

Helping hams

In case of disaster, a local chapter of radio buffs stands ready to assist with emergency communications.

By ANNE JOHNSTON

Messenger Post Staff

CANANDAIGUA — An Ontario County organization that considers itself the “when-all-else-fails group” is back in action, thanks to a federal grant and renewed interest.

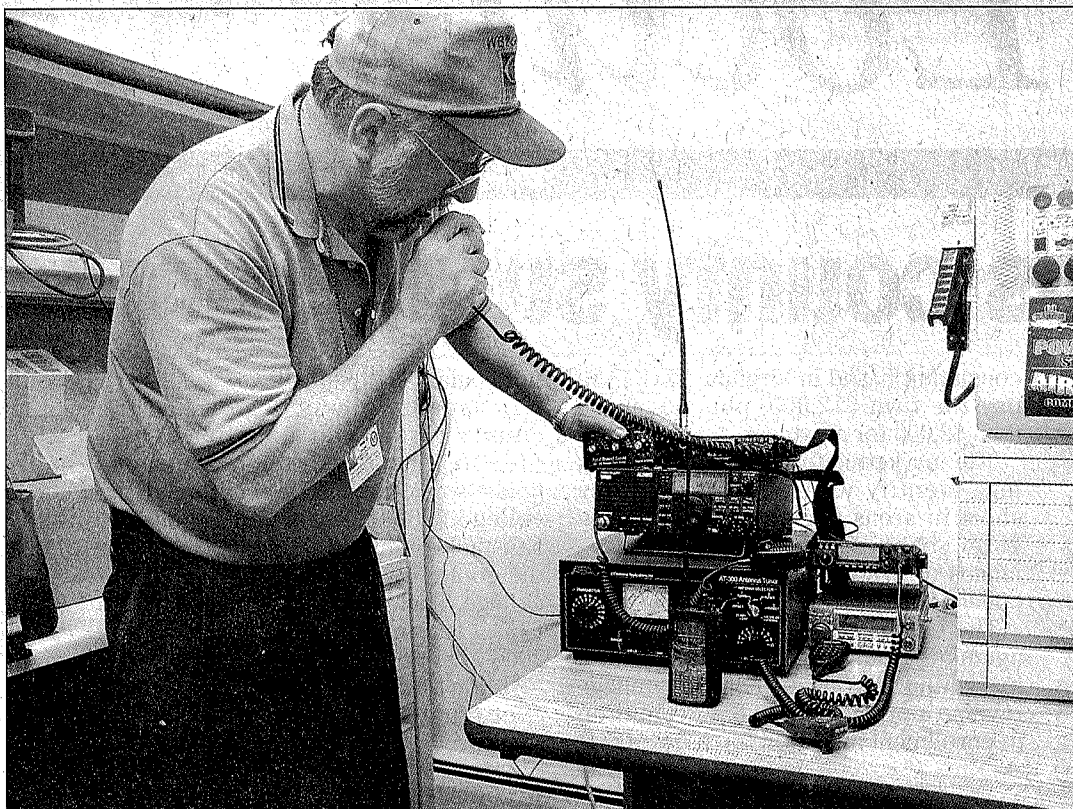
Called the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service, or RACES, the group takes part in disaster training drills, with the goal of being ready to help officials communicate during a major ice storm or widespread flooding, for example.

Power outages, damaged telephone lines and unreliable cellular phones would not stop members from being able to talk over their amateur radios, according to the organization's radio officer, Scott Teresi. “They're able to get a line of communication out to pretty much anyone in a short period of time, regardless of the environment,” the Canandaigua man said.

Even if the county's 911 center was hobbled, member John W. Park said, the RACES base station at the county's Safety Training Facility in Hopewell would be functioning on emergency power and RACES members could help alert officials elsewhere to local needs.

“As long as that thing is over there, Ontario County is not going to be isolated,” said Park, who lives in Gorham and is also the county attorney.

RACES came on the scene nationally in the 1950s and is supported by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Allen Pitts, public information officer for the American Radio Relay



STAFF PHOTO/ANNE JOHNSTON

Honeoye resident Norm Schrader, known by the call sign WB2GGM, talks with another amateur radio operator during a radio check from the Ontario County Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service base at the county Safety Training Facility in Hopewell.

“Despite all the modern communication systems — and they're wonderful — when things get sticky, the hams are holding down the fort,” Pitts said.

When Park arrived in Ontario County in 1980, the county had a radio officer to manage the local RACES group, which he joined.

As things like cell phones and the Internet became more popular, Park said, interest declined in emergency communications from volunteers. The level of organization in Ontario County waned, and by the late '90s, the local RACES chapter petered out.

Then came 9/11, when American Red Cross communications for metro New York — based in the World Trade Center — were knocked out. Park said amateur radio operators, or “hams,” spent countless hours providing communication for the organization and other agencies.

