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Our Gateway

“This month the International Amateur Radio Union marks its 89th birthday with the theme, ‘Amateur Radio: Your Gateway to Wireless Communications.’”

Every year the International Amateur Radio Union (IARU) celebrates the anniversary of its founding, April 18, as World Amateur Radio Day. The idea is to provide IARU member-societies with a suggested public relations focus on the benefits that countries and communities derive from Amateur Radio. The theme is chosen by the IARU Administrative Council and varies from year to year, calling attention to one or more of Amateur Radio’s contributions to emergency communications, technology, youth education, and international goodwill.

While the creation and continued success of the IARU are well worth celebrating, the ARRL has not made great use of World Amateur Radio Day for public outreach because our own Field Day, falling just a few weeks later, offers such an outstanding opportunity. Several other IARU member-societies embrace it enthusiastically, organizing special events and other activities around the occasion.

This year’s theme, “Amateur Radio: Your Gateway to Wireless Communications,” may seem to make a bold claim. After all, wireless communications are nearly ubiquitous. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) there are almost as many cell phone subscriptions in the world as there are people, and at the current rate of growth the penetration will exceed 100% sometime this year. That milestone was reached in the developed countries in 2007 and the developing world is catching up rapidly. ITU statistics show the number of fixed (wireline) telephone subscriptions peaked in 2009 and is slowly declining. Fixed broadband subscriptions continue to grow, but at a much slower rate than mobile broadband. In a world that is nearly saturated with wireless communications, what does Amateur Radio have to offer — especially to a young generation that takes mobile telecommunications for granted?

What we offer can be summed up in one word: *experience*.

The utility of commercial wireless networks is beyond question. Most of us make use of them every day. It is becoming difficult to imagine life without them. Indeed, for young people the world before smartphones is as much ancient history as is the world before television for Baby Boomers. In the space of a few years we have become accustomed to being able to connect with friends and family from almost anywhere, at almost any time. Talking, texting, even trading photos and videos with someone halfway around the world is simply a matter of poking at a little screen. What it takes to make this happen is of no concern to the consumer, who — if it stopped working — wouldn’t be able to fix it, anyway.

Through Amateur Radio, one can experience every aspect of wireless communications. From building the most basic receivers and transmitters to designing a digital protocol, from making a first contact across town to bouncing signals off the Moon, an incredible array of rewarding experiences is available to the radio amateur. Much like the consumers of commercial wireless

services, those of us who have been at this for a while tend to take these experiences for granted. We shouldn’t.

Most people will never experience the elation that comes from connecting a receiver they have built with their own hands to a piece of wire, and hearing signals from hundreds or thousands of miles away. Most will never have a “wow” feeling when for the first time, one of those signals responds to their call. They will not experience the camaraderie that comes from performing a public service as part of a team of communications problem-solvers. They won’t feel the security that comes from knowing that when (not if) commercial services fail, they will still be able to communicate.

With experience comes understanding — of how radio works, when it will and will not, and how to work around the problem when it doesn’t. And, has been true since radio’s earliest days, an early opportunity to satisfy one’s curiosity through hands-on exploration can have a strong and very positive influence on career choice and success. As society becomes ever more dependent on the wireless telecommunications infrastructure it becomes ever more dependent on the people who know how to keep it running and to make improvements to keep up with increasing demand.

What are the unforgettable moments in your own Amateur Radio experience? Looking back across a 52-year span, this writer can think of a few. My first contact as a Novice after days of fruitless calling. My first DX contact, with PY5ASN in Brazil — a blessed soul who spent many hours patiently helping newcomers fumble their way through a QSO. Joining my section traffic net at age 14 and, for the first time in my life, being treated as a peer by adults. A 250-mile contact with a Heathkit Twoer. Working Asia on 80 meters for the first time, with low power and a low dipole that had to be bent twice to fit on a city lot. These and dozens of other memories from my teen years are as fresh as if they had happened last month.

And they keep happening. Speaking of last month, while on vacation in Puerto Rico I happened to tune across six meters and heard LU5FF, and later LU5CAB, with nothing more for an antenna at my end than a piece of wire. Best of all, they both came back to my call. Reading about transequatorial propagation — a phenomenon first discovered by radio amateurs in 1947 — and puzzling out the physics that make it a regular occurrence at some latitudes is one thing. Experiencing it is something else entirely.

And there is only one way to do that: by entering the gateway of Amateur Radio.