

The hobby of meeting people in the air

1977

by Andrew Chan

Curious about what a radio could do, Verne Bohlender built a crystal set more than a quarter of a century ago. After he had everything hooked up, he turned it on. What he got from it was an electric shock and the noise of a truck going by his house in Hanover.

He didn't complain about getting the shock.

Instead, he gave it another try. This time he was smart enough to find out more about radios from reading books and consulting with experienced radio builders before he went ahead with his receiver super regen.

As soon as he switched on the receiver, he heard some strange band music blaring through the speaker. He listened to it for awhile. Moments later, the announcer came on and identified the broadcasting station as Mexico City Radio, Mexico.

Reaching out to a nation a few thousand miles away could not be anything less than a thrill for a young man like Verne in the early 50's. His ambitious mind began grasping for fresh air. He read more books on radio. He visited other amateurs in Port Elgin, Paisley and the surrounding areas.

During his educational tour, he was given a single tube transmitter by the Wint Shoemaker in Paisley. Not long afterwards, he applied for a beginner licence for amateur radio operators. He was assigned the phonetics, VE3 BSF. Whenever he got on the radio to make contact with the other amateurs he would identify himself as Big Sleepy Fellow, using the last three letters of his phonetics.

Verne didn't stay at the

Everyone has a story to tell

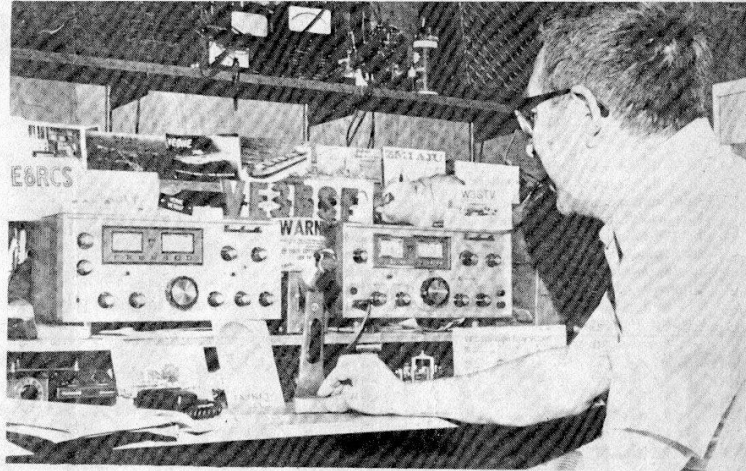
when Verne made contact with her radio operator. After the original contact, Verne found out that the operator's grandmother had just died. So, he tried to make contact again with the Bonadventure but he was not successful. He didn't give up. He contacted another operator who was able to relay the information to the man on the Bonadventure. As a result, the man flew home the next day.

Verne didn't use his radio solely for conveying information or messages. One time, he used it to play chess.

Verne and a 17-year-old boy from New Brunswick became friends after conversing a few times on the air. The boy was paralysed from the waist down and he asked Verne to teach him how to play chess. Everyday at noon they played chess through the radio. Sometimes they could only make three moves in a day before it was time to get back to work. A game could last for days.

Over the years, Verne has talked to people in Japan, New Zealand, Africa and Russia. Usually, he has no problems communicating with English speaking people from every corner of the globe. Occasionally, he would run into the trouble of trying to make out lumbering English. South America seemed to be the place where he had most of his communication problems. Once in a while, he even had to use a book on conversational Spanish to help him carry on the communication.

Although Verne has made thousands of friends on the air, he



"Baker Sugar Fox"

cannot tell if he has passed them on the streets. They only know one another either by voice or by phonetics.

One day, an old fellow walked into his Chesley grocery store to say hello to him. Verne was at a loss. He didn't remember having met such a man before. Until the man brought up the radio business did Verne realize that it was the first down-to-earth reunion for two amateur radio operators.

Operating radio at his leisure remains a hobby for Verne. Now this old timer is playing with a \$1,000 radio set-up. Obviously, time has changed since his "shocking crystal set".

Verne didn't stay at the beginner's level.

Six months later, he acquired the advance licence which allowed him to transmit all the legal modes namely, code, voice, teletype, and television. By then, he was also capable of building more sophisticated equipments.

Verne can still recall the three-year-old earthquake incident in South America. It happened on a Sunday afternoon. Following the earthquake, a radio operator lined up a network of amateur operators to help in relaying information. Verne was assigned to control the traffic in-flow for almost three hours.

Another impressive episode occurred on Bonadventure, the only Canadian aircraft carrier. She was off the coast of Florida