

Aaron M. Stella, 24, of Saginaw Township is a member of the Saginaw Valley Amateur Radio Association, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. At right is Ed Trombley, one of Saginaw's early ham radio operators and an inspiration to the group's president, Keith H. DeLong of Freeland.



JONATHAN GRUENKE/  
THE SAGINAW NEWS

# Helpful hobbyists

*Saginaw Valley ham radio operators have served as a vital link in times of trouble for 50 years, but it's the fun of communicating and tinkering that attracts members of all ages.*

SUE WHITE  
THE SAGINAW NEWS

When Aaron M. Stella's friends hear about his hobby — operating a ham radio as a member of the Saginaw Valley Amateur Radio Association — he says they tell him, "Dude, you're 24! That's for 80-year-old men!"

Even the Saginaw man's wife jokingly chides him about not telling her before she said "I do."

■ Key moments in the history of the Saginaw Valley Amateur Radio Association, see graphic, **back page**.  
■ How to get involved with the group and hobby, see story, **back page**.

But as the organization celebrates 50 years of transmitting around the world, Stella says the radio operators still provide a vital link in emergencies. The Federal Communications Commission says 720,000 amateur and vanity operators hold active licenses in the United States, and the Saginaw organization has a roster of approximately 60 members.

"I started in this about two years ago because I wanted a scanner in my car and getting a ham operator license was the easiest way to do that legally," Stella said. "But the whole time, in classes and in the club, has been one of the most welcoming experiences.

"We have the old-timers and their



traditional ways, the edgy people who get into the experimental element, and everything in between. I haven't met anyone I didn't love talking to."

Since incorporating in 1956, the Saginaw Valley Amateur Radio Association coordinated rescue efforts for hurricanes, tornadoes, ice storms, earthquakes and, in recent years, terrorist attacks.

More often, members are severe weather spotters, Stella said, with the National Weather Service receiving a great deal of information from ham operators.

But when he attended a recent meeting of emergency responders,

Jeremiah I. Thomas, 13, uses a ham radio during a Saginaw Valley Amateur Radio Association demonstration at Wickes Library in Saginaw as radio operator Robert B. Tuttle, 27, of Saginaw watches and listens. Jeremiah is the son of Brenda Gochett of Saginaw.

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SAGINAW NEWS FILE



It's a volunteer effort, added Keith H. DeLong, 40, of Freeland, who serves as the association's president.

PLEASE SEE HAM RADIO, BACK PAGE ▶

## Ham history

Here are some key moments in the history of the Saginaw Valley Amateur Radio Association, also known as SVARA:

- **1920s** — Ham radio operators in Saginaw start meeting in each other's homes, though they aren't officially an organization yet.
- **1956** — The group is incorporated and begins meeting at the city of Saginaw Water Treatment Plant. Soon after, members provide emergency service when tornadoes hit Flint and rural Saginaw County.
- **1957** — Local hams record transmissions from the Russian satellite Sputnik, and hope Americans soon will launch one as well.
- **1967** — A Saginaw family receives an



Easter message from their grandson who is stationed in Vietnam. The mid-Michigan radio group is one of many patching through free calls for holiday greetings.

- **1976** — Members jump to action when a March ice storm locks mid-Michigan down, directing rescue crews to senior citizens without heat and to a pregnant woman about to deliver her baby.
- **1986** — Gov. James Blanchard recognizes the group at a Michigan Hispanic Commission meeting for its humanitarian contributions during international efforts following the 1985 Mexico City earthquake.

■ **1988** — As a single point of contact for the state of Michigan, the Saginaw Valley Amateur Radio Association handles emergency traffic for Hurricane Gilbert.

- **1989** — The Valley radio association is appointed the first "Gateway Station" in the United States, following recommendations after its handling of Michigan's contact after Hurricane Hugo. Members also handle traffic following an earthquake in San Francisco.
- **1991** — The American Radio Relay League Convention draws 5,000 people to Saginaw.

Visitors camp on Ojibway Island during the convention, gathering under the stars to tell stories and send messages.

- **2005** — The Saginaw Valley Amateur Radio Association receives a grant from the Homeland Security Department to set up stations in Saginaw's hospitals and Red Cross and 911 centers.
- **2006** — On June 6, the local group celebrates its 50th anniversary with a night of nostalgia at the Trillium Banquet Center in Saginaw Township.

