

An Island Sprouts Its First Amateur Inhabitants

An expedition to a Maryland island bears unexpected fruit!

In his book *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe writes about the adventures of a man shipwrecked and marooned on a lonely tropical island. Crusoe, the unexpected visitor, encounters and befriends a native inhabitant he later named “Friday.”

Fast forward to 2001. There is another island, closer to my home, believed to have received its first settlers in the 1600 or 1700s, whose inhabitants conversely befriend visitors and also embrace Amateur Radio.

Closer to Home

The island is secluded. Forget about RadioShack stores to shop around in. In fact, there is no police force simply because there is no crime. A few hours’ drive from Washington, DC, and a 40-60 minute ferry ride, lies Smith Island, a marshy 8 by 4 mile archipelago about 10 miles off the Maryland mainland in the Chesapeake Bay. Three communities (Tylerton, Ewell and Rhodes Point) are home to about 350 inhabitants—watermen, their families, store/innkeepers...or mainlanders seeking Shangri-la. A very friendly lot.

Upon arriving on the island, and depending upon the time and type of day, you are met with a deafening quiet, or perhaps the wind and sounds of the watermen’s boats as they strain at their moorings. Despite its isolation, the island is no stranger to Amateur Radio. Over the years a number of Islands On The Air (IOTA) operations have taken place there. However, outside of a microwave telephone system to the mainland, the usual ship-to-shore VHF radios, and maybe Citizens Band radio, there were no Amateur Radio operators residing on the island. That was about to change.

It Was the Best of Times

In December of 2000, a group of

Maryland and Washington, DC, amateurs decided to visit the island and “do a little hamming.” Arrangements were made with a bed and breakfast innkeeper for transportation and accommodations at the community of Ewell. As a courtesy, the innkeeper provided his own boat transportation so the group did not have to use the services of a commercial ferry that connects to the island from Crisfield or Point Lookout, Maryland. The island is a tourist attraction during the late spring and throughout the summer months, so the amateurs, arriving on a Saturday, had the inn to themselves. Despite wintry winds they were comfortably situated, until it was time to put up the antennas. Only several feet above sea level (and eroding more each year), the island is extremely flat. There is nothing to stop the wind. Even so, the hams managed. Nothing

elaborate, mind you—essentially a G5RV dipole and a loop for 6 meters.

Ham Radio, Good Food, Friendly People

Now, you have to recognize that while this particular group of amateurs loves their hobby, they equally enjoy good food and people. The islanders took an immediate liking to them. Having set up their station at the inn, the amateurs began their operation. From time to time some of the islanders dropped in to watch and listen as the group worked stations needing Smith Island as a new IOTA (NA 140) or US Island (MD00035). For the permanent residents this became an education in Amateur Radio, planting seeds of curiosity that promised to bloom later.

One of the visitors who came through the unlocked doors (virtually no one locks



A happy group of visitors. Left to right: Herbert; Skip, K3FOR; Karl, AA3XC; Walter, AA3SG; Grady, WB3JUV; Kenny, AA3NN; Keith, KB3EGL.

their doors) was the island's only pastor. Every Sunday he travels to each of the three community churches by boat and golf cart to lead services. For an interesting related story on Smith Island's only pastor, see the May 2001 issue of *Smithsonian* magazine, page 32, titled "Preacher on the Go," by T. Edward Nickens.

An Unexpected Turn Of Events

On Saturday evening, the innkeeper approached the amateurs with news that the weather had turned foul and it appeared that they may not be able to leave the island Sunday because of very high winds and 4-6 foot waves. He was understandably reluctant to venture out in his boat. With this in mind, and although it was evening, he served up an extra-special "breakfast" for everyone. The group continued to operate throughout the night.

Sunday morning arrived and with it a possible break in the weather. Still reluctant to take out his boat, the innkeeper suggested that the group ride the commercial ferry back to the mainland that afternoon. Packing up their gear the amateurs boarded the ferry. However, Mother Nature's fickle mood changed, and the weather once again closed in. The ferry began an hour-long roller coaster ride across Chesapeake Bay, its passengers consisting of the amateurs, some Smith Islanders and other visitors returning to their mainland homes.

