

In place when disaster strikes



JOHN GUERRA/STAFF

From left, Mike Forsythe, Roger Warrick, Mike Enos, and George Sweatt show off the home-made mobile ham transmission tower Saturday.

Local ham radio operators work the field

By **JOHN GUERRA**
STAFF WRITER

The mobile tower – built from pieces of scrap by George Sweatt – rises 60 feet into the sky above the Placid Lakes Community Center.

“It’s what you call functional, not beautiful,” said Sweatt, who has worked in communications for years.

His friends – Mike Forsythe, Roger Warrick, Mark Enos, and Ron Natale – are proud of the tower, which can bounce signals off the International Space Station or off the ionosphere to reach the rest of the world.

“We have two antennas at the top that operates off five different bands, and at the top is a long-wire, inverted V that can operate on all bands,” Forsythe said. What the group is looking at, craning heads to take it all in: A mobile radio tower that can be erected anywhere in the land when natural or man-made disasters hobble civilization. It’s also a symbol for what ham radio operators can do. The worldwide community of operators can provide a communications platform in areas hit by war or hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and other natural disasters.

For 24 hours from 2 p.m. Saturday through 2 p.m. Sunday, the Highlands County Amateur Radio Club set up house at the community center to hold its semi-annual field day. There is the summer field day and a winter



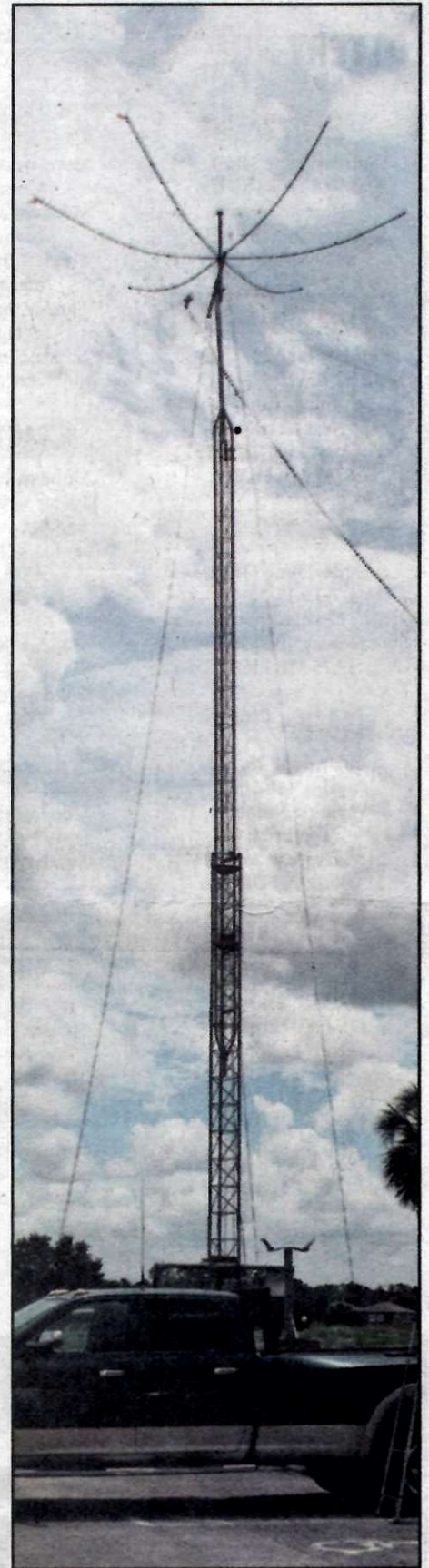
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Mike Forsythe monitors the signals coming in over the ham radio the software is connected to. The Highlands County Amateur Radio Club held its annual summer field exercise last weekend to see how quickly they could be up and running.

field day, both of which allow the club to practice setting up emergency communications and to compete in a North American contest to see how many ham radio contacts the club can make.

Third, it was a time for the public to drop by to try a transmission and learn the amazing history of the discipline.

“Ham radio started in 1908 by Hiram Percy Maxim,” said operator Roger Warrick. “He was the grandfather of ham radio when there were just a few



JOHN GUERRA/STAFF

This is a handmade mobile tower built by the Highlands County Amateur Radio Club, which set up shop for its summer field exercise. It was built with scrap metal but can transmit worldwide.

RADIO

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guys communicating with morse code as a hobby.”

The number of operators exploded as radio became more accessible. In fact, ham operators helped create the science behind it.

“Ham radio operators helped advance the technology,” Warrick said. “Antenna design, radio design, batteries – operators innovated what we have today.”

The Amateur Radio Club provides ham operators for the county’s emergency operations center during hurricanes, Enos said. He has been an operator for decades,

including in fire service and disaster emergency communications up north. He also has a handheld ham radio the size of a small cell phone that he carries with him.

“We’re very interested in getting younger people in Highlands County interested in ham radio,” Enos said. “We encourage them to contact us on our website, Highlands County Amateur Radio Club — Highlands County Florida (highland-samateurradio.com).”

There’s so much to say about the 24-hour-long summer field exercise, including that Forsythe and his fellow operators planned to use the relay on the International Space Station as it passed

over Central Florida Saturday night.

“We’re in place when disasters come,” said Ron Natale, who has been a ham radio operator for 60 years. “When everything is down, including electricity, you can still send messages through us and the American Radio Relay League (ARES).”

This is truly adventurous stuff.

“When a hurricane goes through the islands and tears everything up, sometimes there will be two or three days before they get infrastructure up,” Warrick said. “There’s a guy like one of us with a piece of wire over what’s left of a tree and a radio and a battery giving them information.”

In 1908, members of the Harvard University club created the world’s first amateur radio station. Their names were Albert S. Hyman, Bob Almy and Peggy Murray, and their first callsign was HYMAN-ALMY-MURRAY. Translating it into Morse code is hard, and it was shortened to HY-AL-MU. But a Mexican steamship used a similar callsign, HYALMO, and they began to mix on the air. Then the American pioneers abbreviated theirs to capital letters. In those years, radio operators chose their callsigns, and the signal of amateur radio stations was often better and stronger than professional ones. It got to the point that a special committee of Congress in Washington created a law project that severely limited the activities of radio amateurs. In 1911, Albert Hyman proposed his version of the law on the telegraph without wires in his dissertation for Harvard University. The reviewer sent a copy to Senator David Walsh, a member of the relevant congressional committee. The theses impressed the lawmaker so much that he invited the author to a commission meeting. With tears in his eyes, Albert Hyman told the members of Congress how much effort and labor it took to build their small amateur radio station. If the commission’s project is accepted, they will be forced to close their radio station, as they will not be able to pay for the license and meet other stringent requirements. During the debate, HAM became the symbol of all the small amateur radio stations in the country, desperately resisting the pressure and threats of powerful professional radio stations. During the discussions, all speakers came to the defense of hams. The project was rejected, and the abbreviation became the symbol of all amateur radio stations.