

MATT HAUGEN (847) 869-8984  
MEDILL NEWS SERVICE  
FEBRUARY 13, 2001

Beeps and dashes pour out of a black box the size of a pack of cigarettes that sits on the table in front of Mike Dinelli. A half dozen electronic clicks whir by each second. The noises are like the gibberish chirpings of a video game soundtrack, but Dinelli hears something else.

He tilts his head a bit to one side, sits very still and then deciphers the noises. As he says the words and letters that make up the jargon of a Morse code message, a small display screen on the box affirms that he is correctly interpreting the beeps.

"This helps people get better at deciphering code," Dinelli says. "Some people can do as many as 60 words a minute...You can also slow it way down."

He turns the speed down on the device to 10 words a minute, but the beeps and dashes still seem unrecognizable. He turns it up to 60 and the noises seem to become one constant, uninterrupted beep. Dinelli says he can decipher about 30 words a minute, which sounds like a Pac Man game fast forwarded.

Dinelli's audible skills would amaze most people. But even though the talent is tougher to come by today than it was 50 years ago, Dinelli is still only one of thousands of Americans who communicate with a language based on a century-old technology.

At the open of the 20th century the world was moving through a communications revolution similar in scope to the one it's experiencing today. Telephones were becoming commonplace and Guglielmo Marconi's new gadget - the radio - was wowing people with its ability to send messages without wires through the atmosphere to receivers hundreds of miles away. Today with fax machines, cell phones and wireless Internet, some diehard communicators have decided that one of the oldest technologies is still one of the best.

Around the country and around the world, amateur radio - also known as ham radio - continues to hold both a nostalgic and a cutting edge niche in telecommunications. Enthusiasts, called hams or hammers, carry on the legacy of wireless communications in many forms.

Dinelli, 44, goes in for one of the classics.

"I do about 99 percent of my stuff with Morse code," says Dinelli, who lives in Skokie with his wife and 12-year-old son, Steven.

Dinelli, who is also known by his call sign N9BOR within ham circles, has worked with radios since he was a kid. He now spends a few hours each week communicating with people from all over the world via a radio in his basement.

"I just have a blast," Dinelli says. "The friendships that you develop are great. It's sort of like a fraternity."

Along with his friends made through the airwaves, Dinelli has met many people closer to who also share his hobby. He serves as president for the Metro Amateur Radio Club in Skokie. The 76 members of the club meet on the first Wednesday of each month to discuss radio issues. It is just one of thousands of such clubs around the country.

Dinelli estimates there are 600,000 ham radio operators around the world, with a majority operating in America, where the Federal Communication Commission requires amateur radio users to obtain a license by taking a 35-question multiple choice test. Dinelli earned his license in 1980 and just before Christmas last year his son found out he had passed the exam also.

"They just want to make sure you're not going to hurt yourself and you're not going to interfere with any other frequencies like the police or fire departments," says Arnold "Arnie" Borenstein, W9FO, who earned his license in 1940. Borenstein is a member of the Metro Amateur Radio Club. He co-taught the class Steven took for the FCC test.

"They ask you things like do you want to look into a microwave or not," Steven says. "It's really for just basic stuff."

Steven and his father now communicate with each other using handheld radio devices that transmit over short distances. Steven's was a gift from his father for getting his license.

Although Dinelli uses his radio as a hobby to practice an old-fashioned craft, some hams are doing high-tech and very critical communicating with their sets.

"Amateurs carry out a public service when communications fails," Borenstein says, noting that hams often play a vital role in emergencies. When earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes and other natural disasters disrupt phone and Internet service, hams will work with the Red Cross and the Salvation Army to coordinate rescue efforts, Borenstein adds.

Hams are also working with new technologies to push the limits of what radios are capable of doing. December 22 last year a class at Luther Burbank Elementary School in Chicago became the first group to use an amateur radio to contact the International Space Station. Students asked Space Station Alpha Commander William "Shep" Shepherd questions about being an astronaut and what he enjoyed most about living in space.

Some hams have also combined their radios with the Internet to try out new forms of contact. Using a setup known as a tunnel, hams send radio signals "down" into the Internet that then come "up" at locations all over the world. But high-tech is not the only way to reach distant lands with a radio.

In 2000, Dinelli made contact with people in more than 100 different international locations, most by using just Morse Code. Each contact he makes sends him a QSL card, which is a note card documenting the transmission. The time, location and type of contact is printed on each card and sent to the person contacted. Many hams have thousands of QSL cards in their collections.

A quick way to build up such a stash is through "contesting." Amateur clubs and other organizations sponsor events where hams contact as many people in as many locations as possible during a given time period.

"During a contest, I could be on [the radio] for maybe 24 hours during a 48-hour period," Dinelli says. Steven, who also enjoys taking part in the contests, says he can make a contact in just 30 to 60 seconds. Often the two will contact thousands of people in a just a day or two.

Over the years hams have created a subculture complete with customs, codes and practices unique to the hobby. Abbreviations and odd lingo may intimidate people unfamiliar with how a radio works, but most amateurs enjoy explaining their hobby and the special ins and outs of it.

Even as new technology changes telecommunications, Dinelli still says amateur radio is not going to disappear. There is something special and nostalgic about vacuum tube radios and hand-written logbooks.

"You can start as a kid and carry it through your whole life," he says.