COMPILED BY SAGINAW NEWS STAFF WRITER SUE WHITE

## Hook up with the hams

SUE WHITE  
THE SAGINAW NEWS

Think you'd like to ham it up?

Head today for the Richland Township Park in Hemlock, at the end of Sandridge, off North Hemlock, where the Saginaw Valley Amateur Radio Association is having a field day.

"We'll be there until 3 or 4 in the afternoon," said group President Keith H. DeLong. "People can come out and see us in action. They can try it out, too, and experience it for

themselves."

Association meetings, held at 8 p.m. the first Friday of every month at the American Red Cross, 1232 N. Michigan in Saginaw, are open to the public, DeLong added.

And if someone is interested in taking the plunge, there's a class for beginners opening in the fall, in preparation for license testing by the Federal Communications Commission.

For more information, e-mail the association at [n8xd@arrl.net](mailto:n8xd@arrl.net) or visit its Web site at [www.k8dac.com](http://www.k8dac.com). ♦

FROM THE COVER

### Ham radio Interest continues

Through license stipulations, amateur radio operators cannot receive pay for their services but that's a point of little concern, he added.

Most are eager to jump to the challenge.

DeLong traces his interest back to the day when his father gave him his grandfather's shortwave radio.

"I was stringing antennas through a tree and along the roof so I could pull in broadcasts from Egypt, Russia and Australia," he remembered.

"There was an old fellow in the club, too, Ed Trombley, who taught everyone Morse code.

"Eventually, as I got older, I thought it would be fun to talk to these people and not

just listen

anymore."

DeLong started tinkering, building his own radio set-up and working out ways to tap into low-power microwave frequencies that allowed him to bounce signals off satellites.

His first license only su-

thorized him to communicate to line-of-sight destinations — defined by the horizon. "I wanted to talk to people farther away, and that meant connecting with the satellites."

While the full explanation gets a little technical as DeLong slips into a language unique to radio operators, the nuts and bolts involves a short antenna positioned in a ravioli can.

"It's not an original idea," DeLong said, laughing. "But I did leave the label on the can, so there's no doubt about what it is. It's a unique opportunity, building your own system. You can buy it all, of course, but it's fun to tinker."

And that's what members pass on to the younger set, he added, through programs at Saginaw's libraries and next month, at a huge gathering of youth in Detroit.

"We offer experiences, so people can see what it's like and get involved," he said.

Joseph M. Turner, 58, of Saginaw was interested in electricity and electronics, and when he joined the radio club at Webber Middle School, it was a way for a little kid in Saginaw to talk to people around the globe.

"It was a great way to learn about the world," Turner said. "But as I continued, my main interest moved from social to public service."

From the start, he added, when the first "wireless club" formed in 1908 in New York City, membership has divided between the technically inclined and the social sorts. What has changed, he added, is the average age of operators

— in 1908, it was 12 years old, in 1930 it was 25 and today it hovers around 55.

"The technology is growing, too, integrating into computer and television to the point where the technically proficient can communicate with astronauts and more. And some people join for the antiquity of the hobby; they love the Morse code and realize the traditional is still the most efficient around."

The 50th anniversary celebration brought a down-home message from Germany, from a Saginaw native who says experiences as a member of the mid-Michigan group led to her joining the Civil Defense Corps and to her current work teach-

ing at schools with the Department of Defense overseas.

"Dick Miller, who was a teacher at Webber Junior High School and the founder of the Webber Junior High School Radio Club, was responsible for many of the

younger members," wrote Diane Henrichs Yoesting, who said she joined the association 45 years ago.

"He gave up every lunch hour to be with all of us energetic middle school-age students."

Yoesting remembered that she was the only girl among the group that studied the international Morse code test for their novice licenses, and that when she passed, her fellow ham operators dubbed her "Brave Daring Chick."

"When things get scary in life, as they often do, I just remember — I AM a brave daring chick."

And even though times have changed, with better communication lines and the Internet shrinking the world, Stella said even someone who grew up in the computer age can appreciate the reliability of the good old ham.

"We are obsessed about backup," he said, talking about this weekend's field day, where members do everything possible to continue operations around the clock with no external power source.

"You wouldn't believe the amount of computer involvement in what we do today. The technology keeps adapting as more becomes available."

Interest is growing, too, he added.

"My brother-in-law is involved now, and he just turned 18," Stella said. "It's a fun hobby." ♦

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