



# Going Ham

Milwaukee is an epicenter for the forerunner to social media – amateur radio.

By **TEA KRULOS**

**W**hen radio emerged in the early 1900s, everyday people figured out how to set up their own stations, tap into those newfangled radio waves and speak with others around the world. And to this day, fascination with amateur (aka ham) radio has endured in Milwaukee.

“Ham radio was kind of the first social network,” explains Tom Pachner, store manager of Ham Radio Outlet on Good Hope Road, which is the flagship of the 12-location national chain.

The building has catered to hams since 1957, when it opened as Amateur Electronic Supply. Now, it employs about 10 hams to guide customers to shelves well-stocked with receivers, antennas, microphones and gadgets.

Ham radio units range from portable handheld sets to – as some Milwaukeeans have invested in – home centers with an antenna that looms as tall as a tree and can cost up to several thousand dollars. Hams are required to get an operating license, and then they’re assigned their own unique call sign that they use to initiate conversations over the waves.

Amateur radio soared in popularity in the 1910s and survived multiple wartime bans to experience a golden age after World War II, before home computers became popular. Long after, amateur radio still has a devoted following, especially with electronics aficionados. Here in

## DID YOU KNOW?

The term “ham radio” comes from its early days, when professionals would deride “ham-fisted” amateurs messing with their radio waves.

Milwaukee, a robust community of hams gathers on-air and at local club meetings.

Milwaukee Radio Amateurs’ Club, established in 1917 and the city’s oldest active club, has over a hundred members. It convenes at the Ham Radio Outlet, where it has a monthly build workshop in addition to regular meetings and a twice-a-year boot camp to teach newly licensed operators.

“Our club is not a bunch of guys hanging out drinking coffee,” Club president Dick Strassburger says. “We’re really big on education and sharing the joy and knowledge of the hobby, so we can tap into people’s curiosity and get them interested.”

For Strassburger, part of the appeal of ham radio is getting to talk to random people from around the globe. “Hearing a voice from far away intrigues people. You have no idea who is out there until you start calling and someone out there responds,” Strassburger says.

Civic duty is also a motivating factor for hams, according to Pachner. Amateur radio is often used in emergency situations,

such as helping coordinate hurricane relief in North Carolina last year.

A sense of community also keeps operators engaged. Pachner says amateur radio has such a strong following in Wisconsin because “we are friendly, talkative people, which is perfect for a communications hobby.” Wisconsin hams will establish a certain time and frequency at which they’ll tune in “and friends from around the world meet and chit chat,” on the radio waves, he says. “Hams like to talk.”

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