“That kind of raised awareness a little bit,” Park said.

Closer to home, awareness was raised by ice storms in the Adirondacks. Local emergency-services folks who went there to help out saw how useful the amateur radio



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operate with Red Cross shelters, not to mention help the shelters communicate with each other about their capabilities and needs.

“They would be a valuable tool,” said Harloff, whose office obtained a federal grant to help the group get back on its feet.

Postcards were sent out to the roughly 250 licensed ham operators in Ontario County, and now, 32 of them belong. They come from all walks of life, Teresi said, and approximately 20 have now gone through an emergency communications class to learn specific procedures for operating during a disaster like an ice storm.

The local RACES chapter meets once a month at the county's Safety Training Facility and also holds weekly

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Teresi said members also volunteer provide communication during events like charity walk-a-thons and bike-a-thons.

Park said some members have their radios in their homes, some have them in their cars, and some carry portable radios. Others have all three.

Teresi, who keeps his in his vehicle, became licensed in 1993. At the time, he was volunteering as an emergency medical technician near Asbury Park, N.J., where a Nor'easter hit, phone service was out and rescuers relied on amateur radio operators for help.

Similarly, Teresi noted, RACES members down South were in the thick of things during last year's hurricanes.

“They were providing emergency communications when all other communications went down,” he said, adding that RACES members also helped coordinate rescues of stranded people.

Park, who got his amateur radio license at the age of 15 in 1961, said he has used those skills more in the past two years — with the revived Ontario County RACES chap-

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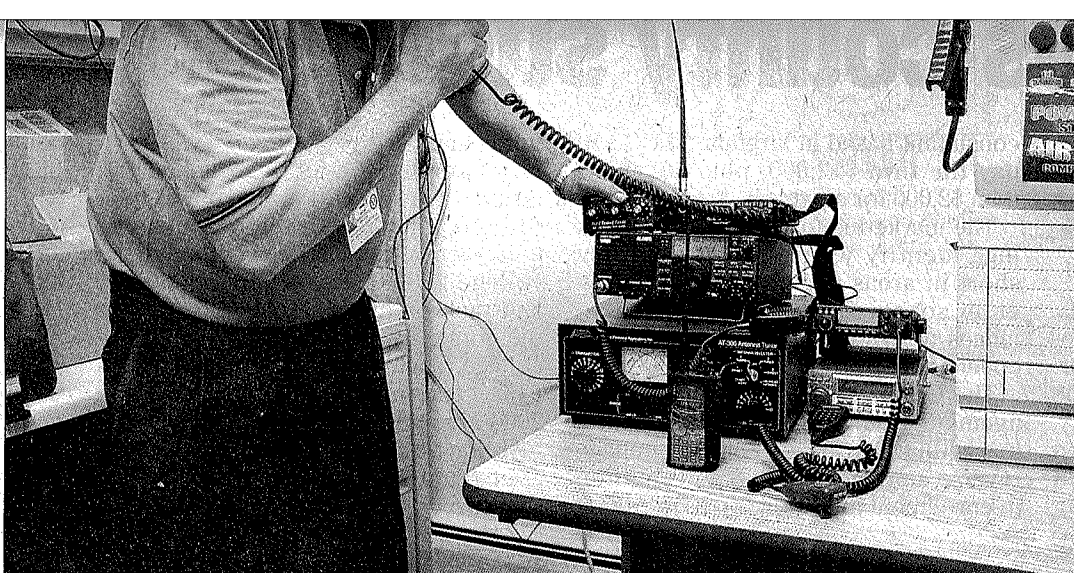
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RACES came on the scene nationally in the 1950s and is supported by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Allen Pitts, public information officer for the American Radio Relay League, said examples of emergencies in which RACES members have helped out include several hurricanes and tornadoes, the deadly 2004 Amtrak derailment in Mississippi, the shuttle Columbia recovery effort in 2003 and the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995.



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Closer to home, awareness was raised by ice storms in the Adirondacks. Local emergency-services folks who went there to help out saw how useful the amateur radio operators were when so much of the infrastructure was down, Park explained.

After the April 2003 ice storm in Ontario and surrounding counties, plus the Northeast blackout that summer, county Emergency Management Coordinator Jeff Harloff got in touch with



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The local RACES chapter meets once a month at the county’s Safety Training Facility and also holds weekly trainings, with members scattered about in different locations.

“When we come on the air, we essentially throw a net over the county and link all the communities in it together,” Park said.

To further their training and provide community service,

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Park, who got his amateur radio license at the age of 15 in 1961, said he has used those skills more in the past two years — with the revived Ontario County RACES chapter — than he had in the previous 20.

“The nice thing is, it’s an opportunity to do public service when it’s really needed,” he said, “and it’s fun, besides.”

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