

Meet a Different Kind of Ham at the Fair (continued from page 20A)

cating during emergencies and disasters.

Affiliated with ARRL and Radio Amateurs of Canada, Amateur Radio Emergency Services (ARES) is a group of amateur radio volunteers from across the United States and Canada who have been organized and trained to assist in public service and emergency communications. During the Katrina disaster on the Gulf Coast more than one thousand ARES volunteers assisted relief efforts by providing communications that helped coordinate information for the Salvation Army, American Red Cross, FEMA and the Coast Guard. As with Katrina, natural disasters often disrupt normal communications, making rescue and relief efforts even more difficult.

Around the world, amateur radio operators have assisted in the aftermath of floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes.

Local ARES groups are organized by an Emergency Coordinator

(EC) who calls members into action when needed. The local EC is Matthew Welch, who is also currently vice president of GARA.

It's not only disasters and emergencies that bring out the amateurs. ARES groups also provide communications for public safety and public service. Examples are 5K runs and bicycling events. Because the routes are spread out, the hams provide added communications and help coordinate emergency responses where needed for injuries or illness.

Many amateur radio operators have also taken weather observation training through Skywarn, a program of the National Weather Service (NWS). Almost 300,000 volunteer spotters have been trained in recognizing weather patterns and describing them with correct meteorological terminology. Their on-the-ground observations during severe weather can be reported to NWS, valuable information for meteorologists.

Skywarn volunteers are trained weather observers, not storm chasers. Anyone with an interest in weather can take the training, but hams can also communicate their observations to other amateur radio operators in the path of severe weather. For more information on Skywarn, visit the www.weather.gov/skywarn website.

Like many other parts of our modern world, ham radio has entered the Internet age. Through special software, hams can establish links to distant connections and talk to people located just about anywhere in the world.

Hams often collect contacts and look forward to talking to other people from all over the country and other parts of the world. They formalize radio contesting with an annual Field Day, gathering to try for as many contacts as possible, with points awarded for various defined "gets".

Among recent contacts from the Middle-

field-Burton area have been Arkansas, California, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Oklahoma and Pennsylvania, plus Australia, England, Haiti and India. While sitting in the parking lot at the fairgrounds, I recently listened to a ham operator calling from Japan through an Internet link. Although not fluent, he was taking the opportunity to use his English by chatting with hams in the U.S.

If they're lucky and the timing is right, hams can talk to the International Space Station briefly as it travels overhead. Many astronauts and cosmonauts hold licenses.

GARA member Lyle, of West Farmington, started in CB radio and has been a ham since 1993, when he passed his Novice test. In 2004 he upgraded to Technician class (now the entry level). Lyle plans to work on his General license and upgrade in the near future. Referring to ham radio, Lyle says, "I enjoy it so much. The people are so nice!"

GARA set up at last year's fair; Lyle was one of the hams who spent time manning the booth in 2011 and he plans to be there again this year. At least four new hams resulted from contact with GARA at last year's fair.

Bob, of Munson, another GARA member, has been a ham less than a year now. He had a natural interest in amateur radio due to his background in electronics and communications, and had discussed amateur radio with some hams in the company where he worked. Once he retired, Bob found he had the time to pursue his interest in a license, but he needed more information on how to go about it.

By chance, Bob met Lyle on the grounds at the 2011 Great Geauga County Fair. Bob did not know Lyle then, but recognized him as a ham because of his call sign on his hat. Lyle directed Bob to the GARA booth, where he spent about half an hour talking to the licensed operators there and found

the information he needed to get started.

Bob passed his Technician test in October and was issued his license. Since then, he went on to pass his General test in December, and his Extra test in February.

GARA members recently sponsored a class for Technician license in Middlefield; Bob's wife Linda took the class and earned her Technician license.

Charles and Tina, of Middlefield, had enjoyed listening to local hams on a scanner and heard that they would be at the fair. While enjoying the fair, they stopped by the GARA booth and were delighted to actually meet the people they had been listening to. Both were inspired to pursue a license and passed the Technician test within the past year.

If you are interested in learning more about amateur radio, be sure to look for the GARA booth at the Great Geauga County Fair for information on how to pursue your own license.