

Flea Market Madness! A Beginner's Guide to Buying and Selling

Take a trade show, a family reunion, a factory outlet mall, a multifamily garage sale, and spring break at Daytona Beach.... Add a liberal dose of ham radio and computers.... And you've got a modern hamfest. Enjoy. Here's how!

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Like everything that incorporates technology, ham radio is experiencing its share of changes. Radios are smaller and have features we only dreamed of a mere decade ago. Sunspot cycles come and go (thankfully, the present cycle is perking up!), and a new crop of ham operators is making its mark on the hobby. To those with tunnel vision, the sky might seem to be falling. But change is one of the few constants in the universe, and no matter how the technological details ebb and flow, some aspects of our hobby remain the same.

Camaraderie, for example, is still an Amateur Radio hallmark. So is the tendency to gather for face-to-face meetings and fun—enhanced, perhaps, by ham radio's geographic diversity. The get-togethers detailed here are called hamfests by some, flea markets by others, and swapmeets by a few. The names are interchangeable. If you're a newcomer to the hobby, it's possible that you've never participated in one of these age-old Amateur Radio get-togethers. If so, you're in for a pleasant surprise. Why not pay a visit to your local hamfest? You're sure to have a good time, and you'll probably come away with a few more friends, a few new treasures and a slightly thinner pocketbook. In this article you'll learn some hamfest lore, how to find hamfests in your area, and how to successfully buy and sell Amateur Radio (and related) gear at these amazing ham radio get-togethers.



Hamfest flea markets are social events where you're likely to run into almost anyone. Photo courtesy of Rick Lindquist, N1RL.

Hamfests—What's in it for Me?

Where can you find hundreds (sometimes thousands) of fellow hams, tons of bargain-priced radio and computer gear (including hard-to-find components and electronic assemblies), interesting forums and lectures, ham radio exams, and tasty grilled bratwurst sandwiches? Hamfests, of course. The exact mix of the things you're likely to find depends a lot on the kind of hamfest you're attending, its size, and to some extent, the region of the country.

Large multiday hamfests such as the annual Dayton Hamvention, or the many ARRL Division Conventions, attract thousands of hobbyists. Small regional or local hamfests may draw only a hundred. At Dayton, you'll find more than a dozen specialized forums; at a small hamfest in northern Minnesota, you probably won't find any. You will have fun, however, at both extremes.

Nearly every hamfest has a swapfest or flea market where individuals and commercial dealers hawk their wares. Generally, flea markets on both coasts will have more exotic hardware such as microwave assemblies and transistors, but prices overall will tend to be higher. Smaller Midwestern hamfests may not offer as much high-tech stuff, but you'll usually find a surplus of good, used HF gear. A transceiver that will fetch \$700 in New England might sell for \$500 in Iowa.

Many hamfests and flea markets—much to the chagrin of some—are piled high with computer stuff, from obsolete parts to new systems. Computer technology is forever merged with Amateur Radio, so worrying about the number of computer vendors at hamfests is a moot point. Why not take a look at everything?



CW keys, old and new. So many keys, so little time! Photo courtesy of Rick Lindquist, N1RL.

When and Where?

Information on upcoming hamfests is available from several sources. Members of your local ham club will probably be "in the know." Hamfests tend to be annual events, publicized well in advance. Check your club's newsletter, packet BBS or Web page for announcements.

Nationally, hundreds of hamfests and Amateur Radio events are listed in the "**Hamfest Calendar**" and "**Coming Conventions**" sections in *QST*. Listings usually appear a month or two in advance. You can browse *QST*'s hamfest listings electronically at <http://www.arri.org/hamfests.html>.

When it comes to locations, you're likely to find hamfests held at hotels, schools, parks, National Guard armories, fairgrounds, or civic centers. Organizers usually host events at identifiable and accessible locations (although sometimes you'll wonder!).

Tips for Smart Shoppers

Because we think of hams as friends, it's difficult to think that we could never run into a bum deal at a hamfest. After all, these people are fellow hams! Although most individuals and commercial outlets selling hamfest gear are on the level, smart shopping and a healthy dose of preventive caution will help you avoid unwelcome surprises.

Here are a few tips for buying used radio or computer gear at hamfests:

- Budget your money. If you're at all typical, you don't have an unlimited budget for ham radio acquisitions. For some, going to a hamfest is like going to the candy store. If you're not careful, you'll go home with plenty of "candy" and no mortgage money. That's why it's a good idea to plan your spending in advance. Perhaps you can bring along a few pieces of gear to sell or swap—just in case you find a big-ticket item you just "have to have."

- Negotiating skills are helpful. If your expectation of ham radio flea markets is reminiscent of open-air Byzantine street markets, then you'll probably do just fine. Haggling over the price of used gear or components—in a friendly and generally reasonable manner—is appropriate and expected. Don't take the negotiating stage too far, however. If someone is selling a \$5000 transceiver for \$50, some out-of-control hamfest shopper will, no doubt, offer \$45.

