

The History of CMARC

The Central Michigan Amateur Radio Club is not just another Ham Club. In fact, CMARC has been responsible for some ground breaking things in our great Hobby and we are pleased to share the story with you. With the help of former club President and long time CMARC member, Currin Skutt, W8FSZ, as well as many of those involved in the club from years past, we hope this historical perspective is informative and entertaining.

The roots of the Central Michigan Amateur Radio Club can be traced back to as early as September of 1921, when 16 Amateur Radio Operators met for the first time. From this meeting, came the formation of an informal group known as "The Central Michigan Wireless Association". The next mention of the CMWA is around 1932, when still more informal get-togethers were held. In fact, it was not until 1946 that the club members got organized and became affiliated with the Amateur Radio Relay League. At the time, members met at Cedar Street Center, located at 429 North Cedar in Lansing.

Following the end of World War 2, somewhere between 1946 and 1947, the club began meeting at the Lansing Dairy Company and then, in 1948 held it's meetings at the Hayford Street Fire Station. The station, located at the corner of Michigan and Hayford, in Lansing, offered a room in the basement for the club to conduct its monthly meetings.

Around 1952, according to former President Currin Skutt-W8FSZ, the Central Michigan Amateur Radio Club secured its club callsign, W8MAA. Another item of note, for which members of CMARC were directly responsible, included Amateur Call Plates. These were yet another challenge to the Ham community and CMARC members rose to the call. As Currin tells it, there were Call Plates in the late 20's or early 30's, but the State Police claimed it "loused up their record keeping", and the end was pronounced upon the early predecessors. According to Skutt, Cosmo Calkins, W8MAA, was a "Senate Technician". "If you needed pens, or paper", said Skutt, "you called on Cosmo." And, as time passed, Calkins developed a good rapport with Senators and even had some favors to call in. It was this edge that proved fruitful for Cosmo in his endeavor to make Amateur Call Plates a reality once again.

Well, the Bill was written and introduced into the House, where it was promptly sent into committee and stalled there. It seemed, according to Currin, that Politics were getting in the way. But upon chatting with a friend in southern Lower Michigan, he was told it would be remedied. Within a brief few days, the Bill was back out of committee, awaiting a vote. Now, the challenge was to impress Senators with the importance of Amateur Radio in the community. It had been believed this was mere "child's play" for adults, and the true value of Amateur Radio in a disaster (for passing health and welfare traffic) was largely unknown.

Enter "The Michigan Buzzard Roost Net", on 75/80 meters, Monday through Friday. This net, one of the oldest, became the tool used to finalize approval for the Call Plates. As Skutt tells it, "we started getting the word out" and members of the net would be on between 5:00pm and 5:45pm, to pass traffic amongst themselves. As word of the vote spread, more operators were on the air, as Cosmo and his Ham Radio Friends demonstrated the operation for Senators. He would take a message for one of the Senator's wives and get it to an operator in his state. When the Senator called home, his wife would relate how "some Amateur Radio operator called with a message from you." Once again, thanks to the persistence and professionalism of the operators involved, the bill allowing Amateur Call Plates was easily passed and signed by then-Governor G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams and the first Amateur Call Plates of this new generation made their appearance in 1952.

Around 1959, the club newsletter made its first appearance. No name for the publication is mentioned in any of the club's early notes.

1960 was a dark year for CMARC, as one of its strongest supporters became a silent key. Ralph Ziegenbein (pronounced Zig-en-bine) held Amateur Callsign W8PLP. He was a popular barber in the Lansing area, with a shop located on Michigan Avenue, near Clemens and made a large impact on our Club. "He would ask if you were a Ham when you came into his shop", said longtime CMARC member, Currin Skutt (W8FSZ). "If you said yes, he would open a drawer and hand you a QST, if you said no, he would direct you to the magazines on the table."

