

Second Century



The Genealogy of Amateur Radio

What does that Norman Rockwellian image of amateur radio look like in your mind? Is it a picture, taken many years ago, in black and white, of you and a parent or grandparent at a desk with your first radio? Mine is a little like that.

My father introduced me to amateur radio, encouraging me to learn about radio by listening first, for stations in all 50 states, before I moved on to get my Novice license. The picture in my mind is of my dad and me, sitting on the floor with an open book, components neatly organized around a carefully drilled metal box, as we assembled a two-tube transmitter for 40 and 80 meters. I still have my dad and that transmitter in my life today, but that portrait-like moment is the defining image of the generations that form my life — my family tree — in amateur radio.

Ever since I was licensed there has been talk of the “graying” of amateur radio. The elders in my local Fair Lawn Amateur Radio Club, as well as my high school advisor, were all gray. But that was just a moment in time during the late 1970s. Today, amateur radio really is at a place where those who came into the hobby during a growth spurt in the 1950s have all but left us, and those of us in the second growth spurt of the 1970s are reaching, or are in, our retirement years. So what is the future of amateur radio? What will our family tree of generations of hams look like in 20 years?

Regrettably, as a community, we allowed the internet and smartphones to interpose themselves between us and our young people — our next generation. We are now well into the second generation of young people who did not grow up with amateur radio in their schools. The advisors have retired, and the stations have been dismantled for other uses. We’ve allowed the simple argument that “I can talk anywhere in the world on my phone” to be an acceptable excuse for why young people don’t need to pursue an interest in amateur radio. It isn’t.

This is the moment where we must double, re-double, and double again our efforts to insert radio communications into the learning environment with young people. Amateur radio was STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) before it became a buzzword. In tenth grade, I stayed after school for a week to learn logarithms while studying for my Advanced exam because I wanted to — I needed to — to understand the theory to pass my exam. Who does that today? Who has the inspiration to go beyond the curriculum and the largely programmed day young people live as they progress through their school years? ARRL must become a force in the STEM space to take what we know, what we can do, and who we know to create new capabilities, build new muscles, in this space.

We’ve been very successful in getting to know and work with the college community via our Collegiate Amateur Radio Program (CARP). Through monthly Zoom calls with college and university students and advisors across the country, we see and understand the attitudes of today’s college community and create opportunities for amateur radio to find a place within their culture. You may have heard me speak of the technology-induced ADD most people, especially young people, suffer from today. There are hundreds of interruptions a day from their smartphone or smartwatch from one or more members of the various groups they belong to, with questions, comments, observations, updates, and the like. How do you neatly fit into, and take an important place within, a mind that is undergoing constant interruption and being connected 24 hours a day?

The answer is somewhere within how, for generations, families have stayed together and thrived. We must take this moment, this opportunity, to define how we can and will make amateur radio more relatable to the younger generations as the older generations continue to enjoy the connectedness our community offers. Globally.

As I have said many times, clubs are a critical part of this strategy. Invite the younger or youngest members of your club to be the ambassadors to new hams, irrespective of their age. Ensure that there are interesting activities such as kit night, or POTA, or satellites, or digital voice and data activities to capture that important mindshare of these new hams. We will be doing our part looking to move more training, better curriculum options, and hands-on exercises into classrooms across the country to regain that relationship we once had, creating life-defining moments with today’s young hams.

Be radio active! Learn a new capability of amateur radio. Be a connector! Teach that new capability to others! And think about how you will fit into that genealogy — that family tree — of future hams to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David A. Minster', with the call sign 'NA2AA' written in blue ink to the right.

David A. Minster, NA2AA
Chief Executive Officer