- Arrive early or stay late. The best hamfest deals are usually made in the first and last hours of each event. Getting to the hamfest early will allow you to snap up some of the best merchandise. If you wait too long, your favorite stuff may be all gone. Alternately, if you play the waiting game, sellers will be quick to discount stuff that did not sell previously.

- Always test expensive gear. If you're buying a major item such as a transceiver or receiver, make sure you're able to plug the thing in somewhere to see if it works. As mentioned previously, most sellers represent their merchandise accurately, but it never hurts to power up a potential acquisition.

- Returns? In a similar vein, make sure you get the seller's name, address and phone number—just in case. Although you don't expect to have major problems with a piece of gear you've thoroughly inspected and casually tested, it never hurts to be prepared. If the seller is truly compassionate, you may be able to negotiate a return policy. It never hurts to try!



As buyer or seller, never be afraid to negotiate. The posted price is almost never the final price!

Out With the Old and in With the New

If you're looking to upgrade your station equipment or accessories and you don't have tons of extra cash, why not take advantage of "flea market fever" by selling your existing gear at a hamfest to finance all or part of your new setup?

Whether you're a total greenhorn when it comes to hamfest salesmanship, or a somewhat seasoned veteran, the following tips will help you make the most of what is sometimes an intimidating experience: Selling stuff to other humans (well, hams!) face to face. Everyone wants a good deal (that's why they buy gear at hamfests in the first place!)—but you, the seller, need to make out okay, too. A win-win scenario is what you're looking for.

Tricks of the Trade

Selling ham gear for premium prices usually involves more than simply driving a hard bargain. Here's how to turn an average hamfest into an excellent sales experience:

- Appearance. That means, you, your table and your gear! Think of your hamfest table as a storefront. If you walked into

your local Wal-Mart and found dirty, crusty merchandise strewn across the aisles and greasy-haired employees clothed in ripped up overalls, you'd probably turn around and walk out. Everyone feels comfortable shopping at Wal-Mart because the store is clean and brightly lit, the employees are neat, clean and friendly, and so on. The moral of this story? Make your hamfest table look like "the Wal-Mart table!" Clean up your gear, display it neatly and make index card signs for big-ticket items, listing the details and the price. Dress casually and presentably.

- Setup and location. Hamfests are like trade shows in the sense that the location of your table can sometimes make a difference in the number of potential customers who walk by. This is more important for large events, where you don't want to get stuck in some out-of-the-way corner or hallway with limited visibility and traffic.

Having ac or dc power available at your table can often help you make sales. Most hamfest buyers are afraid of buying a rig that has problems or doesn't work as claimed. Being able to demonstrate gear on the spot can be a big benefit. In addition, chattering radios and other gadgets in operation at your table attract more shoppers.

- Realistic pricing. This is a biggie! It's a hamfest, folks! Don't price your used (and sometimes abused) gear as though you were suddenly promoted to sales manager for Neiman Marcus! Remember the win-win scenario? Sentimental attachment doesn't promote sales. Be reasonable—that's how to sell stuff at hamfests.

- Talk it over. Many flea market attendees are tire kickers, but with a little salesmanship, many a tire kicker has been "persuaded" to take home merchandise. People like to joke, laugh and have fun (even hams!), so be sure to blurt something out when you catch someone peeking at the stuff on your table. This breaks the ice and sets the stage for friendly chatter—and potential sales.

- Negotiating. Nearly every flea market price is at least somewhat negotiable. People will ask you to sell your stuff for less than your asking price, they'll ask you for "volume discounts," and they'll ask you to accept trades.

You should at least be comfortable in jockeying your prices a bit, and if you can take a trade, that's just fine. It's your show, but by being flexible you'll be more successful. A 10 to 15% reduction in price seems about right. Anything more turns haggling into railroading! Don't wait for your customers to start haggling—you can get the ball rolling by offering a deal of your own. It works!

- Terms and guarantees. To ease buyers' fears of getting ripped off, represent your gear honestly and offer reasonable terms. Some sellers offer a five-day money-back guarantee, especially for big-ticket items, holding onto a customer's payment to make sure he or she is happy with the deal. Why would you want an unhappy ham customer (friend), anyway?

- Miscellaneous tips. (1) Arrive early! Many of your best sales will be to other sellers who relish the opportunity to examine everyone's stuff before the masses get through the gates. If you set up as early as possible, you won't have to try to sell and set up at the same time, and you'll be free to search for your own goodies to buy! (2) Be prepared for weather changes if your event is outdoors. (3) Bring a friend or helper so you're not tied to your table for the whole show. (4) Bring lots of change and dollar bills. (5) Accept local checks only, or checks from buyers you know personally.



