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QST Profile:

Who's Harry Helms?

This radio amateur is committed to helping newcomers get on the right wavelength.

By Robert J. Halprin, K1XA

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Who is Harry Helms? The bumbling, obese private detective who somehow foiled a high-society kidnapping? No—that was Hollywood's *Who's Harry Crumb?* as portrayed on celluloid by actor John Candy. Is he the octogenarian Manhattan hotel mogul who, along with his wife, the so-called "Queen of Mean," had big-time legal problems? No, that was Harry Helmsley.

So who is Harry Helms, anyway?

An active radio amateur and shortwave listener, Helms, AA6FW, is an entrepreneur and prolific electronics journalist with 11 books to his credit. (His latest, *Shortwave Listening Guidebook*, was reviewed in December 1991 *QST*, page 34.) Helms writes a monthly column for *Popular Communications* called You Should Know: Interesting Thoughts and Ideas for Enjoying the Hobby, aimed at the radio beginner. He also authors Report from the Third Planet, a column about geological and environmental sciences for a new magazine, *Science PROBE!*. In 1990, he cofounded HighText Publications in San Diego, where he's vice president for book projects. Helms admits that "if it wasn't for Amateur Radio, I wouldn't have had the career I do—and I can't think of much anything else I could do instead. I'd like others to be as lucky as I was to have Amateur Radio play such an important role in their formative years."

An avid astronomer, scuba diver and mountain climber, Helms, 39, modestly describes himself as a "very ordinary and dull person" who feels the messages he tries to convey—about ham radio, SWling, electronics, computers, science and the world around us—are more important and interesting than the messenger. Despite this disclaimer, this interview gives us the chance to find out more about his inspirational background and his expert analysis of the past, present and future of Amateur



Since his teens, Harry Helms, AA6FW, has enjoyed an all-out fascination with the radio spectrum which he conveys to his readers, especially beginners. "I was touring the Soviet Union in April 1986 when Chernobyl blew. With the small, portable shortwave receiver I had taken along, I was able to keep informed as to what had really happened, thanks to the BBC and VOA. Even our official Soviet tour guides were discreetly asking me what the Western media were saying. This incident typifies a fundamental notion of mine that in a world where satellites and fiber optics are the hot buzzwords, there's still a place—and need—for the sort of simple, but reliable shortwave communications radio amateurs pioneered and still practice."

Radio in the codeless Technician era.

QST: When did you get interested in Amateur Radio?

Helms: It all started with a simple observation I made when I was about 10 years old. During the daytime, I heard one set of stations on the broadcast band, all local. At night, some of those stations disappeared, and in their places were stations from hundreds or thousands of miles away! Yet I didn't hear a different set of FM broadcast-band stations at night and I saw

the same TV stations at night. It made no sense—I thought radio signals were all alike except for something called "frequency." In the library, I found the answer in some books about radio, where I first learned about shortwave and ham radio. I pestered my parents for a shortwave radio and on my 11th birthday they gave me a Hallcrafters SX-119 Sky Buddy II. I extensively monitored the ham phone bands with that radio. In an era that predated the advent of communications satellites, the idea of talking directly to people around the world on your own radio station had this fantastic, Buck Rogersish aura to it!

I was immediately interested in ham radio, but it wasn't until a few years later that I buckled down and learned the code, getting WN4EOX as my first call sign [Helms was born in the Norfolk, Virginia, area while his father was in the Navy, and spent the first six years of his life there. Since then, he's lived in both Carolinas, Georgia, Texas, New York, New Jersey and now California.]

QST: Did your interest in Amateur Radio serve as a catalyst for your writing career?

Helms: Ham radio wasn't merely a catalyst—it was the *raison d'être* for my entire career! My writing career began the summer before my senior year in high school. I enjoyed the electronics magazines of the 1960s, such as *Popular Electronics*, *Electronics Illustrated*, and so on. Maybe I was cocky, but it occurred to me that I could write articles as good as the ones I was reading in those magazines!

I started trying to sell magazine articles to those publications when I was 14, building up an impressive collection of rejection slips. In 1969, when I was 16, I sold my first article. It was about the Mariner IV Mars probe, and I think I received \$50 for it. The magazine that bought it was called *Radio Today*, a now-defunct journal, then published by Wayne Green, W2NSD. I continued to write articles mainly for such magazines as *Elementary Electronics* and *Radio-TV Experimenter* throughout college. It became clear to me that I enjoyed learning about the different technologies and explaining and/or demystifying them for the layman through my writing.

After graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I began a career as a technical writer for Texas Instruments and Tandy Corporation. I continued to write freelance articles and books for TAB, Sams and McGraw-Hill. When my editor at McGraw-Hill was promoted, I applied for his old position at McGraw-Hill's New York headquarters. I got the job and have since been a senior editor for technology books at McGraw-Hill, Prentice Hall and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. I left the latter company in early 1990 to help launch HighText, which specializes in technical and engineering books.

QST: *Do your magazine columns have any significance to Amateur Radio?*

Helms: Of the two columns, the one of most direct significance to ham radio is in *Popular Communications*. The editor, Tom Kneitel, K2AES, gives me a pretty broad range to write about, but I try to remember the things about radio that once puzzled me and hopefully explain them to those readers in a similar situation. In the *Science PROBE!* column, I get to write about physical and environmental science observations one can make about the world, and I get to rekindle the sense of wonder about how incredibly complex and varied this planet is! I don't proselytize, but where appropriate, I try to work in ham radio and its benefits into articles for a non-radio audience [Helms recently published an onsite report in *Science PROBE!* about observing the July 1991 solar eclipse from Hawaii in which a KH6 2-meter FM observation network was mentioned prominently.] I try to make it clear in my work that I'm a ham radio operator and that ham radio played a major role in getting me where I am today, and I always enjoy pitching ham radio to people who ask what those letters and numbers after my name stand for.

