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Lamorinda 'Hams' Have a Field Day

By Cathy Dausman



Local radio enthusiasts gear up for Field Day.
Photo Cathy Dausman

while others were little more than meters-long lengths of wire suspended in the tree tops. Treetop antennas were placed with the help of an air cannon and lightweight drone.

Each antenna was designed to capture different radio frequencies in the high- and very-high bands. Under ideal conditions this setup would allow the operators to make voice, digital or even old-fashioned Morse code contact with other amateur contestants from Alaska to British Columbia and Hawaii, and from Minnesota to Arizona and Florida using only a small generator or 12-volt battery for power.

And make contact they did, beginning at 11 a.m. local time. The contest begins simultaneously across North America and runs for 24 hours, although LARIG elected to limit their participation to Saturday only. For contest purposes, communication with other stations was limited to exchanging call sign IDs, station class and location.

"CQ, CQ (short for "I seek you"), Field Day, this is K-6-O-R-I (the LARIG club call sign)." This standard call went out from every radio operator. When a station responded, the other group's information was logged, and K6ORI responded with "we are three-alpha (operating three radio bands on alternative power), East Bay."

On it went - long past lunch, in the heat of the day, in the acquisition and disappearance of signal strength across the bands. Field Day is a contest, yes, but it also serves as an opportunity for Lamorinda amateurs who volunteer as emergency radio communicators in Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda to hone their skills.

Gene Gottfried of Orinda is a longtime experienced radio operator. He is known as an "Elmer," or mentor in amateur radio parlance.

"I first became involved in emergency preparedness in 1987 in connection with our Neighborhood Watch program," he said. "Ham radio seemed to be the best way to establish emergency communications, and I got my first license in 1996."

Friends often meet in the park to enjoy conversation and refreshments, especially during summer, but at least one group at Moraga Commons Park was there June 25 with a second agenda. Members of the Lamorinda Area Radio Interest Group met to participate in the American Radio Relay League's nationwide Field Day.

ARRL says Field Day, held the fourth full weekend in June, is the most popular annual on-the-air event in the U.S. and Canada; 2016 marked its 102nd year.

Twelve LARIG members joined more than 35,000 federally licensed radio amateurs nationwide for the event. The amateurs, also known as "hams," began antenna placement and gear assembly at 7 a.m. Some antennas resembled a larger version of those formerly used for residential rooftop TV reception,

"Field Day gets us out of the house and into the field with whatever equipment we can use that is run from batteries or portable generators," explained LARIG member Fred Lothrop of Lafayette. He said the group made contact with more than 60 stations across the U.S. Lothrop devoted his day to mentoring new member Tony Angelo of Moraga.

"The lesson was long, several hours, but (Angelo's) interest never flagged and we (now) have a candidate emergency operator for next year or when the real emergency need arises," Lothrop said.

"I had a blast," said Angelo. "It's really amazing that with radios and wires, plus a little red generator and antennas that fit in a car trunk, you can talk to people from Seattle to Los Angeles while sitting on a little patch of grass in Moraga. What a fun way to learn how radios work their magic."

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