

Signals From Paradise

A brief history of ham radio in the Virgin Islands.

Malcolm Preston, NP2L

The origins of ham radio in the Virgin Islands can be attributed to Dick Spenceley, who was a Navy radio man stationed at the St Thomas Coast Guard station in 1921, and who later settled on the island. In 1928, *QST* reported that the United States Supervisor of Radio in the Fourth District issued the call 4AAN to Dick in 1928. His call was later changed to KV4AA. His many years of activity were recognized by the US Army and the Territorial Governor in 1968. For a number of years, Dick was active on the HF bands. He was recognized in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for making 48,100 QSOs in 376 days in 1978. Many of us have his cards in our archives.

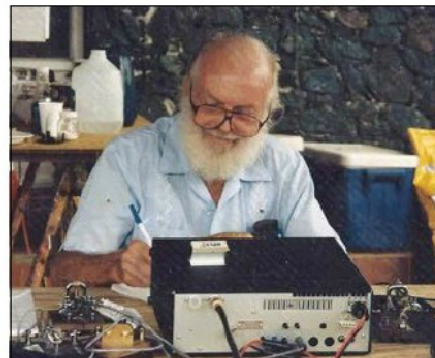
The Virgin Islands remained sparsely populated until the 1950s, when air service improved and a boom in tourism started. Caneel Bay, the first Caribbean Resort, was opened by Nelson Rockefeller, who also purchased and donated land on St John for a national park. A large oil refinery was built on St Croix. Amateur activity started to grow along with these developments. Hams started coming to participate in contests and operate casually during their vacations. Some even ultimately settled on the island.

Always recognized by the ARRL, the US Virgin Islands, along with Puerto Rico, were part of the West Indies Section until 1982 when Ron Hall, KP2N, was elected first Section Manager. Ron served until 1996, followed by John Ellis, NP2B, until 2012 when Fred Kleber, NP2X/K9VV, was elected.

The British Islands, centered around Tortola, also experienced growth and actually became the birthplace of the Virgin Islands Radio Club. Bob Denniston, W0DX, a former president of the ARRL, had settled on that island and built a small resort on Belmont Bay called Smugglers Cove. The seed for starting a radio club was planted during a discussion between Bob, also VP2VI, and Ron Hall, W8OFG, now



At the Orlando HamCation®, Greg Sarratt, W4OZK (left), who was Southeastern Division Director at the time, posed for a photo with three US Virgin Islands Section Managers. From left to right: current Section Manager Fred Kleber, K9VV, former Section Managers John Ellis, NP2B, and Ron Hall, KP2N. [Harold Kramer, WJ1B, photo]



Bob Denniston, VP2VI/W0DX (SK), operating Field Day on St Thomas in 1996.

KP2N, a designer for Heathkit in Benton Harbor who was visiting the islands. They realized that the ham population on Tortola (at that time Bob and Arthur Swain, VP2VA) wouldn't support a club they named the club the Virgin Islands Radio Club. Instead, they combined forces with St Thomas hams Aubrey Nelthropp, KV4BT, Clark Edson, KV4EN (later KP2B), and Anglican Bishop Edward Turner, KV4BQ, to start an informal club. Initially the club was based on the premise that there would be no formalities, no business, and no officers. That philosophy still exists today — when the annual business meeting is timed, it may not take longer than one minute. Formal recognition waited until 1978 when

officers were elected and the club became affiliated with the ARRL.

A radio club was established on St Croix around 1975 by Lou, KV4JC, with Dick, WV4II, and Jerry, WB6RCN. Dick Moffit and his brother Vern, WV5IJ, had a ham shack and tower at an old sugar mill. In 1993, a discussion between Bob Kallaway, KP2AV, and Mal Preston, NP2L, led to the organization of the St John Radio Club, with an initial group of 12 members.

One of the first activities engaged in by all of the clubs was the establishment of 2 meter repeaters. Three repeaters were established on St Thomas, but at that time all were owned by individual members, not the club. In 1978, W4UWH set up the first one in 1985, WP2ACW set up the second; shortly thereafter W2IBJ set up the third. The WP2ACW repeater was later purchased by Klaus, KP2O, and is still in operation at its commanding location atop of Crown Mountain. A repeater consisting of a couple of reconfigured mobile rigs was installed on St Croix in 1985. It was later replaced by a repeater originally built in 1979 by W4MRJ as a RTTY repeater in Atlanta. John, W4MRJ, now with the call NP2B, brought it down and rebuilt it as a voice repeater, and it is still in use today as NP2VI. The St Croix club gave the St John club a repeater, which they renovated and

put into service on Bordeaux Mountain as KP2SJ in 1993.

Communication During Disasters

Emergency communication has always been a priority in the Virgin Islands. Phone and power lines, satellite dishes, and microwave antennas tend to be attractive targets for storms, particularly during the hurricane season. Significant storms were experienced in 1928, 1931, and 1932, then Donna in 1960, Klaus in 1984, Hugo in 1989, Bertha in 1998, and Marilyn in 1995. Ham radio always played a significant role in preparation before, during, and after the storms.

