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Straight Key Night 2009

Sean Kutzko, KX9X

ARRL Contest Branch Manager, kx9x@arrl.org

I discovered the joys of AM DXing when I was 3 years old. By the time I was 6, I had talked my older brother out of his shortwave receiver kit, wrapped wire around my bedroom walls and started listening to the world. It wasn't long before I wasn't content to just *listen*; "how can I talk to these places?" I trotted on down to the library, asked the librarian for books on ham radio, and soon 621.384 was a weekly haunt of mine. Clearly this ham radio business was something I wanted to do, but in 1975 one had to learn Morse code to get a license. I was scared off by the requirement, and convinced myself I would be happy to just listen in.

When I was 13, unable to contain my desire to transmit any longer, I hunkered down with a Novice license study guide borrowed from the University of Illinois club station, W9YH. A couple of students — Tom Ask, AC9L and Fred "Fubar" Kleber, K9VV, most notably — helped me tremendously. I faithfully copied "The Battle of Gettysburg, the most important battle of the Civil War" and passed my 5 WPM code test. My license came in the mail on May 20, 1982.

Now it was time for the rubber to meet the road; as a Novice in 1982, you were only permitted to use Morse code. I started tentatively, making one or two QSOs a week. That soon turned into 3 or 4 QSOs a day, all with my Radio Shack straight key. While CW started off as a curiosity and was an obstacle to me for several years, it quickly became my voice for talking to people hundreds and thousands of miles away. As part of the last generation of kids that grew up without a computer in the home, CW was pure magic, and I still feel that way today.

Nothing So Fantastic

This magic is what Straight Key Night is all about. Yes, we can communicate more efficiently with other modes, but there is nothing as pure, nothing so fantastic in its simplicity as Morse code. Clearly, others agree with those sentiments; participation in SKN has doubled in just ten years, from 108 entries in 1999 to 235 entries this year. Total QSOs are up as well, from 1249 to 1897 in that same decade. Even with the FCC dropping Morse code as a licensing requirement,

2009 SKN Participants

AA4LR, AA4ZS, AB3AP, AB7MP, AB8FJ, AB9NZ, AC0BU, AE3A, AE3J, AE4MZ, AE5B, AE6PX, AE6RF, AF4MY, AJ4BP, DL2KDW, HP1AC, HP1DCP, HP1BF, JE4QGF, K0CDJ, K0CVN, K0LWV, K0ODF, K0ZK, K1LNL, K1INV, K1PDY, K1YA, K2CJ, K2HT, K2KEY, K2NPN, K2UY, K3BVQ, K3MD, K3NCO, K3PX, K3ROI, K3RSA, K3Y7 (NG7Z, op), K4BAI, K4CNW, K4DXV, K4EOR, K4HGX, K4IV, K4JK, K4NVJ, K4TRH, K4ZMR, K5BZH, K5DCM, K5ICW, K5MV, K5RLA, K5SOH, K6FFY, K6KQV, K6PBQ, K6WSC, K7SU, K7TUC, K8UC, K9AYB, K9ING, K9KEU, K9PMV, K9VKY, K9WWT, K9YKL, K9ZTV, KA0I, KA2SJK, KA7T, KB0ETU, KB1LZH, KB2KDV, KB5RXL, KB8M, KB8TXZ, KB9KEG, KC0EEP, KC0RSX, KC2ICA, KC2LMX, KC8WGA, KD5QHV, KD6WKY, KD8BXT, KE4RO, KE7POV, KF4IZE, KF8ZN, KG2OR, KH6OU, KI0KM, KI5JF, KI6ZX, KK5FX, KL8DX, KN4SA, KO6YG, KT3A, KW3U, N0BGT, N0EAX, N0JL, N0SS, N2BE, N2KZ, N2UC, N3CJM, N3MVX, N3NZ, N4IQ, N4QX, N4XE, N5BF, N5BNU, N5DY, N5LH, N5LUL, N5NT, N5VWN, N6NAX, N7TOD, N8GM, N8GU, N8K, N8QE, N8XMS, N9AKF, N9NM, ND6S, NF8M, NG2T, NJ3K, NM0L, NN0B, NN7A, NP3CW, N914Q, OH3WD, ON6ZJ, VA3RKM, VE7BGP, VE7NI, VO1NA, W0AAA, W0ESE, W0FBI7, W0IS, W0KU, W0NOV, W1DUW, W1IVB, W1OH, W1PID, W1RO, W1TPB, W1TS, W1WIU, W2LG, W2LID, W2OBJ, W3CEI, W3OE, W3GK, W4CYF, W4RK, W4STX, W4UR, W4VAB, W4YD, W4YE, W4YOK, W5AKU, W5ESE, W5IA, W5QLF, W5XW, W6LX, W6TUR, W6VNR, W7GVE, W7LNG, W8FDV, W8IO, W9ILF, WA0VOY, WA1AB, WA1CFX, WA2BSW, WA2JSG, WA2QQF, WA4ONV, WA5AU, WA5MUF, WA6BXV, WA7GSN, WA7OET, WA7YAZ, WA8OKR, WA8TOX, WA9CFK, WA9QWX, WA9ZBW, WA9ZJI, WB0B, WB2LEB, WB2LHP, WB2MIC, WB2Y, WB3CQD, WB5NMZ, WB6CGJ, WB6IYM, WB6SCA, WB6SSW, WB7O, WB8LZG, WB8SJE, WB9CIS, WB9DLC, WB9HFK, WB9MII, WD5FOI, WD8NHA, WD8RIF, WF5W, W16I, WR9H, WW3QB, WW6D, K2WY, K6KPH, N3IJR, W5ZR, K7HZ, W6BNB, WB6SSW, K5ECI, K4BKD

