

# Home & Heart



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**A**s a teenager and young adult, I listened to a lot of radio. I had never talked on a radio though. I had a friend who was really into citizens band radio, but I thought that was kind of weird. I never realized then that radios would play a big part in my life.

## First Contact

Bob-O and I met and courted through the mail. (That's a whole 'nother story.) He told me he was a ham radio operator. I vaguely knew what that was. After we had exchanged letters for a while, he suggested that I could actually talk to him at Starveout (the extremely remote cabin where he lived) by ham radio. He told me the name and address of a ham in Napa, where I lived. If I would go to this ham's house between 6 and 7 PM, he could connect me with Bob-O over a 75-meter net group called Western Public Service System.

I went there, and that was the first time I spoke to Bob-O. It seemed awkward since you needed to say "Over" at the end of each transmission. The conversation went something like:

"Can you hear me? Over."

"Yes, I can hear you fine. Over."

"This is pretty cool, huh? Over."

"I'm so glad to be able to talk to you. Over."

Well, you get the picture. It was not a long conversation, but a momentous one.

## Hamming It Up

Soon after joining Bob-O at Starveout, I started studying for my ham license. I was already using the 11-meter CB radio when I was out driving on the river road, and from the cabin whenever I needed it. I had become very comfortable talking over a keyed microphone. The first ham license back then was called a Novice ticket. I had

to learn Morse code at five words per minute and be tested on that. I did, I was, I passed, and received my call letters from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). I became KB6MPI.

For our honeymoon, we went to a Hamfest in Seaside, Oregon. While there, on the spur of the moment, I took the test for the next grade ham license, Technician. I missed it by three questions. We went home, and I studied some more. Bob-O made up a song so I could remember the frequencies each ham license allows you to use. He had me do the math and build a Yagi antenna. I took the test again. Again I didn't make the grade. I studied even more. I made sleep tapes for myself that I listened to awake and asleep.

I drove out to the coast, three-and-a-half hours away, which was the closest place to be tested. There in the basement of the sheriff's office, I took the Technician's test for the third time. This time I passed it. I had a license to use 2-meter radio. Although I could have received new call letters at that time, I chose to remain KB6MPI.

## KJS Phone Home

Several years after I moved to the river, Bob-O set up a 2-meter phone/radio for us at Starveout. We had a base unit hardlined to a phone connection at a friend's house a couple miles from Forks of Salmon. We put up an antenna there also. With 2-meter radios in each of our rigs and the cabin, we could access the phone from wherever the antenna signals could reach.

After the system was first set up, whenever the phone rang at our house, it would also ring at Glady's house. Glady was the Forks postmaster and had held that position since the year I was born, 1953. You could say that by being postmaster at the tiny Forks post office, she had a hand in Bob-O's and my courtship.

Bob-O called the local phone company and got ahold of a knowledgeable, friendly technician. When they had discussed it thoroughly and Bob-O had tried all the things the tech recommended, the problem still persisted. Finally, weeks later, the guy says, "You know, once when I was working on a very rural phone system in Mexico, we ran into a problem like this because the phone system was set to ten pulses per second instead of the normal twenty." That indeed turned out to be the case, and the problem was solved.

We had to get microphones that had numerical, touchtone keypads on the back for each 2-meter radio. To get a dial tone or answer a phone call, we would have to hit the star button and then the two button. This would open the line. After a call, to close the line, we would again press the star button, then the two button.

Since our side of the phone had a handheld microphone, like a CB radio, only one side of the conversation could be spoken at a time. In other words, both of you could not talk at once.

My mother, fueled by her desire to talk to me on a regular basis, grasped this concept quickly, and became quite adept at it. She also became experienced at dealing with skeptical phone operators. I believe she came to relish it.

To call into the Salmon River region from the outside world, you had to follow a certain procedure. First, you needed to convince the usually disbelieving phone operator that they could, and, indeed, had to connect you to “the Fort Jones operator.” It was best to just give that operator the whole sequence of dialing marks and routing numbers. It would take a while for them to realize that you weren’t joking. Eventually, they would believe that there was such a person, and finally connect you. But operators would sometimes hang up on what they thought were prank calls.

From here, the process speeded up. The Fort Jones operator was used to the rural phone system and knew what to do. You would give her the special dialing marks and routing numbers, too. For Forks of Salmon, they were 888192916063181, then our number, toll station 4740. As you might guess from the degree of difficulty, Mom was my only regular caller.

### Emergency Phone

Because we had the only phone for miles in any direction, our phone became the emergency contact phone for the community members around us. Sometimes the message was brief and easy to relay. After a short phone conversation, the radio message would go out.

“Indian Creek, Indian Creek, this is Starveout for relay.”

“I’m here, Starveout, let’s go up.”

After moving off channel 18, the road channel, to channel 23, the talk channel, the conversation would continue.

“Indian Creek, you here yet?”

“I’m here, what’s up?”

“Good news, Sarah! Your sister had twins, a boy and a girl. Everyone is excited and doing fine. Call when you can, Auntie.”

“Thanks, Kathleen. I’m going to tell Rex. Indian Creek out.”

“Starveout out.”

Sometimes the relays were distressing and more complicated. A family member would call us seeking their relative, having been given our number in case of an emergency. I would have to explain how the phone/radio conversation worked. I would sit with a microphone in each hand—one for the phone/radio and one for the CB. After contacting the river person, I would tell the phone person to go ahead. Whatever they told me, I would repeat directly into the CB mike. I became like a translator, just repeating what was told to me by each party, trying to be an invisible part of the conversation.

I remember one particularly desperate call, late one night. To this day if the phone rings in the middle of the night, I think it’s bad news. Fran’s sister called from New York. I put out the late night call on the CB.

“Main House, Main House, wake up! This is Starveout with an urgent relay. Main House, Main House, wake up, Main House! This is Starveout with an urgent relay.”

Someone at Main House answered and woke Fran up. As soon as she was on frequency, I told her sister to go ahead.

“Fran, something terrible has happened. Swifty’s been in a car accident, and he’s hurt pretty bad.”

Swifty was Fran’s husband. I repeated it into the other mike. There was a pause, then:

“Where is he? Is he going to live?”

Key and repeat.

“He’s in the hospital here. We don’t know yet. He has a lot of injuries. His chest. His leg.”

Key and repeat.

“I’m coming out there. I’ll leave tomorrow.”

Key and repeat.

“Mom bought you a ticket and it’s waiting at the airport for you. I’ll see you soon. I love you, take care.”

Key and repeat.

“I love you too. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Good-bye.”

Key and repeat.

“Hurry. Good-bye.”

Key and repeat. Hang up phone radio.

From Fran, “Thanks, Kathleen.”

“I’m so sorry, Fran. I hope he’s going to be okay. Good night. Starveout, out.”

“Main House, out.”

Several months later and still limping, Swifty returned to the river.

It was after this that I realized people's lives were passing through my hands. Births, deaths, anniversaries, graduations, and tidings glad and tragic—I relayed them all. It was a unique experience. I didn't know then that my time in the radio shack at Starveout would become even more dramatic and filled with adventures, unlike any I had lived through before. Next time I'll tell you about the forest fires of 1987.

#### **Access**

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