A Surprise Conversation

Sometime during the ride back, one of the passengers, an islander by the name of William Clayton from the community of Tylerton, struck up a conversation with the amateurs. He stated that a number of years back, he had studied for the Amateur Radio license, taken the test and failed. Seems he was studying from an



Smith Island, Maryland's only inhabited offshore island.

outdated guide. Hearing about his misfortune, the group said they would send him the most current study material, maintain contact with him and, when he was ready, they would return to the island with Volunteer Examiners and administer the test. Strange bedfellows these: amateurs from a large, sophisticated, heavily populated metropolitan area, and a quiet waterman who grew up without the benefit of modern conveniences, talking about modern-day Amateur Radio. It is written that we amateurs come from all walks of life.

Return to the Island

On Memorial Day weekend 2001, a group returned to the island with three Volunteer Examiners, sponsored by the District of Columbia Metropolitan Area Repeater Club (DCMARC). Not only was William Clayton there for his examination, but also his son Matthew, who resides on the mainland in the town of

Princess Anne, his interest in Amateur Radio piqued by his father. I am pleased to report that both father and son successfully passed their Technician Class license exams, and shortly thereafter received the call signs KB3GRC and KB3GRD, respectively. Smith Island, Maryland's only inhabited offshore island in the Chesapeake Bay, now had its first full-time resident Amateur Radio operator.¹

Since the group was already on the island, the remainder of the weekend was spent enjoying their favorite pastimes: radio, good food and conversation. The islanders served some of the largest and most delectable crabs the amateurs had ever tasted. There was no doubt in their minds that the crabs were carefully hand

¹If there was a resident of Smith Island licensed in the Amateur Radio Service prior to William Clayton, he/she is unknown to the author, the visiting amateurs and the islanders they came in contact with.



The Ewell Tide Inn was home to the amateurs during all three visits to the island.



An antenna party behind the Ewell Tide Inn.



The antenna mast goes up in preparation for the start of the Smith Island operation.

DCMARC



Keith, KB3EGL, giving out a new IOTA.

DCMARC



Roger, KA3FTJ, manages the Smith Island pileup.

DCMARC



Steve Eades, the second new amateur resident on Smith Island, passed his Technician exam in November 2001, and now holds the call sign KB3HHU.

selected especially for them. In addition to the ham station setup at the inn, a temporary station was established at the local grocery store using a military tape antenna. This provided more visibility for Amateur Radio (and I suspect gave the amateurs better access to even more food!).

It was an education for the islanders, and some expressed interest in obtaining their Amateur Radio licenses, so a third trip was made in November 2001—and this visit produced a second islander ham.

When the sun comes up, it is a new day with new expectations. You never know what will be coming your way even from a small, isolated, quiet island, somewhere in time.

Epilogue

I struggled to find the right words to express how we felt about what these visiting amateurs did for the Smith Islanders and son Matthew Clayton. The effort they made to provide the necessary study guides; the time to stay in touch with

Smith Island

To learn more about Smith Island, its inhabitants, places to stay, where to eat, how to get there and ferry schedules, go to the following Web pages:

www.intercom.net/npocsmithisland/ and
www.smithisland.com.

them; the arrangements they made for the required number of Volunteer Examiners and the return trip to the island to administer the examination. Although I do not know all of them, I would venture to say that a simple “thank you” is all that they would want. The pleasure was theirs: Kenneth Courtney, AA3NN; Walter Jackson, AA3SG; Jeffrey Norman, AA3WP; Karl Pearson Sr, AA3XC; Ryan Johnson, K3FOR; Robert Lee, K3RE; William Gilliam Sr, KB3FEA; William Gilliam Jr, KB3FEB; Roger Johnson Sr, KA3FTJ; Roger Johnson Jr, KB3GFU; Keith Poptanich, KB3EGL; Sharon Armstrong, KB3EUI and Grady Ball, WB3JUV. Each one of you is indicative of the professionalism and helping hands of the Amateur Radio community. And that’s what it’s all about.

You can contact the author at 5730 Lockwood Rd, Cheverly, MD 20785; k3beq@arrrl.net. 