



Amateur radio serious business

HARD AT IT - Russell Brown talks on one of the radios during the Meridian Amateur Radio Club's annual field day Saturday, while Donna Harrison talks on another. Looking over Brown's shoulder is Phillip Duke. The club spent the night at Bonita Lakes, making contacts with other ham operators across the nation.

Photo by Steve Swogetinsky/The Meridian Star



**By Steve Swogetinsky/The Meridian Star
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Sometimes, serious business can be a lot of fun.

That's how amateur radio operator Mel Oubre summed up the all-nighter he and fellow members of the Meridian Amateur Radio Club pulled Saturday during their 24-hour emergency drill field day.

"This is a nationwide drill," Oubre said as members worked to convert the second pavilion at Bonita Lakes Park into an open air "hamshack."

"We set up antennas and operate on emergency power generators and batteries for 24 hours. If there were some sort of disaster that knocked out the power and communications, emergency management would rely on the amateur radio operators to send messages. We want to be ready in case that ever happens," Oubre said.

Retired from the Navy and Delco Remy, Oubre has been a ham radio operator since 1984. He said he might spend as little as 20 hours with his radios on some weeks, and as many as 100 hours at other times.

"It depends on what is going on," Oubre said. "I'm one of the storm watchers for the National Weather Service. If we are having bad weather, I could be on the air communicating with the weather service office in Jackson."

Oubre was classified as a novice when he became an amateur radio operator in 1984, and has moved up to over the years to "extra class." He said how much a person spends in becoming an amateur radio operator depends on the individual.

"You can get into it for \$200 to \$300, or you could spend several thousand dollars," Oubre said. "A good HF base station will cost between \$1,000 to \$1,800. Some might cost more, some less, depending on what you want to do."

The object of the weekend drill is to contact as many different amateur radio stations and operators as possible. This information will be sent to the American Radio Relay League, which will compile reports from operators from across the nation and publish a report.

Last year, the Meridian club made more than 800 contacts, and Oubre predicted with two stations working, it would be more than 1,000 this year. While some contacts might be international, most were made within the United States.

Not all of the talking is being done by voice. John Ziller was operating a digital radio setup with a computer gathering information from his radio.

"I just click and send a message," said Ziller, who has been an amateur radio operator for about 13 years

"This is a good hobby for someone who is retired. But it is important work. In a real emergency when the power is out, people count on the ham operators for communications because they have the backup power."

During a time of bad weather, anyone with a scanner can listen to the Meridian amateur radio operators by tuning in 146.700.

The drill wasn't all work. While one group talked on their radios and another was setting up a third antenna, others were grilling hamburgers. They'll be at Bonita Lakes Park until 1 p.m. today.

The club holds its official meeting every first Saturday at the Magnolia Inn, starting at 9 a.m., said Mike Harbour, a longtime member. They also get together on the other Saturdays at the same time for unofficial meetings.

"It's great fellowship, and you enjoy being around people who are interested in what you are interested in. We'll go home tired after the field day, but this is something we enjoyed doing," Harbour said.

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