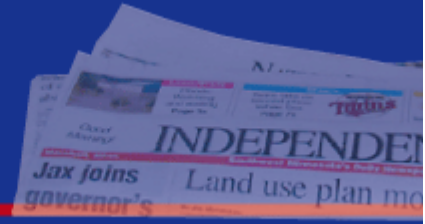


# INDEPENDENT

Southwestern Minnesota's Daily Newspaper



## Tuned In

Amateur, or ham radio, is both a hobby and an important community service for area operators

By Deb Gau [dgau@marshallindependent.com](mailto:dgau@marshallindependent.com)

Sometimes it starts with curiosity, sometimes with fun. But no matter how you get introduced to amateur radio, area enthusiasts say, it's a hobby that sticks with you.

"It's just kind of neat, how the signal goes from one person to the other," said Dan Starkenburg, an amateur radio operator from Marshall. Starkenburg was introduced to CB radio, and later amateur, or ham radio, through a college roommate.

Cal Nielsen of Tyler said his first experiences with ham radio got him into a little trouble as a youth. "Me and the superintendent's son put an antenna on the smokestack of the school, and we would talk back and forth," Nielsen said. Eventually, they were told to stop because the signal was interfering with the P.A. system at Danebod Church. But Nielsen has never stopped pursuing amateur, or ham radio, as a hobby.

There are a growing number of people in southwest Minnesota applying for amateur radio operating licenses, area operators said. It's partly for fun, but also because ham radio has practical uses for emergencies.

"Amateur radio can go across town, or around the world," said Kevin Haney, a Murray County ham radio operator.

In recent years, there have been efforts to make amateur radios available in area hospitals, and there are also local volunteer organizations, like the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES), that assist with county emergency communications. Haney, Starkenburg and Weinrebe are all members of their county ARES groups.



Photo by Deb Gau

Des Weinrebe and her father Arl demonstrate some of the amateur radio equipment they use at their home in Avoca. The walls of the "Ham Shack," as the Weinrebes call it, are covered in area maps and reference materials.

"I've found a lot of people, myself included, will use cell phones in an emergency," Haney said.

But cell phone networks can easily overload in an emergency situation. Ham radios don't need the same infrastructure as cell phones, Haney said, and if necessary they can operate on battery power

Starkenburg said amateur radio communication was used in the search for Brandon Swanson and during this spring's flooding in the Fargo-Moorhead area.

Haney said interest in ham radio is growing in Murray County, mainly through classes offered by local operators like Randy Donahue, the chief deputy of the Murray County Sheriff's Department.

"He's a radio nut," Nielsen said of Donahue.

Starkenburg said there about 53 licensed ham radio operators in Lyon County, with about 30 in Marshall. Recently, there have been a few more people who have gotten their operating licenses and radio callsigns in Lyon County.

Nielsen said he knew several ham radio operators in Tyler, but not all of them were active. Of course, even with the practical uses of ham radio, many operators are also in it for the fun. Weinrebe said he started out getting a license to operate the radio at the Murray County Hospital in Slayton, and now he has a whole room in his Avoca home dedicated to radio.

"I'd say we're pretty dedicated," said Weinrebe's daughter Des Weinrebe. She caught the bug from her dad.

"I think I picked up the book out of sheer boredom," she said, and decided to try for an operating license. "In three months, I had the highest license you could get."

Des said she preferred the technical side of amateur radio, "like helping other people program their radios." But Arl Weinrebe said he liked talking to other people.

"The best was getting a call from a guy in Russia on only 65 watts of power," Weinrebe said. Usually, international communications take a lot more power to travel thousands of miles. "Once I got someone from Cape Cod. That was kind of unique, because he was a soldier who had just gotten back from Iraq, and he had really missed the radio."

One common event for radio operators is participating in nets. A net is like a formal roll call for operators on a specific frequency, Weinrebe explained. Nets are also a chance to check for technical problems, and there's usually some group discussion involved, too.

"A lot of (radio) clubs just find ways to help out around the community," Starkenburg said, like providing traffic control at parades or other events. "It kind of gives us an opportunity to show what we've learned."

Amateur radio is also a regular presence at the Murray County Fair for weather and other communications, Weinrebe said. Scouting events can also draw a lot of interest in ham radio.

"We were with the Boy Scouts for what they called the Jamboree On the Air," Nielsen said. He wasn't sure exactly how many Scouts he spoke to, but "I talked from 9 a.m. until 2:30."

Talking and socializing with other hams from around the world is another of the fun parts of being an operator, Nielsen said. He's even gotten transmissions from space. Several American astronauts are ham radio operators, Nielsen said, and sometimes they speak live from the Space Shuttle via satellite radio.

"They'll tell about their mission, and give descriptions of what they're doing," Nielsen said.

One of the drawbacks of ham radio as a hobby might be purchasing equipment, Nielsen said. However, there are inexpensive radio models available.

"You can get a \$150 car radio," or a handheld radio, Starkenburg said. More information about amateur radio and becoming a licensed operator is available at Amateur Radio Relay League's Web site, [www.ARRL.org](http://www.ARRL.org).