



The Deerfield Fair is a New Hampshire tradition extending back 130 years. Good communications are essential, and the NEAR-Fest hamfest organization cemented its relationship with the fairground board of directors (NEAR-Fest is held at the Deerfield Fairgrounds) by becoming the communications vendor and coordinator for the fair.

One strategy for making sure your hamfest site remains available, says the chairman of NEAR-Fest, is to make your group a resource for your hosts as well as a client.

How to Keep Your Hamfest's Venue... or Making Friends With Your Radios

BY MICHAEL CRESTOHL,* W1RC

We in New England have been very fortunate to have enjoyed a wonderful semi-annual regional hamfest known as "Hosstraders," which was held at five venues in New Hampshire during its 34-year run. These events were "overnighters" at several fairgrounds, and without question the most beloved of these sites was the Deerfield (NH) Fairgrounds, where the hamfest was held from 1976–1992. Since May 2007 this wonderful venue has been the home of the New England Amateur Radio Festival, aka NEAR-Fest.

As NEAR-Fest General Chairman and "Benevolent Dictator," my principal job is to foster and maintain positive

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relations with the Fair Association's Board of Directors. These are the folks who decide who can rent the grounds and how much they will have to pay for the privilege.

Since board members are elected annually, directors are always changing. Thus, maintaining cordial relations with them represents an ongoing challenge. I have witnessed several other great hamfests either disappear completely (such as FAR-Fest at Montgomery County Fairgrounds, Gaithersburg, MD) or be seriously impacted (Shelby, NC) as a result of a decision by their respective fairgrounds' board of directors that wasn't in the best interests of the amateur radio community. This was my biggest concern in running this hamfest, because we did not want to lose this wonderful venue. No other fairgrounds I have ever seen even comes close to Deerfield as

About NEAR-Fest

The New England Amateur Radio Festival (NEAR-Fest) is a two-day hamfest held twice a year at the Deerfield Fairgrounds in Deerfield, New Hampshire. This year's spring fest is April 30 and May 1. For information, see <<http://www.near-fest.com/>>.

About the Deerfield Fair

The Deerfield Fair has been held every fall for the past 133 years. The 134th Deerfield Fair is scheduled for September 30 through October 3, 2010 at the Deerfield Fairgrounds. For information, see <<http://www.deerfieldfair.com/>>.

such a perfect spot for a hamfest and quite frankly, I can't see myself doing it anywhere else.

From the very beginning, we adopted a highly proactive stance regarding keeping the grounds immaculate and making sure that everyone removed everything they didn't sell. We virtually banned CRT monitors from the flea market. Most people understood our concerns, but a few miscreants who didn't get it had it explained to them in language that even they could understand by our Sergeant-at-Arms, Paul DePetriello, W1PRA. In addition, we added two Fire Wardens to our roster—a couple of former firefighters—to enforce the Fair Association's no-smoking policy and our outdoor cooking rules. However, because of problems with other groups in the past, our relationship was tenuous at best, even with these efforts.

Seizing an Opportunity

In the summer of 2008, an opportunity presented itself when the fair director, who was my point-of-contact, called and asked if I would like to serve as Superintendent of Radios for the fair itself, as the person who had been doing it no longer wanted the job. This was a big deal. The Deerfield Fair is the oldest agricultural fair in New England, having been held annually for over 130 years. It's a real old-fashioned, "down home" kind of family fair that allows no alcohol or gambling, and the traditional gang of "carnies" simply are not permitted to participate.

Notwithstanding, I live 90 miles from the fairgrounds and would have had to commute for five days, so I recommended someone who lives considerably closer as a very suitable candidate, particularly since he has experience in the two-way business. This is how it came to pass that Ed Anderson, N1IWW, NEAR-Fest's Treasurer, became Superintendent of Radios at the 2008 Deerfield Fair.

Ed's experiences would make an article in itself, but suffice it to say that there were several issues with the rented radios. The vendor was arrogant and rude. He made it abundantly clear that he didn't care for amateur radio operators very much. There were only two channels in use, the equipment was old and tired, and so were the batteries. Clearly the system needed a major upgrade, and I could see another opportunity to show the board members that the radio amateurs who rented their fairgrounds twice a year could be a valuable resource to them in the future . . . and the future was now!

Creating an Opportunity

Ed and I met with the board in late October. Our first order of business to discuss was expanding the number of UHF frequencies for which they were licensed. We felt that having more channels available would be a major factor in improving their communications capability during the fair. The board



Caricature of author Mike Crestohl, W1RC, and co-Radio Superintendent Mike Raisbeck, K1TWF (T-Woof), during the Deerfield Fair.

agreed and asked me if I could help them do this. A motion immediately was passed empowering NEAR-Fest to act as their official agent in dealing with the FCC.