There is little information on the man known affectionately as "Mr. Ham Radio" and he has no Family in the area, according to Skutt, but he is remembered as the man who spearheaded the push to bring the Novice Class license to Amateur Radio. According to Skutt, Ziegenbein came up with the idea, looking for a way to get the younger generation interested in Amateur Radio. It was markedly more difficult to jump into the hobby then, having to meet the requirements of a General Class license. Following much discussion, it was agreed that something could be done and after more discussion in the next month, CMARC sent it to the Club Secretary and had it typed up for submission to the ARRL. "The League took it from there", Skutt remembered and Amateur Radio added the Novice Class to its list. The rest, as they say, is history!

Ziegenbein was among the last of the sparkgap users in the Lansing area, too. Currin tells a story about how Ralph's transmitter would weld the electric meter when he used his transmitter, which caused some problems with the electric company. A man of good humor, Skutt also told of Ziegenbein's homespun phonetics. "He called himself a modular fruit stand", said Skutt. "Peaches, Lemons and Prunes".

W8PLP assured himself a place in the hearts of CMARC members of that day. Currin shared that Ziegenbein was a "man of his word. If he told

you he would do something, you could expect a report on it at the next meeting". His dedication to the Hobby was apparent and Skutt also said the Lansing barber never missed a meeting.

A member of the Quarter Century Wireless Association (QCWA), Ziegenbein was traveling to the Upper Peninsula for a meeting in 1960 when he and his wife were involved in a terrible auto accident near Houghton Lake, Michigan. Ziegenbein died in the accident, but his wife was taken to a Grayling hospital with injuries and she recovered.

Following Ziegenbein's death, Currin tells that a group of Hams known as "The Lush Wells" (all CMARC members) decided to preserve Ziegenbein's call sign, "If not for the Club, then for a worthy organization." After navigating a sea of red tape, the group's efforts were rewarded and W8PLP was issued to CMARC for the station at the American Red Cross, Lansing Chapter shortly thereafter. With the club in the comfortable surroundings of the Red Cross, they were better able to work with "mock disaster drills" and the like, and the relationship between the two entities continues to this day. In fact, the club not only resides within the walls of the Red Cross, an official Club radio station is set up there, as well.

In 1964, the club newsletter, still unnamed, finally got one. By contest, "The Scope" became the new name of CMARC's monthly bulletin and the winning submission was entered by Dale Moore, K8YRD, who (as of the date of this update) is still an active member of CMARC. Of course, the style changes from time to time, but in essence, its contents bear resemblance to the newsletters of old.

1968 was a busy year as CMARC members helped put together the Michigan Amateur Radio Convention. Held in Lansing at the "Jack Tar Hotel", it was the first (and so far, only) major Amateur Radio Relay League event to happen locally, but to hear the older members talk, it was a sight to see!

The late 1990's recorded what can arguably be called the most prolific period of growth in CMARC's storied past. Rededicating itself to a proactive position in the Greater Lansing Area, CMARC earned kudos from all corners of the Hobby, including then ARRL Great Lakes Division Director, George Race (WB8BGY). Race made many trips to the Lansing area, attending Club meetings and heaping praise on president, J. Ervin (Erv) Bates, W8ERV (served 1998-2000) and his fellow Board members for the Club's meteoric rise.

The pinnacle of Erv's stint on the CMARC Board came in December of 1998. "There was an evening in the late summer of that year", he remembered, "and someone got on the subject of Club growth. One thing led to another and I made the (mistake) of saying I would wear a tutu if we hit 200 members by the end of that year....my secretary, Julie McLain (KB8ZXR) heard me and announced my offer at the next meeting". Needless to say, CMARC rallied around its president and on December 4th of that year, Erv

paid up as the Secretary announced membership had surpassed the milestone (205). The audio was featured on 'Amateur Radio Newslines' later that month, January 1999's Scope featured a ton of pictures and the Club was on its way. Ultimately, by the end of Erv's three years on CMARC's Board, membership reached 217.

