

## The Essence of Ham Radio-XI Origin of the word 'ham'

The reason why an amateur radio hobbyist is called a 'ham' is very difficult to be traced down. Though the term 'ham radio' is used in unison, if we look into any English dictionary, it would be found that it is a single word (ham) used to describe 'an amateur radio operator' licensed by the government. We can assume that the word 'ham' was incorporated into the English language dictionary at a point of time after the advent of wireless communication system. But this also seems to be not true from the fact that there was evidence of the word appearing even before the advent of wireless telegraphy. An early landline telegraphy textbook (The Telegraph Instructor, 1908) written by G. M. Dodge defines 'ham' as a 'poor operator'. In fact, the first wireless operators to go to the sea leaving their offices were the landline wire telegraphers. They took with them their language and much of the tradition of their older profession. Those who took wireless telegraphy as profession started using the word 'ham' as an abusive term against the non-professional hobby telegraph operators when they got interfered by crude wireless equipment used by the hobbyists. The hobbyists possibly unfamiliar with the term picked it up and applied it to themselves with pride!

In fact, the amateur radio hobbyists use the word 'ham' to show-off, while the word 'lid' (one of the wireless telegraphy jargons) is used to describe an inept radio operator! A 'lid' was a telegraph operator so inexperienced that he had to use a pot or can lid to rest his telegraph sounder on to copy the codes properly! There are many other terms, which an amateur radio operator has to remember to pass the examination as well to maintain correct operating practice. For example, the meaning of '73' is 'best regards', while the meaning of '88' is 'love & kisses'. Amateur radio can be considered as a subculture in its own right, with highly specified lingo and very particular rules of behaviour.

Some people believe that when the young and inexperienced radio enthusiasts began to venture on air with crude spark transmitters based on vehicle ignition coils, their Morse code transmission quality must have been pretty poor and professionals dismissed them as 'ham-fisted' or 'ham-handed'. This is the reason that some radio amateurs consider 'ham radio' as a derogatory term. Some amateur radio operators even object to being called 'amateurs' on the ground that this may be taken to imply 'amateurish'! On the contrary, nowadays, amateur radio operators employ automated techniques like computer interfaced radios and computerized data communication techniques (Packet Radio) to send messages and they also maintain professional communicating skills while

making on-the-air contacts. The Morse codes heard on the amateur radio bands can be considered to be of more than the professional standard.

Amateur radio emerged as a hobby at a time when there were no government regulations. But later on, with the formulation of International regulations, the hobby became authorized. Thus, another version explains that during the earlier days of radio communication, government stepped in to conquer the short-wave radio frequencies and allowed the radio amateurs to operate only on certain frequencies, so the frequencies of amateur radio stations became sandwiched like a 'ham sandwich' and an amateur radio operator came to be called a 'ham'! Some people try to relate the term 'ham' by amalgamating the names of three great radio experimenters. They are: Hertz (who practically demonstrated the existence of electromagnetic waves in 1888), Armstrong (who developed a resonant oscillator circuit for radio frequency work) and Marconi (the 1909 Nobel laureate in Physics, who in the year 1901 established the first transatlantic radio contact).

Fig:1



In a similar fashion some tries to amalgamate the names of three student amateur radio operators at Harvard. According to this story, the word "HAM" as applied to 1908 was the station CALL (call-sign) of the amateur wireless station operated by three amateurs of the Harvard Radio Club. They were Albert S. Hyman, Bob Almy and Poogle Murray. At first they called their station "HYMAN-ALMY-MURRAY". It was tiresome for them to tap out such a long name in Morse Code. So they revised it to "HY-AL-MU", using the first two letters of each of their names. Then early in 1901 some confusion resulted between signals from their station "HY-AL-MU" and a Mexican ship named "HYALMO". They then decided to use only the first letter of each name and the station call-sign became "HAM".

In the unregulated days, amateur radio operators picked their own frequency of operation and call letters. Then as now, some amateurs had better signals than commercial stations. The resulting interference came to the attention of US

congressional committees in Washington and the Congress proposed a legislation designed to critically limit amateur radio activity by placing all radio service under the control of US Navy. In 1911, Albert Hyman chose the controversial Wireless Regulation Bill as the topic for his thesis at Harvard. His instructor insisted that a copy his thesis be sent to Senator David L. Walsh, a member of one of the committees hearing the Bill. The Senator was very much impressed with the thesis and he asked Hyman to appear before the committee. Albert Hyman took the stand and described how the little station was built and almost cried when he told the crowded committee room that if the Bill went through they would have to close down the station because they could not afford the license fee and all the other requirements, which the Bill imposed on amateur stations. Congressional debate began on the Wireless Regulation Bill and little station "HAM" became the symbol for all the little amateur stations in the US (and elsewhere!) crying to be saved from the menace and greed of the big commercial stations who didn't want them around. The bill finally got to the floor of Congress and every speaker talked about the "poor little station HAM." That's how it all started.

Yet again according to another theory, it is believed that the term 'ham' is an acronym for a magazine called Home Amateur Mechanic published by Hugo Gernsback in the early days of radio (1908), which included many construction projects related to radio transmitters and receivers. Those using such radio transmitters and receivers referred themselves as being user of HAM (Home Amateur Mechanic) equipment. Hugo Gernsback was an 18-year-old immigrant from Luxembourg, who was among the firsts to establish a company, which supplied affordable radio equipment to experimenters and amateurs in New York City.

There are also a few apocryphal explanations about the word 'ham'. According to one such explanation, "HAM" stands for "Help All Mankind" as reflected in its service towards people in distress during natural calamities, disasters and civil emergencies. An amateur radio operator, however, utilizes his wireless communication system for personal enjoyment only during most of the time. Considering this, the employment of amateur radio equipment for a public service cause may be a rare occasion. Another version explains the word 'ham' in a lighter vein as "Hardly Any Money", because, an amateur radio hobbyist invests his money in setting up a wireless station without seeking any monetary profit!

□ Sandeep Baruah, call-sign: VU2MUE