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Durham's Black HAMS

One of Only Two Groups in Nation



TWO HAMS George Barner (left) and Coolidge McCoy (right) operate an array of amateur radio operation equipment during a recent "field day" exercise in Durham. Barner and McCoy are two of eleven members of the area's only all-black HAM radio operator group.

Photo by Silas Mayfield

Melvin Hamilton and his friends often have long range conversations with other friends, not only in this country but overseas as well.

But these chitchats, called in the parlance, "rag chewing," don't run up the phone bill.

Hamilton and his friends are Amateur Radio Operators, HAMS for short, and they talk to other HAMS around the country and across the world.

"We are one of only two all-black HAM clubs in the world, as far as I know," said Hamilton, who is president of the 11-member group. "But we are trying to spread the message and get some increased interest in this hobby in the black community."

Recently, the club — Mid-State Amateur Radio Society — launched a series of classes in HAM radio techniques at the Garner Road YMCA in Raleigh. The

classes, now entering their second month, are scheduled on Monday and Thursday evenings, 7-9 p.m. According to Hamilton, the classes cover the basic information necessary to help students qualify for the examination a person must pass to get a HAM radio operator's license.

The license is issued by the Federal Communications Commission, the federal agency that controls the airways in this country.

Persons interested in enrolling in the classes should call the "Y" in Raleigh. The number is 833-1256.

Amateur radio operation has grown tremendously in popularity over the past 30 years or so. According to Peter O'Dell, public information officer, for the American Radio Relay League, the HAM professional organization, there are more than one million

HAMS in the world, and about 400,000 in this country, and another 30,000 or so in Canada.

Though there are not any specific figures on how many of these operators are black, Hamilton said he feels there are fewer than 10,000. He went on to estimate that of the nearly 1000 operators located in the Triangle area, only about 50 or so of them are black.

"It is not something that we are generally exposed to," he said, "and therefore, we just don't give it much thought."

Hamilton said his group got together because they had common interests in several areas, including amateur radio operation. Mid-State's members live in Durham, Raleigh and Hillsborough. According to Hamilton, the black club is OMIK, which stands for Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Kentucky, where this group's

members are located.

"They are definitely the oldest black HAM club," Hamilton said. "And as far as I know they are the only one besides us."

Amateur radio is more than just a hobby where a bunch of folks spin dials as an emergency communications network during both natural and manmade disasters.

HAM operators have been known to be the only link of communications during tornadoes, hurricanes, severe fires, and other disasters. They have been credited with saving many lives, and generally helping to bring order from chaos in many emergencies.

Becoming an amateur radio operator is not easy. An applicant has to pass a FCC examination that tests the applicant on the knowledge of Morse Code, FCC regulations, HAM radio equipment operation.

Once you're set up, then it's a matter of surviving the annual skills assessment, called Field Day, where operators around the world gather at their equipment and talk and operate to prove that they know what they are doing.

"Once you have your license," Hamilton said, "then you have to be willing to spend about \$1000 or more for the equipment you need."

Mid-State participated in its second field day this past June. Field Day is always held on the first Saturday in June.

Members of Mid-State Amateur Radio Society are: Henry Garper, Rev. Coolidge McCoy, Melvin Hamilton, Cidero Greene, Joseph Taylor, George Barner, Jim Johnson, Hugh Smith, Travis Brown, John Mayo.