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Amateur Radio Club of Parker County has a field day reaching out

By Terry Evans

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A couple dozen people worked 24 hours (in shifts) last weekend on a social-media network that was born more than a century before Facebook.

"Ours is the exact term of social network," said Jack Nixon, 70, president of the Amateur Radio Club of Parker County. "Each Sunday night our folks check in with Weatherford, Mineral Wells, Burleson, Granbury, Stephenville, all over for people to drop into the conversation."

After setting up ham radios in a pavilion next to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints on Bethel Road — stringing antennas through the trees and erecting a tower to elevate others, firing up a generator and assembling a solar panel to power them — the hams reached out to touch as many fellow radio enthusiasts as possible from 1 p.m. Saturday to 1 p.m. Sunday. They made contact with more than 75 of their peers in about 30 states and one territory, including Hawaii and Puerto Rico. Called a CQ Field Day, the annual event is a contest for bragging rights to see which club of the thousands across the nation can make the most contacts.

But the fun has a serious base. It's also a training session for disaster response, Nixon said. Conducting field days keeps these communicators' skills honed for the real deal.

"It's the ability to get in touch with someone who's away from wherever the emergency is," Nixon said.

Will Teague, 75, a past-president of the club, posed an example.

"Say a storm takes down all the cell towers and knocks out the telephones," Teague said. "You need to communicate with someone who can relay messages."

Members also gravitate to such official functions as Skywarn weather-watching networks and emergency-management agencies.

The promise of performing such services is a siren's song to many folks who join amateur radio clubs. They're folks like William Newman, 57, a district radio officer for Texas State RACES (Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Services), and Ken Stout, 53, a radiology

service engineer, who worked together Saturday on Stout's base unit. Stout had used a slingshot to hurl a string through the taller branches of oak trees near the pavilion, which he then used to hoist the wire that served as his antenna.

"The attraction of amateur radio is talking to people all over the world with two pieces of wire," Stout said.

An increasing number of people have been attracted to the hobby the last few years, Teague said. The club started in 1983 with about 15 members. It grew to more than 90 members in the 1990s, then slipped considerably. There are now 71 members, men and women. The oldest is in his 80s; the youngest, 12.

Initiation is simple: pass an exam that shows a basic understanding of how radio technology works and get a radio technician license.

"You can buy a manual, go online to an amateur radio study site," Nixon said. "Google W5PC for a lot of the information."

The club's call sign is W5PC, and members teach free classes on two consecutive Saturdays a few times a year, Nixon said. Graduation is rewarded with a free one-year membership.

That's when the real learning starts. Amateur radio equipment varies from hand-held models costing less than \$100 to base stations and ancillaries that run into the thousands, Nixon said. Fortunately, the Parker County club has a fair share of Elmers.

"An Elmer is a mentor who teaches someone who's just gotten into radio," said Teague, who has been Elmer to a line of enthusiasts that includes Nixon.

Amateur Radio Club of Parker County meets at 7 p.m. each second Tuesday at the Harberger Hill Community Center, 701 Narrow St. in Weatherford.