As far as *Popular Communications* is concerned, my gut-level estimate is that about 25% of my readers are hams. I attribute this to the fact that most contemporary HF transceivers have shortwave coverage as part of the package. And hams have been a big help in tracking covert radio activity, such as "numbers" stations, strange CW beacons, ionospheric sounders and other esoteric signals. The increased technical savvy and capabilities of hams have made possible the resolution of some of these puzzles.

QST: *With your background, your own radio station must be right out of the bridge of the starship Enterprise, right?*

Helms: Not exactly. In fact, I have a low-profile station just like many hams and many of my readers. I live in an antenna-restricted housing development with my wife, Tina, here in San Diego, so I'm limited to a Butternut 80-10 meter vertical, con-

veniently hidden by a tree. My HF rig is an ICOM IC-735 transceiver and I keep the power down to about 70 watts to avoid TVI complaints. I enjoy DXing and contests and have been able to earn DXCC with this setup. I'm mainly active on SSB, although I'm increasingly active on packet and RTTY. I always bring along a 2-meter FM hand-held whenever I travel. I spend most of my time in the listening mode, however, and my principal receiver for shortwave is the Drake R-8. I have a fondness for vacuum-tube gear, though, and have a Hammarlund HQ-150, Drake SW-4A and Hallicrafters SX-119 in the shack, although not the original one I got as that birthday present.

QST: *Clearly, then, you're able to identify with the beginning ham. What predictions or insights can you offer on the future of our hobby, particularly in view of the influx of codeless licensees?*

Helms: You ain't gonna recognize Amateur Radio in another 20 years! Most amateurs will be codeless hams. And a good bit of ham radio will more closely resemble the originally intended Class D CB service than today's ham radio, especially if some of the FCC's recent thoughts about broadening the scope of permissible communications come to pass. A substantial minority of hams will never even touch a microphone, but will communicate only via keyboard, often in some sort of automatic or unattended mode. Traffic handling via nets will become something akin to AM phone or straight-key CW—a small, nostalgic, cultish activity, while traffic handling via packet will totally dominate. Even "coded" hams will migrate more to VHF, UHF and satellites, less the result of deliberate decisions than the result of antenna restrictions, space limitations and so on.

Amateur Radio will become less of an activity as an end in itself and become more of an adjunct to other activities, such as hiking, camping, boating and so on. People will increasingly use ham radio as a low-cost, convenient communications medium instead of a "hobby." Bottom line: I feel that we're on the verge of a revolution in the mix of the ham population and operating styles that will be equivalent to the SSB and FM repeater revolutions—and then some—rolled into one! The "good old days" are still in the future, and I'm looking forward to 1993 and beyond.

QST: *Is it fair to say that you were a proponent of the new Technician license?*

Helms: Yes, I was and am a strong advocate of the codeless Technician license as our last and best chance to save Amateur Radio. We finally have a code-free ticket with enough real privileges to make it worthwhile and attractive. Everyone interested in the future of Amateur Radio—individual hams, clubs, the ARRL,

authors—has to spread the news about the codeless Tech and reorient our approaches to recruiting new hams to capitalize on it. My eclipse article served as an example of this, in which I described Amateur Radio supporting an activity totally unrelated to radio, but still the sort of scientific endeavor from which prospective hams might be recruited. We must also minimize the attitude present in some quarters that one will never be a "real ham" until the code is mastered, because the reality is that many newcomers will obtain a codeless Technician ticket as their first and *only* license.

QST: *In terms of recruitment of young people in particular, is there any hope of dragging them away from MTV and Nintendo?*

Helms: I feel strongly about the need to involve more of our youth in "hands-on" technical and scientific activities like Amateur Radio. Those of us pushing 40—or over—can remember the variety of scientific toys that were once available. I had all the chemistry, physics, electronics, microscope and Erector sets as a kid, and I suspect many of my contemporaries had the same. Try to find anything remotely similar in toy stores today.

Video games are great for developing reflexes, but not much else. I'm convinced that we have to get our youngsters involved in science-related activities at an early age and produce a more scientifically aware populace. Otherwise, the United States is doomed to become a part of the Third World.

If the codeless Tech license had been available when I became interested in Amateur Radio, I would have been able to get my ticket a couple of years earlier. I know some amateurs get upset at the thought of a lot of "kids" descending on "our" bands. I can understand why—kids are often irritating, disruptive, rude, inconsiderate and generally loathsome! Guess what? That's the natural order of things.

When I was a teenager, I was difficult to deal with, too, even when participating in the sort of scientifically oriented activities I advocate. Gunpowder was a frequent product of my chemistry set, for example! I suspect most amateurs who dread any possible large-scale infusion of youth into the ranks of Amateur Radio were more like I was than they choose to remember.

But my point of view is that any perceived disruptions to our tight, quiet little world is worth it if the result is a technically competent, productive society that can afford to keep our Social Security checks coming! My company is publishing a book called *All About Ham Radio* for this audience and we'll try to bring out one Amateur Radio-related title per year. All of us have to help recruit and welcome younger, codeless hams. [QST]