Tod Mitchell gives a glimpse into the oft-overlooked hobby, “ham” radio
by Joshua Theis

While the use of a radio may seem outdated in our in- clined world, amateur, or “ham,” radio for short, is an old-fashioned hobby that still retains a following of local “hams” across the U.S. and the world. Canby local Tod Mitchell began his amateur radio career as a ham back in 1978 when he was ten years old. Mitchell grew up with radio communication was often done through nontechnical forms of communication, such as Morse code, which Mitchell learned from an early age, and he remains quite fond of this method of communication. To this day, Mitchell communi- cates over the radio almost ex- clusively using Morse code, and it is something he has al- ways enjoyed. Despite it being a somewhat novel form of communication today, the usage of Morse code fits into a still very popular ham niche, one Mitchell is very much a part of. In some ways, according to Mitchell, Morse code can be one of the most effective forms of communication, as an example being hams’ fielding radi- os during medical emergencies such situations, such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Mitchell attributes his newfound interest in the hobby as a whole to the time he found a Morse code straight key, a tool for generating Morse code straight key, a tool for generating Morse code. When Mitchell first went out to obtain his ham operating license, Morse code was still a required skill for communica- tion via radio, and so he had to travel to the FCC office in the Twin Cities to take a practical exam to prove his proficiency in Morse code. Despite drop- ping the exam requirement, the use of Morse code in the ham community remains alive and well, according to Mitchell, a- tributing its popularity in part to today’s youth with slick, out- dated “game” items or trends of the last cen- tury such as texted interest in second player. Regulation of ham radio dates back to the twentieth cen- tury when wireless telegraphy technology began to take hold. With so many radio sig- nals floating around, the Federal Communications Commission (or the FCC) began to institute regulations as a way to police and other- wise clear out the excess inter- ference radio operators would have been experimenting. An example of how radio inter- ference would have been an issue during this time was the night of the sinking of the Tri- tonic, when radio operators ex- perienced interference when signalling for help. The FCC has since regulated the amateur radio service and determines what frequencies hams are al- lowed to operate on, what modes are allowed, and how much power hams are allowed to use. Two-way communica- tion is a requirement also set by the FCC, with some excep- tions. Amateur radio operators are also barred from using any forms of encryption when op- erating, and ham frequencies cannot be used for business purposes. Mitchell feels the title “amateur” radio operator can sometimes be misleading, as it connotes that hams are not skilled or accomplished as radio operators, when in real- ity, it denotes a distinction be- tween paid and unpaid radio operators. A number of ama- teur radio services, such as the Amateur Radio Emergency Services, or ARES, can pro- vide important back-up serv- ices during a crisis. During weather disasters, ARES is useful for finding help and welfare calls when cell lines are down and police and fire departments are overwhelmed. The service is also commonly used during events like parades and marathons.

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Every amateur "ham" radio operator, including local ham Todd Mitchell, has their own call sign. Not every ham is bold enough, however, to have their call sign also be on their license plate.

**EVERY HAM HAS A CALL SIGN**

**COMMUNICATION IS KEY**

Having practiced using Morse code for so long, amateur radio operator Todd Mitchell has collected a number of CW keys for his collection, including an old-fashioned Russian model (left).

**THE FCC requires by law that hams are to avoid interfering with appliances and electronics of their neighbors.** Mitchell noted that the ham community in general is quite good at self-policing, and he was not attracted to the unspoken code of conduct that existed when he first entered the ham community.

"It’s a fraternity, and you sym-

**Proper**

**EVERY HAM HAS A CALL SIGN**

"Every ham is entitled to a free pass on the air," said Mitchell. "But we treat one another with respect and obe-

**The**

**EVERY HAM HAS A CALL SIGN**

Mitchell continues to appro-

**Proper**

**EVERY HAM HAS A CALL SIGN**

"There’s always something new to learn," Mitchell said. “I’ve been in it for 42 years now, and I’m still doing new things. There’s always some-

**The**

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**PROOF OF CONTACT**

QSL cards may look a little bit like fancy postcards, but in reality, they function as physical proof of making contact with fellow hams across the globe. Mitchell is a long-

**A HAM’S SHACK**

Inside his radio operator’s "shack," Todd Mitchell has assembled several home radios and other important equipment for making contact with fellow hams across the globe. Mitchell is a long-time user of Morse code and makes nearly all of his contacts using it.

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