You'll find used transceivers in abundance, but make your choices carefully. Photo courtesy of Rick Lindquist, N1RL.

Good Luck!

Hamfests are a wonderful part of Amateur Radio. They will sustain you through thick and thin. They will open doors to new pursuits. And they will expose you to interesting and handy-to-know friends and fellow hams. If you've never attended, get busy! If you live near a large metropolitan area, you can find at least one nearby hamfest almost every weekend. If you're in a more remote area, you'll have to plan ahead. Whatever it takes, you owe it to yourself to see what it's all about. You'll see me there, pawing through the weird stuff under the tables....

The author, a ham since age 13, was a *QST* editor from 1988 through 1994. During his time in New England's "hamfest alley," Kirk dragged home dozens of "unbelievable" flea market finds. He now lives in Minnesota's lake country where he works as a technical writing/technical marketing consultant and freelance writer. He's a regular contributor to *QST*.

Buying Your First HF Rig at a Hamfest

Choosing your first rig can be confusing! The vast array of radios—new and used—is bewildering at best. Should you buy a brand-new whiz-bang rig with all the bells and whistles? Or perhaps a midrange rig in that cozy 4 to 8-year-old span where gear is still "awesome enough," yet much more affordable? You could also buy a brand new "beginner's rig," a relatively affordable modern radio that sports only the most essential functions. Or, if your budget is really tight, you could get lucky and come up with a well-cared-for older rig from the 1970s through the mid-1980s.

There are additional considerations. Do you even want a transceiver? Or will a separate transmitter-receiver pair be more to your liking? Are tubes okay, or do you need "solid state all the way"? Will the wall socket always power your rig, or is dc power desirable?

And what about size? Big, small or in between? Warranty? Service? It's not always an easy choice!

Radio Buying Tips

- Think about what you'll actually do with your shiny new (or lovingly used) radio. Analyze your interests, the bands you'll be using, the modes you'll be using, the power output you require (or can afford), and so on. If you'll always use SSB, buying a rig with an expensive built-in CW filter may be a waste of time and money.
- Shield yourself from the glare of hundreds of shiny, beckoning pushbuttons and gizmo switches. "Creeping feature-itis" can strike anyone, anywhere! Your first rig won't be your last, so go easy until you've had a chance to explore your new hobby a bit further. Then, with some experience under your belt, go for the gusto if you need more radio.
- Before trekking to the nearest hamfest, check out the "Product Review" column in *QST*. Nearly every mainstream radio made since the late 1960s has been reviewed there. You'll also get performance specs, features, a look at the controls and connectors—the whole nine yards. The League's *Radio Buyer's Sourcebooks*, Volumes 1 (1981-1991) and 2 (1991-1993), available from your local Amateur Radio dealer or from the ARRL, save you the trouble of looking through all those back issues. Each features the most popular rigs and accessories reviewed in *QST* over the years.
- Buying from a dealer—whether the rig's new or used—can be safer than buying from an individual. In addition to hardware, dealers offer information, service and a bit of security. Make sure the dealer you choose has a reasonable return period (a modest restocking fee is acceptable), and try to purchase your rig with a credit card, if possible. You'll be protected if the rig turns out to be a lemon.

Used Rigs to Consider

If you've decided to buy a used rig (for whatever reason), the radios listed here (far from comprehensive) are as affordable as any you'll find, work well on today's crowded bands, and can handle most specialty modes (check carefully to be sure they'll meet your needs):

- ICOM: Models IC-701, IC-720, IC-730, IC-740, IC-745 and IC-751(A). Prices range from \$250 for the IC-701 to about \$600 for the IC-751 or IC-751(A). They're all solid state and have many built-in features.
- Kenwood: Models TS-120, TS-130, TS-140, TS-180 and TS-430. Prices range from \$300 to \$600. They're all solid state

and have many built-in features. Kenwood rigs with at least one tube: Models TS-520, TS-530 and TS-820. These are older and may require some "tweaking".

- Ten-Tec: Models 540, 544, Argosy, Argonaut (QRP, 5-W output), Omni series, Century 21 and 22 (Morse code only) and the Scout (compact beginner's radio; frequency limited, but a nice performer). Ten-Tec radios all are solid state, made in the United States and feature smooth, full break-in CW keying. Prices range from \$100 to \$500.

- Yaesu: Models FT-107, FT-301, FT-707, FT-980 and FT-747. All solid state. Tube models: the popular FT-101 series (older, may need "tweaking"), FT-102 and FT-901. Prices: \$200-\$700.

- Older rigs: These tube-type radios still can offer good performance—if they're working properly—although some operating flexibility is sacrificed. Look for Drake's TR-4 transceiver and the T4/R4 series transmitter-receiver combos, Heathkit's HW and SB series (will probably need "fixing") and Henry Radio's Tempo One and Tempo 2020 (both made by Yaesu and imported by Henry Radio), among others.—*NT0Z*