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When explaining Amateur Radio (sometimes called 'ham' radio), many people have visions of operators huddled around a big old radio adjusting knobs and listening to Morse code. Amateur Radio today is not your father's ham radio. Morse code is no longer a requirement to earn a license. In today's digital world, keyboards and personal computing skills have largely replaced the telegraph key. Amateur Radio enthusiasts today have the ability to use their skills and technology in many different ways, from communicating across Steele County, around the planet, or out of this world to an astronaut on the International Space Station.

How does Amateur Radio help in an emergency? Anyone involved in emergency response will note the importance of reliable communications. Communication systems used by Public Service agencies are regulated to ensure communications are clear and without interference. Unfortunately, this regulation also restricts flexibility when communication demands are high. How many times in recent years have you heard the term "interoperability"?

Amateur Radio has much more flexibility and resilience. It generally is not hampered by "interoperability" issues. Amateur Radio can instantly cross jurisdictions (city, county, state). The equipment in use in one part of the country can instantly be used in another. A wide range of frequencies are available so lines of communication can be set up to talk across town or across the world. Amateur Radio also does not require an infrastructure, such as a cell phone tower, to communicate. The elimination of obstacles provides meaning to the slogan "When all else fails, Amateur Radio". On the Public Service side, some of these limitations are being addressed with the new radio systems often referred to as "800 Megahertz."

Amateur Radio volunteers can provide communications on behalf of Public Service agencies or other non-profit groups such as the Red Cross or Salvation Army. Amateur Radio is routinely used during the warmer months as part of SKYWARN, watching the skies during severe weather events.

Amateur Radio volunteers from Steele County traveled to Rushford in 2007 to provide communications during the flooding. During the peak flooding period Amateur Radio was the ONLY method of communicating in to or out of Rushford. One of the most important roles in Rushford was passing messages from the flood victims to distance relatives, letting others know they are OK. The Red Cross used the communication link to track where flood victims were located. Coordination of supplies and resources was also handled through the link.

Owatonna - Steele County Amateur Radio (OSCAR) is the local ham club that meets monthly. In addition to gathering to discuss their hobby, members also prepare for responding to a communication emergency. Members participated in the annual Steele County drill last September, demonstrating a new communication mode that might be used in that particular scenario. An emergency communication exercise called "Field Day" takes place the last weekend of June each year. Volunteers have donated and/or installed Amateur Radio equipment in preparation of supporting the residents of Steele County. Amateur Radio equipment is set up at the Owatonna Fire Station, Ellendale EOC, and the mobile Emergency Operations Center trailer.

During an event of national significance, Amateur Radio emergency operations may be coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) through the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES). Local non-profit agencies are supported by the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES), coordinated through the American Radio Relay League (ARRL). As part of Steele County Emergency Management, a dual RACES/ARES organization is established.

In this article, I focused on emergency communications, but there are many other facets of the hobby. For example, hams are communicating through dedicated satellites, linking through the Internet, tracking moving objects with GPS, and transmitting TV signals. And what about Morse code? Many operators (new and old) continue to use this time honored and dependable method of communication. Anyone with an interest in Amateur Radio is invited to visit one

of the club meetings. OSCAR is sponsoring a license class, beginning 10-Feb. Visit the OSCAR web site at www.oscarmn.org for additional information on Amateur Radio, OSCAR, and the license class.

Tom Karnauskas is the ARES Emergency Coordinator and RACES Radio Officer for Steele County. Anyone interested in Amateur Radio can contact Tom N0UW at 507-444-9133 or **OSCARMN@LL.NET**.

Steele County Community Awareness Emergency Response (CAER) is an organization with a purpose to help people, business, and agencies promote the highest possible community awareness and emergency response and recovery from disaster.