During the 1928 hurricane, two early Army Amateur Radio Systems (a predecessor of MARS) members, Forrest Dana, 4AGR, and Ralph Hollis, 4AFC, maintained a critical communications link with the US War Department. They provided information that brought help from both the Army and the Red Cross.

In 1995, John Ellis, NP2B, was in contact with the NHC net on 20 meters during Hurricane Marilyn. From his shack on St Croix he corrected information on the center of Marilyn. He was in an ideal position to do so, being directly under the eye. In the early hours and days after the storm, ham radio was the only working means for inter-island and off-island communication. The repeater on St Croix remained the only operational one in the Virgin Islands. Traffic was passed for the Governor and Lt Governor, National Guard, Red Cross, and FEMA, among others. Stations on St Thomas and St Croix reported the condition of airport runways, arranged for helicopter air evacuations, arranged for deployment of gas generators and other needed assistance principally over 20 meter SSB nets. On St John, hams provided equipment to open communications between the clinic, EOC, and Coral Bay, which was completely cut off by road. Hams manned EOC equipment on all three islands. In the aftermath of all of these events, Virgin Islands hams from all three islands handled health and welfare traffic with several disaster nets on the mainland.

DX and Contests

Because both the US Virgin Islands and the British Virgin Islands are recognized as countries for DXCC credit, DXing and contests have always been popular. Bob



Frank Butler, W4RE, and Ron Hall, KP2N.

Denniston, WØDX/VP2VI, has been recognized by Martti Laine, OH2BH, as the pioneer of the DXpedition for organizing the "Gone Wacki" trip to the Bahamas in 1948. Bob joined John Ackley, KP2A, on Clipperton Island in 1954 and earned a world record in the ARRL DX contest for the 1960 performance at VPIJH from Belize. Bob and John planted the seed that brought visiting hams from all over the world to operate in the Virgin Islands. Jon Pomfrett, W2AAF, was a regular summer resident and a DXer on St John. One can still create a pileup by calling CQ.

Contest stations also have origins in the Virgin Islands. For years, KP2A was active with John or visiting operators at the controls. WP2Z was probably the first rental ham shack in the Virgin Islands. It was on top of an 850 foot hill overlooking St Croix's north shore. NP2B's location was the perennial base for visiting competitors on St Croix. The St Thomas club station, KP2D, has thrived in both ARRL and CQ contests, principally in RTTY events. Around 1997, a group from the US Virgin Islands and the British Virgin Islands entered VP2VE in ARRL SSB DX contest from the Big Bamboo beach bar on the north coast of Anegada.

Several well-known nets sprung up in the Virgin Islands. While he was there, Bob, VP2VI, held a nightly CW training net on 160 meters. Other notable long-lived nets include the 40 meter Caribbean Maritime Mobile Weather Net (7250 kHz, 1100Z). Lou Bean, KV4JC, served as net control for 20 years before being relieved by George Cline, KP2G. Aubrey Nelthropp, KV4BT,

was a cofounder of Friendly Net (7188 kHz, 1200Z). George, KP2G, started the Virgin Islands weather net on the St John repeater (146.63, 1040Z) in 1994. The St Croix ARES net meets Monday evenings on their repeater (147.250, 2300Z).

Bring Your Rig

Ham radio doesn't recognize national borders, as the connection between US and British Virgin Island amateurs attests to. In 1985 the UN donated several battery-powered HF rigs to the British Virgin Islands to provide emergency communications between Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Jost VanDyke, and Anegada. Installation was accomplished by hams from both countries making eight trips to those islands. VP2VI along with longtime British Virgin Islands Telecom administrator Arthur Swain, VP2VA, developed a British Virgin Islands testing and licensing system based on those in the US. After Bob and Arthur passed away, US Virgin Islands VEC teams tested British Virgin Islands candidates (who all have US postal addresses) and qualified them for US licenses. The telecom office on Tortola was then able to license them based on reciprocity.

Hams, sailors, and others seeking a warm climate are always welcome in the Virgin Islands. Rent a boat, condo, house, or hotel room. Bring the family, bring your rig, and come on down!

Malcolm "Mal" Preston, NP2L, attained a Class B license in 1949 and upgraded to Class A in 1950. He had the calls W9JQY and W2IRZ prior to his current one. He now holds an Amateur Extra class license and is a Life Member of the ARRL. He is a graduate of Denison University, has an MBA from Northwestern, and is a CPA. His work career included service with Auditor General, USAF, several years in public accounting before financial management positions in the paper manufacturing industry. In the 1980s, he pursued a parallel career renovating hydro-electric facilities in New York state. He was a cofounder of the New York Alliance for Hydro-Electric Energy.

Mal moved to St John in 1990 and has been active in ham satellites, DXing, contesting, ARES activities, and both the St John and Virgin Islands Amateur Radio clubs. He currently serves as Assistant Virgin Islands Section Manager.

He can be contacted at PO Box 1318, St John, Virgin Islands 00831 or by e-mail at np2l@arri.net.

