanted our effort to be a “Five Star Activation,” following ARRL guidelines, enhancing public awareness of Amateur Radio, and highlighting a local National Park.

Choosing a Park

New Jersey had 13 sites approved by the ARRL for NPOTA activation. I began to investigate Paterson Great Falls National Historical Park. Located just across the Passaic River from Fair Lawn, it was the closest National Historical Park to our club’s location.

Paterson Great Falls National Historical Park is a geologic phenomenon; a 77-foot-high waterfall (one of continental America’s largest) formed approximately 13,000 years ago on the Passaic River. In 1792, a consortium of businessmen, led by then-Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, was formed to make Paterson, New Jersey the first planned industrialized city in the new United States. They harnessed the power of the falls to create canals called “raceways” around the city, which allowed manufacturers in Paterson to use diverted water power to run their factories.

I wondered if Paterson Great Falls, as a newer National Park, first designated in 2011, might welcome the positive exposure, and whether they would be open to a full-scale NPOTA activation. I also wondered how I might sell the idea of NPOTA at Great Falls to the club. As it happened, in December 2015 our local TV channel was broadcasting a feature about the park. In the cold of winter, I watched a video created in the middle of summer, when the park looked lush and green. Park Superintendent Darren Boch was being interviewed, and his enthusiasm and historical narration convinced me I might be on to something.

After viewing the Great Falls video, our club president, Karl Frank, W2KBF, contacted Park Ranger Ilyse Goldman to discuss the possibility of operating at Paterson Great Falls for NPOTA. When Ilyse told him her father had been a ham, he hoped her positive memories of Amateur Radio would help support our proposal.

Ilyse turned out to be the best partner we could have had for this project. She was enthusiastic about her job as a Park Ranger, understood our mission, and jumped right in to help. Our first issue was choosing a day for our activation.

The Planning Begins

Ilyse suggested that we operate on Earth Day, April 22. The park would be sponsoring a Science Fair that day, which would be attended by hundreds of local school children. This would be a great opportunity to showcase Amateur Radio. The only problem was, April 22, 2016 fell on a Friday, and many of our club members would not be able to attend. We decided to operate on both Friday, April 22, and Saturday, April 23, to provide all of our club members the opportunity to participate.
Ilyse gave us operating space on a paved, elevated balcony, strategically located at one prime viewing area of the falls. It would fit our 10-foot × 10-foot pop-up tent, and give us some room to expand. This would put us in the thick of the action at the Science Fair. Even better, this spot was adjacent to a 50-foot tree, with several smaller trees close by, for raising antennas.

Because her late father had been a ham, Ilyse knew about QSL cards, and asked us if we planned to send cards. She offered me some of her own, printed with Amateur Radio 2 meter station QSL cards. We used the 2 meter GOTA station.

At the 2 meter GOTA station, students were invited to make voice contacts. Jim Cooper, W2JC, made stickers to put in the address section of our QSL card for children who made contacts on the GOTA station. The stickers had a space for the child’s name, and were very interested because they had never tapped a key before.

If there was no ham within range of the contact, Brad would ask each visiting student their name, write out the name in dits and dahs for the student to send, and Elmer them through it. Some of these students had learned about Morse code in the classroom, and were very interested because they had never tapped a key before.

Right next to the HF station, Captain Larry Wolff, WA2ALY, manned the Morse code table with a battery of code keys and oscillators. Larry would ask each visiting student to make a contact and write down the name in dits and dahs for the student to send, and Elmer them through it. Some of these students had learned about Morse code in the classroom, and were very interested because they had never tapped a key before.

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By the time the Science Fair ended at 2 PM, hundreds of students had been introduced to Amateur Radio, and 66 local school children and Boy Scouts had made contacts using the 2 meter GOTA station.

Day Two of the Operation

Heavy rain arrived overnight, and tapered to a light drizzle the following morning. The rain stopped shortly after our pop-up tent was in place, and the rest of the day was clear. In fact, the sun was so bright that we had to use a cardboard box to improvise shade for the computer screens.

More club members as well as friends and...
family were able to participate on Saturday. While waiting their turn to operate, many took advantage of the good weather to roam the park, visit the nearby Paterson Museum, and walk to the bridge over the falls to look at our operating position from a distance.

Brad Kerber, KD2GNY, surprised us by bringing his portable IC-7200 station and modified Buddipole™ antenna, so we were able to run two HF stations for several hours. Kids from two local Boy Scout troops operated the 2 meter GOTA station. A budding ham, Travis (whose grandmother, Kathy Adely, W2YSF, brought him to the event), was thrilled when his grandfather Pete Adely, W2HP, called him on 20 meters from home.

Success and Gratitude
All Fair Lawn Amateur Radio Club members agreed that our NPOTA activation had been a great success. We made over 600 contacts, including contacts with 19 countries (we had to order more QSL cards). Our contacts were shown in real time to visitors with pushpins on maps at our HF table. Thirty of our members, some with their families, plus hundreds of visitors attended the event. Even our non-ham neighbors in Fair Lawn accepted our invitation to visit the falls.

We must first thank Park Ranger Ilyse Goldman, for all of her help and support. Our event would not have been such an overwhelming success without her input and encouragement. We also thank Superintendent Darren Boch for his informative video, and the role he unknowingly played in our decision to approach Paterson Great Falls National Historical Park for our NPOTA event. He was also most kind and supportive. Additionally, we thank Park Ranger Ernie Hernandez and the other outstanding Park Rangers who were on duty both Friday and Saturday. We also thank the National Park Service for their support in this program. And, of course, thanks to all of the hams from the Fair Lawn Amateur Radio Club who enabled this event to run so efficiently.

Susan Turner Frank, W6SKT, worked in LA as an artist and model builder for 15 years until she moved to Fair Lawn, New Jersey with her husband Karl, W2KBF, in 1988. She earned a BA in Radio, TV, and Motion Pictures from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and an MA in English from Rutgers. She is currently working as a freelance writer. Her ham radio interests include operating Morse code on HF, and satellite operations. More recently, she has focused on introducing young people to ham radio through helping with GOTA stations at public events. Susan can be reached at stfrank3@verizon.net.