With the help of a frequency-coordination company, I was able to add ten frequencies, which were granted by the FCC in early January, so they now had 12 channels available to them instead of two. I also modified their ULS file and named "NEAR-Fest, Inc." as their "dealer."

I then proposed to my NEAR-Fest colleagues that we offer to rent radios to the fair at a significant savings over what they had been previously paying. We could buy surplus commercial equipment at reasonable cost (at the hamfest, of course) and program the radios with their frequencies. I quoted a rental price that was about half the going rate, which the board eagerly accepted . . . so now NEAR-Fest was in the radio rental business. Ed and I, along with Mike Raisbeck, K1TWF, signed on as Superintendents of Radio for the four-day event so we would now be in the unique position of NEAR-Fest being one of the vendors and the three of us becoming temporary employees of the Deerfield Fair.

Motorola GP300s and HT1000s were my radios of choice for several reasons, mainly because they are reliable, rugged, computer-programmable, and cheap. Since the radios' power source is a major factor in ensuring reliability, we purchased all new batteries from our old friend and NEAR-Fest exhibitor, Dave Rosenbaum of W&W Manufacturing (aka Battery Tech), who gave us a heck of a great deal because he understood what we were doing. Thank you, Dave!

Becoming "Family"

We created a "Radio Plan" that used colors to refer to the different channels and set up several "talk groups" such as tick-

eting (green), parking (yellow), facilities & maintenance (red), public safety (blue), and so on. A major high point arrived in August when Ed, Mike, and I were invited to attend the traditional "Superintendents' Cookout" held at the fairgrounds the Saturday before the fair opened. I ate the best beef sirloin tips I had ever had at that cookout, and more importantly, the invitation meant we were now part of the Deerfield Fair "family."

In 2008, the Superintendent of Radio's "office" had been located in the Administration Building, but since this was a secure area requiring a wristband required to enter, it was not the best place for us to "hang out" during the fair. Thanks to John, the Director of Maintenance, we set up an ad hoc radio shop in his office that provided all the amenities and comforts of life, such as a refrigerator, microwave, etc. Ed and I set up the rack chargers in strategic locations throughout the fairgrounds, gave the new batteries a good 18-hour initial charge, and distributed the radios to the people on the list provided by the fair committee.

I wish I could report that everything went perfectly smoothly from the beginning, but there were a few glitches, mainly with the HT1000s. Ed was manning the fort that first morning, and we realized very quickly that the function buttons that control scanning and other features should have been disabled. I was stuck in a meeting from which I could not extricate myself, but as soon as I could escape, I sped down the 90 miles to Deerfield so I could quickly correct the problem.

Once the HT1000 switches and buttons were disabled, everything proceeded smoothly and the four days passed uneventfully until the fair ended. Ed was just a blur as he rounded up the radios and chargers and packed them in his van. We rode off into the sunset, hoping that the fair people were pleased. On the last day, Ed and I asked Sheryl Bolduc, the Fair Association President, if the board would permit us to host a "cook-out" for our volunteers the evening before our upcoming hamfest. A couple of days later, we received a phone call saying that our request had been granted. This was a very positive sign that they were pleased with the radios.

Eleven days later as we gathered at the fairgrounds to prepare to convene NEAR-Fest VI, we noticed several large trailers and concession stands parked in the center of our hamfest area. There was a Fair Association Board of

Directors meeting scheduled for that evening, but we just couldn't barge in and complain about it because everything has to be put on the official agenda by the Secretary. Fortunately, one of the directors came in to turn on the outdoor lights for us, and it didn't take long before things began happening and the offending trailers were hauled off to a parking lot outside of the hamfest area. Our relationship had definitely taken a turn for the better.

Looking to the Future

A week after NEAR-Fest VI, I received a phone call from Sheryl asking me if NEAR-Fest would be interested in again providing the radios for 2010. Apparently, the board was very satis-

fied with the radio service we provided and passed a motion to invite us back. With this as a consideration, I declared the project a success and now look forward to enjoying a good relationship with these folks for many years to come.

Many amateur radio clubs are facing a similar dilemma when it comes to their hamfest or flea market, even those in school cafeterias and gymnasiums. It seems that every season some well-established fleas and 'fests are disappearing from the calendar because the club or group loses its venue. A little creative thinking will go a long way here, and provided you use commercial frequencies if they are available, you can strengthen a relationship or build a new one while adding a substantial amount to your club's treasury in the process.

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EB63 (140W)	EB104 (600W)
AR305 (300W)	AR347 (1000W)



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