HamFair, which for many years had been just sort of happening, also benefited from the renewed energy. HamFair99 recorded profits "not seen in three years", according to longtime HamFair assistant, Don Tillitson (WB8NUS). For the first time in the history of the event, even the food concessions made a profit, according to Concessions Chairperson, Julie McLain (KB8ZXR)! But the other shoe dropped in the year 2000, when HamFair2000 Chairman, Bill Mathews (KB8TTS), agreed to move the event to The Summit, in Delta Township. Nobody could have seen the windfall coming, as more than 700 came and profits soared. Great Lakes Division Director, George Race began the call to hold our Division Conference in Lansing, but it wasn't destined to happen. So far, the success of that year has not been repeated and HamFair has since been canceled....as eBay grows and takes market share from the Amateur Radio Community.

But the news was not all bad. CMARC also renewed RACES/ARES ties, under the direction of Clint Hannahs (KC8EHR). Hannahs quickly earned the respect of his peers and it wasn't long before he was named Ingham County's Emergency Coordinator. Although he has since resigned the post, Hannahs remains actively involved and assists new EC, Tom Shaver (KC8NJK) as needed in the newly formed Amateur Radio Public Service Corps (ARPSC). The group has taken a Quantum Leap in the past 10 years and it is now an arm of our local group that ALL can be proud of. No longer a SKYWARN only organization, ARPSC members now take part in providing communications for the annual summertime 'Common Ground' music festival, as well as 'Festival of Lights', held during Christmas time.

In the early years of the 21st Century, CMARC once again found itself struggling. It wasn't until 2005 that things began turning around, with some hard work and determination. HamFair was gone, the SCOPE had been on life support since 2003 and the Club dwindled to a mere 78 members and there was actually talk of disbanding the Club. Despite it's history and longevity, CMARC was on the ropes, with its very survival in question!

But the tide turned and beginning in February of 2006, the SCOPE made a comeback. DeAnna Barnhill (KD8BDI) took the helm and was named editor, where she served until February of 2008. Her husband, Roger (AB8RX) and several other Board members persevered through the lean times and CMARC began to grow once again.

2007 saw even more growth and CMARC members started coming out to the meetings in greater numbers. Those attending meetings hungered for programs once again, as the winds of change continued to blow through the Club.

2008 is off to a great start. The Club membership is now up to 140, with 31 of them coming to CMARC for the very first time! VE Sessions have been hectic, which is a good problem if you are a Volunteer Examiner, but it shows growth is happening. Speaking of growth, we're excited about the addition of a Ladies' Group at CMARC, too. Julie McLain (KB8ZXR) started a Ladies' Tea Time Net on Tuesday evenings and a newcomer to the Club, Elizabeth Stein (KD8GYN) suggested a monthly Ladies' Tea Time Luncheon. Both have been a rousing success!

Our hat is off to ALL of the volunteers who have offered to do a little extra, so that this growth can continue. There are many of you who do things behind the scenes and nobody ever REALLY knows who did the work, but some folks DO know. People like Don McLain (KB8RAD)...who takes great pride being our Official Club Ambassador. Don takes time to make ALL of our visitors feel welcome, passes out welcome packets to newly licensed Club members and is also Host of RAD's Coffee Break. RAD's meets each Saturday at 7:30pm, at Denny's in Lansing and there is more to come in the pages of this Club's History, with regard to Don and those like him.

As more historical items of interest come about, we will add to this history and the fact that you've read this far is a feat in itself. There is a lot to digest on this page and it was an honor and a privilege to topically research CMARC's history for this Web Site. Years have passed us by and a new generation of Amateur Radio Operators are growing up and coming to power in the clubs. However, without the benefit of the "old timers", the future seems bleak, for their biggest tool is the knowledge, which has been gained through trial and error over the course of decades of Amateur Radio work. As the saying goes, "Those who do not learn by their mistakes are destined to repeat them", and we hope as the younger generation becomes even more active in the local clubs, these men and women who made their mark will take the time to share their pearls of wisdom with us. As time passes, many of the traditions born in the early years remain. The spirit of Ralph Ziegenbein lives on in his Award, CMARC meets monthly at the Red Cross on Grand River in Lansing, "The Scope" still lets people know what's going on and technology is moving at a rapid pace.

All in all, CMARC is a pretty nice place, wouldn't you agree?