



ED ZAGORSKI

TOP: Denny Berg is all smiles as he sits in his Watertown ham radio shack. LEFT: A young Denny Berg of Watertown shows off one of his first ham radio devices.

BY ED ZAGORSKI  
Family & Friends

In a time when social media platforms are often criticized more for their divisiveness than praised for their ability to bring people together, a Watertown resident is tapping into a different network to forge connections worldwide.

Denny Berg, 66, of Watertown said ham radios place an individual one twist of a dial or tap of a touchscreen away from the rush that comes from meaningful chat with people on the other side of the globe. He was licensed by the Federal Communications Commission in 1970 and will hit the 50-year mark as a ham operator this month.

“It crosses all barriers of careers, of families, of different social environments, of different cultures,” said Berg, who goes by the radio call sign, WB9MSM.

# Area ham radio operator on airwaves for 50 years

Ham radios were originally analog, operated using Morse code. As technology evolved, they became voice operated, and now digital technology is used.

He said his interest in ham radios started with his neighbor, Bill Bailey, who was spotted putting up a quad antenna, which is commonly used by ham operators.

"Everything started with Bill and I was not a CB operator," Berg said. "I never really got into shortwave listening. All I ever been was a ham operator."

Citizens band or CB is a public, two-way personal radio service of limited range. Ham has the ability for worldwide transmission while CB can only transmit for a couple of miles. Ham is a nickname for amateur radio transmission.

Berg said he and two other friends, with Bailey's help, became licensed to operate ham radios at the age of 15 or 16.

"One of my friends is still licensed. We had a lot of fun in those early days," he said. "Just to make a contact with another ham operator was really neat."

During his humble beginnings in ham radio, Berg said he would contact his friends and other individuals in the U.S. and even ham operators in Canada.

He admitted ham did boost his interest in the operation side, but not in electronics.

"When I graduated from high school here in Watertown I decided to go to the Brown Institute of Broadcasting in Minneapolis," Berg said. "I thought I was destined to become a broadcaster."

He said he attended school there and enjoyed it, but said learning to become a broadcaster was mostly about learning how to sell air time.

"They really stressed how to put together commercials, and it was very commercialized," Berg said. "I was thinking it was very different. It certainly was not like a clock radio. It was, 'Hey. You have to sell air time' and that's what we did."

Berg said he became disenfranchised with broadcasting and joined the U.S. Navy, where he became a hospital corpsman.

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Denny Berg

"I was a medic," he said. "I went through boot camp at the Great Lakes Naval Recruit Station and I ended up in San Diego, where I was stationed at a naval hospital."

He was also was stationed at Pearl Harbor and then Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, with the U.S. Marines.

After spending four years in the U.S. Navy and being honorably discharged, he attended University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and graduated with a degree in business administration with a major emphasis in human resources. Shortly after gradua-

tion, he landed a position with a Johnson Creek company, where he worked in human resources for 25 years before retiring. Currently, he serves as a substitute teacher at the high school for the Watertown Unified School District.

But Berg never gave up on his passion for ham radio operation.

"I love the fact that I can come down to my ham radio shack and your antenna is all you have and you hear stations and can transmit the stations with the antenna you have," he said. "You're not going through the internet or anything of that nature. It's the real magic of radio and the antenna. It's quite captivating. It really makes you excited, I feel anyway. I enjoy it very much. It's in my blood."



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A wall enclosing a portion of Denny Berg's ham radio shack has a display of the many cards he collected in his 50 years of talking with other ham radio operators across the U.S. and the globe.

Berg said the hobby is more accessible than ever thanks to lower-priced handheld radios, computer and smartphone radio apps that route signals through the internet, and portable antenna systems. Those things also expand overall communication capabilities for the diehards who have extensive professional equipment in their homes, like Berg's elaborate multi-radio and multi-antenna rig.

Digital logbooks and sites like QRZ.com make it easier to track any ham's connections if you have their location or call sign, but for some ham operators, like Berg, the real proof of proficiency and reach is measured by how many postcards one has, according to Berg.

To commemorate connection, it's common practice for operators to exchange postcards, a friendly and tangible example of the hobby's familial nature.

The really valuable cards are those from small countries and those that have communication challenges.

Berg has more than 20,000 contacts with over 3,000 QSL cards. He said in ham radio a contact is called a QSO. He has made contact with 325 countries.

"I've been in contact with all 50 states and countries all over the world," he said.

Berg also made brief contact with the Soviet MIR Space Station as it flew across the globe.



“The contact was very brief,” he said. “It was basically, ‘How are you doing?’ followed by a short response because the window to catch the space station was so small. Plus, you have other ham radio operators trying to do the contact the space station. It was fascinating to reach a Russian space station from my home in Watertown. Ham radio offers so much. It is mind blowing. You can reach so many people. Mind blowing.”

Worldwide, North Korea is the white whale because only a few hams have successfully made contact with the restrictive country in the last 40 years, according to Berg.

He is also active in the Watertown Amateur Radio Club, which has members from across Dodge and Jefferson counties. Berg said it was first founded in 1982. The group has around 35 members which come from all over including Pardeeville, Deerfield, Fort Atkinson, Hartland, Oconomowoc, and, of course, Watertown.

What excites Berg most about ham radio is the technology.

“Technology is going at lightning speed,” he said. “The advent of the computer and the ham radio is such a great fit together. It’s a good marriage. The technology is phenomenal. If you can dream it, you can do it, especially with today’s technology. The equipment is out there to use.”

He said once an individual has his or her first license, most hams find it best to start with simple equipment and grow over time. It usually costs less than \$200 to get one’s own first radio and start talking to other hams. Many

ham radio flea markets are held all over the country that sell good used equipment for even less.

He joked that ham radio is the original internet.

“To new or returning hams, I’d say one can embrace a lot of different things and come into it with an open mind that you’re anxious to learn,” Berg said. “I

say that in only one sense that there’s a lot of opportunities in amateur radio for different modes and different types of operation. I look at amateur radio as an opportunity to learn something new.”

Anyone interested in joining the Watertown Amateur Radio Club, is invited to call Denny at 920-262-0880.



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