

W1HYN

IN SOUTH HADLEY



Jeffrey Barna has been a letter carrier for only four years, but he has been communicating with people all over the world for much longer. Barna's hobby is amateur radio, also known as "ham radio." Enthusiasts like Barna call themselves "hams."

"As a child, I was always into radio," Barna, a carrier technician and member of Western Massachusetts Branch 46, said. "I would play disk jockey." He used wireless intercoms and walkie-talkies to pretend he was on the radio. He liked to listen to shortwave and AM radio broadcasts, which can travel from long distances. When the movie "Smoky and the Bandit" made CB radio popular, he communicated with other radio users that way.

Barna later worked as a real disc jockey on his college radio station at Westfield State University in Westfield, MA, and then for commercial station WARE-AM in Ware, MA. After working at an insurance company for years, he

joined the Postal Service as a city carrier assistant (CCA) in 2018, becoming a career carrier the next year. He keeps his radio equipment at his home in South Hadley, MA, where he lives with his wife, Marcia.

Barna took up ham radio to keep in touch with a friend. "My best friend, who had been a ham since college, was in the Air Force. He was being stationed to Germany, and we thought ham radio would be a good way to keep in touch with each other," he said. After gathering some radio equipment, learning to use it and passing an exam, Barna received his amateur radio license from the Federal Communications Commission in 1989. He's enjoyed the hobby ever since.

There are certain rules and regulations that hams must follow to broadcast on the radio frequencies made available to amateur operators, such as identifying themselves with their call sign (Barna's is W1HYN) whenever they make contact or sign off.

Barna keeps it simple when explaining the radio equipment he owns and how he uses, it by avoiding technical talk. "It's kind of like the post office," he said. "There's a lot of jargon and a lot of acronyms.

"I have radios I can use to communicate locally as well as worldwide," Barna explained. "I communicate with hams all over the world." The radios that reach long distances use radio frequencies that can travel farther without interference, allowing him to reach other radio operators anywhere.

Some operators have high-powered radios and large antennas, but Barna makes do with simple equipment. He has a wire antenna strung from his house to a tree. "It's a very modest antenna—it cost me under \$100," he

said. "Antennas are a funny thing. You can spend as much as you want on an antenna or as little as you want. I work with relatively lower power—my maximum is 100 watts.

"With my 100-watt radio and that antenna, I probably don't do as well as the high-powered people," he added, "but I can certainly communicate with stations worldwide with that setup."

Amateur radio operators have used the airwaves since the invention of radio transmission at the turn of the 19th Century, and they have played a pivotal role in its development. By 1912, the airwaves were becoming crowded, so Congress passed the Radio Act to require licenses for operators. Hams use certain radio frequencies reserved for amateurs. Today there are nearly 780,000 licensed amateur radio operators in the United States, and nearly as many in the rest of the world.

The origin of the term "ham" is uncertain. The prevailing theory is that it was an insult by professional radio operators who resented the intrusion of the airwaves by amateurs—who in turn adopted the name with pride. It also might derive from "am," short for "amateur."

Ham operators often participate in conversations they call "rag chews"—discussions with another operator that usually evolve around, not surprisingly, ham radio. "It's generally about your equipment, the contacts you've made," Barna said.

Then there are "roundtable" conversations with multiple operators. "There will be maybe a half a dozen or a dozen hams, or more, who will all be talking in turn," Barna said.

There is a custom regarding ham radio talk that keeps operators from all over the world united, Barna



Barna has a collection of QSL cards he's received from other hams he's contacted.



Jeffrey Barna

said: “One thing, I think it’s universal because we talk with people all over the world, is politics are never mentioned.” Ham operators avoid political talk with people in other countries to avoid conflict, he noted. “Even if you’re in the United States, Republican, Democrat—politics are 100 percent not talked about. It’s one of the unwritten rules.”

Aside from talk, ham radio operators like to see whom they can reach, how far away, in which places or how many contacts they can make with others, all of it kept in their logbooks. Ham radio organizations sometimes sponsor contests, to see who can make the most contacts.

“You might exchange your call sign, your location, and then you move on,” Barna said. “The objective is to make as many contacts as you can, as far away as you can, in different areas.”

Ham operators often confirm contacts by mailing each other “QSL

cards.” The cards, named for the radio code that means “acknowledge receipt,” are unique to each operator. Like other hams, Barna has a card he sends on request and a collection of cards that others have sent to him from all over the world. Ham operators may get awards from radio organizations for completing certain collections, such as receiving a card from each of the 50 states.

Q codes were invented as shorthand in the early days of radio when Morse code was the only way to communicate. The first voice transmission over radio occurred in 1906 and Morse slowly became obsolete. Barna doesn’t transmit by Morse code, but some ham operators still use it. Most send and receive voice signals, though digital communication through a keyboard—a process Barna sometimes uses—is becoming more popular.

Hams do more than chat—they work with weather and emergency

authorities to provide communication, especially during disasters when other communication channels are out of service. “Amateur radio is very community-minded,” Barna said.

With a small investment in equipment, a little instruction and an exam to obtain a license, anyone can become a ham. Veteran radio operators help new ones take up the hobby by holding classes, and even administering the exams required to obtain a license, through the American Radio Relay League (arrl.org).

“It’s easier than ever to get your ham radio license now,” he said.

Barna spends many hours on the radio, day or night, but he says his wife doesn’t mind, because, as he explains, “One of amateur radio’s credos is that our hobby should complement, not take away from, our familial responsibilities. Everything in balance—good advice for any hobby!” **PR**