participation in CW contests and operating events like SKN continues to rise. The reports of the death of CW, much like that of Mark Twain, are greatly exaggerated.

Eighteen-hundred ninety-seven contacts may not seem like many if you are a hard-core, seasoned contester. Indeed, many a CW contester could make that many QSOs in a DX contest by themselves in a single weekend. Nevertheless, consider that SKN is not about the quantity of contacts, it is about the quality of the contacts completed and encouraging the art of the "rag chew," something many newcomers to the hobby may not have experienced.

Each year, participants are invited to "vote" for the most interesting QSO they either had or heard during SKN. This year we had six different calls tying for "Most Interesting QSO." Congratulations to Kelly, K7SU, John, N2BE, Ed, W7GVE, Bob, K2WI, the operators at K6KPH, and John, K4BAI, for being recognized in this category. Ninety-five operators received at least one vote for Most Interesting QSO.

Anyone who has operated a lot of CW knows that that an individual's "fist" can be as distinctive as his or her voice on phone transmissions. It takes a lot of practice and patience to send *good* CW with a hand key. In 2009, 10 different individuals were tied with nominations for "Best Fist." It is a pleasure to see Karl, N3IJR; Branan, W5ZR; Jim, K7HZ; Bob, W6BNB; Lee, WB6SSW; Ed, W7GVE; Bill, K0CDJ; Bill, K5ECI; Peter, K4BKD, and Jerry, WA6BXV, identified by their fellow participants for this honor. A total of 119 participants received at least one vote for Best Fist.

It is hard to capture the fun of SKN in a brief article. That is why it is one of the more popular items in the ARRL Contest Online Soapbox. Do not forget to tour the entries posted at www.arrl.org/contests/soapbox. You will find that SKN appeals to a wide range of interests and elicits the nostalgic ties to our heritage in this wonderful hobby. This once-a-year event always happens on January 1. So why not take some time between football, gatherings of family and friends, and the modern world next year and spend some time reconnecting... You will not be disappointed.



Armed with a refurbished Atwater Kent speaker for ambiance, Tom Hart, AD1B of Dedham, Massachusetts used his trusty J. H. Bunnell flameproof key with 20 W on 80 meters in the 2009 SKN.