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Embracing the Challenges of the Second Century

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For 3½ decades, this column has carried the thoughtful and erudite writing of my colleague and predecessor, David Sumner, K1ZZ. And in that considerable body of work — nearly half a thousand individual essays — is contained insight on nearly every important topic in Amateur Radio throughout his long career. His essays are valuable, individually in their own right; but taken together, they also inform the historical record. Someday we ought to compile the most important in a single volume, and perhaps someday we will.

The dominant note of our Second Century is *complexity*. If nothing else, over the past 50 years, I have acquired a fulsome appreciation of our community’s sheer complexity. Amateur Radio embraces a wide range of interests, often even competing interests. Complexity has increased in the last decade or so, with the continuous introduction of new technology, new modes of communication, and a growing diversity of participants. Some enjoy Amateur Radio in its most familiar, traditional form of microphone, key, and headphones. Others favor a keyboard and screen. There are half-a-hundred digital modes and their variants in operation today. More are added every year, and the only limits imposed on us are the limits of our own imagination and ingenuity. So I urge you: be ingenious!

Amateur Radio enriches our lives, our careers, our families, and our communities. It is an enormously, personally satisfying pursuit: at once intellectually satisfying and sometimes even athletically challenging (if you’ve ever climbed a tower, you know what I mean).

Social and fraternal, and yet at the same time allowing for intense, single-minded competition, amateurs are found ascending from the Earth in hot air balloons, gliding to the Earth with parachutes, or circling the Earth in space stations. Hams serve their communities in times of need, and Amateur Radio clubs and organizations form an integral part of the nation’s social capital. The science and math that underpin our activities is often the spark that ignites the imagination of a young person and propels him or her to a rewarding career in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), or a totally unrelated career. It may also satisfy the curiosity of an older individual who has finally acquired the time and resources to devote to a new and demanding avocation. Hams embrace at once the rigor of our discipline and a generosity of spirit. For this Second Century: be generous.

Sometimes it seems that all we have in common are the licenses we hang on our walls or carry in our pockets, but we share a common DNA. All of us, each of us, are truly the legitimate heirs of Morse, Marconi, and Maxim. I urge you: be open to new ideas, be tolerant, be inclusive.

The Second Century is not without its challenges. For the American Radio Relay League, the most daunting task is balancing and managing the diversity of interests now and hereafter comprising our community. For my part, our overarching mission is serving all of our various members. And serve we shall. We will do so by investing in a renewed infrastructure that forms the backbone of everything we do from membership services to publishing, emergency services, public service, education, technology, spectrum defense, and radiosport. We will seek at every turn to increase the value proposition of ARRL membership.

Lastly, we face the challenge of transitioning an entire generation. With one generation ascending and another falling back, we must proactively open our community to talented, younger newcomers. Perhaps the first decade of the Second Century ought to be called the decade of mentorship. In our crowded, hectic, continuously evolving society, many parents struggle mightily merely to provide for their children, leaving little time for anything else. There is no influence more powerful on the life of a young person — for good or otherwise — than the authentic attention of an adult. Nearly everything good that ever happened to me in my career resulted from my contact with members of the Amateur Radio community. Although almost imperceptible at times, it was years before I came to realize the positive influence, the gentle hand on my back propelling me forward. And mentorship doesn’t have to end with licensing and introductions. It can extend to a life-long mentorship and assistance with so many of life’s knotty, seemingly intractable problems like the proper choice of school, finding internships, and dispensing career advice. You are wise in the ways of the world. Share that wisdom.

And if you are willing to do all of that, if you are willing to be a good steward of Maxim’s enduring legacy, don’t follow me: lead *with* me, together, into the Second Century. That would be a legacy that the Old Man would approve.