

# Ham radio operators more than just enthusiasts

By Gregory A. Phillips  
Staff Writer

ORANGE PARK — Despite all of the modern forms of communication, such as smart phones, text messaging, social media and Internet chat, one communication medium is standing the tests of time.

Last weekend, ham radio operators from the Clay County Amateur Radio Emergency Services and the Orange Park Amateur Radio Club celebrated the climax of the week long "Amateur Radio Week" in partnership with the American Radio Relay League. The field day — held at Orange Park High School — allowed club members to check their radio equipment to ensure it will work at peak proficiency in the case of an emergency. Local ham radio operators

are often called on to augment the communications abilities of emergency services providers around the country.

During the height of 2012's Super Storm Sandy, some municipalities in the Northeast Atlantic area completely lost their communications abilities. Unable to direct emergency personnel to where they were needed, those municipalities reached out to the ham radio operators from around the country for help, including those from Clay County.

"Sometimes in a storm like that, they can't connect to their responders directly. That's where we come in. We relayed directions for emergency responders letting them know where they were needed," said Scott Roberts, public information officer

for Clay County Amateur Radio Emergency Services. "We also relayed messages between family members letting them know their families were safe and sound."

In times of catastrophic weather emergencies, the CCARES ham radio operators are ready to help when other forms of media, such as smart phones and other Internet communications fail.

"Atmospheric conditions do affect the range of our signals. What's funny is how I can talk to someone in Atlanta and then 10 minutes later Atlanta won't be able to hear me, but someone in Colorado will," Roberts said.

CCARES also assists the Clay County Sheriff's Office to help ensure safety on local waterways via the Marine Volunteers in

Police Service program. They are working with the Marine Patrol of the CCSO to coordinate safety inspections by the marine patrol as well as responding to emergency calls.

Ham radio operators, or hams, are required to have a license from the Federal Communications Commission as part of the Communications Act of 1934. In the U.S., there are three license classes — technician, general and extra.

"The differences in the licenses are in the operating capabilities. Generally, the higher the license, the more frequencies you can broadcast on [legally]," said Mike Hendershot, an assistant emergency coordinator with CCARES.

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## Fine Tuning

STAFF PHOTO BY GREGORY A. PHILLIPS

Members of the Clay County Amateur Radio Emergency Services and the Orange Park Amateur Radio Club are shown here setting up their ham radio antenna June 28 on the campus of Orange Park High School. It was part of a celebration culminating Amateur Radio Week across America. See story, page 5.

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dinator with CCARES.

An estimated six million people are still involved with this hobby that began at the start of the 20th century. HAM radio operators communicate with each other using short wave radio, a technology that has grown since its development.

What once was housing filled with vacuum tubes and transistors are comprised of microprocessors and digital signal processors today. As the science grows, the strength and abilities of these ham radio operators will grow in kind. But there is still a potential need to keep one foot in the past.

"I've been doing this for 56 years. I'm here manning the [Morse Code] radio for the field day," said Clarence Keros. "Several years ago they removed the requirement to know Morse Code from the test to get your license. There's probably only about 30-percent of the licensed people who still know it. But what happens in the event of an Electro Magnetic Pulse? All of the new radios are useless and we're back to vacuum packed tubes and Morse code."

Currently there are 48 members of the Clay County Amateur Radio Emergency Services and 93 members in the Orange Park Amateur Radio Club.