

Radio buffs enjoy hamming it up with network of friends

By Eric Johnson
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HANNIBAL, Mo. — Carol Waddell opens his window to the world with the flick of a finger, tuning a radio dial until he hears a distant voice.

The voice identifies itself by call letters and location while Waddell sits motionless in a worn swivel chair. He's listening intently to a woman broadcasting from the deck of a Navy submarine.

Waddell says he used to fly airplanes for fun. Now, his sole hobby is sailing through the airwaves as an amateur radio operator.

And in the Hannibal area, Waddell has good company. He's one of 50 members of the Hannibal Amateur Radio Club Inc., one of the oldest radio clubs in Missouri.

Club members come from all walks of life. Waddell, a retired electronics specialist, is one of several senior members, but the ranks also include teens and middle-aged women.

Amateur radio buffs, or hams, have a common interest in learning about and tinkering with sophisticated electronic gear. A member's "ham shack" is stocked with broadcasting and receiving equipment that can cost thousands of dollars.

But hams also share an interest in meeting people — fellow hams who live on the other side of the globe or just across the river. And they're proud to serve as an auxiliary communications network for police, civil defense and other emergency agencies.

No one knows the age of the Hannibal club, whose members hail from as far as Fowler, Ill., and Mexico, Mo. Waddell built his first radio set and joined in 1935, but he says the club "has been around a lot longer than that."

The club's call letters — W0KEM — were selected to honor a deceased Missouri lawmaker, U.S. Sen. James Kem. Each member has call letters of their own.

Quincy resident Don Schutjer is president and a 12-year veteran of the club. He also belongs to the Quincy-based Western Illinois Amateur Radio Club and the Quincy Area Repeater Group.

Schutjer said he "finds it intriguing and enjoyable" to visit with strangers on the radio. While some of the long-distance messages "are just rag-chewing," he said, there's a camaraderie among the ham community that transcends the spoken word.

Club member Tony Gilliland says he's driven by the excitement of meeting people. "You never know who



Carol Waddell and Tony Gilliland send a message via international code in Waddell's ham shack.

you're going to talk to," he said. "It could be a senator, a doctor, lawyer or a trucker out in Kentucky."

Gilliland uses a den-based radio and a portable radio in his truck to stay close to friends. A "re-

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peater" station and 180-foot tower on Oak Street allows mobile club members to communicate with each other, even if they're 50 miles away.

Ham operators, who don't like to be confused with citizens-band operators, note there's more to their hobby than microphones and the gift of gab. They must study electronics and earn an operating license from the Federal Communications Commission; club members sponsor classes in Hannibal to help amateurs obtain licenses.

Knowledge of telegraphy's "international code" — an adaptation of Morse code — separates the experienced hams from the casual operators. Waddell says he prefers the challenge of communicating in the code, which hams call "CW."

club member Lou Gordon's niche is competition. An elaborate ham shack allows Gordon to enter and often win global contests for gathering as many signals as possible in a given period of time.

Club member Dan Creech is in charge of the club's civil defense link. In an emergency, the hams would be mobilized to help officials. Members stay prepared by testing equipment with weekly roll calls and annual "field days" that involve hams across the country.

But for most ham operators, the hobby's magic comes from sharing simple messages with a world of friends.

Gilliland says he's enjoyed communicating with famous men like Sen. Barry Goldwater and disabled people whose lives center around their radios. "I've met an awful lot of people," he said, "and it's really fun."