



HEROINE of Ohio floods is Mildred Wildman. Kibitzer is her husband, also a ham

W8PZA Mildred

“It’s A Tidal Wave!”

That radio warning saved a town. In such emergencies girl “hams” find excitement between short-wave gabfests

A MAN ran down the snow-banked streets of Naknek, Alaska. He pounded on the door of a small cabin.

“Come in,” a girl’s muffled voice said. “I’m washing my hair.”

Two minutes later, a scarf wrapped around her damp curls, the girl was racing to an air-field hangar at the edge of town.

“Thank God you’re here,” said a mechanic. Morse code was crackling into a short-wave receiver. “It’s something about a tidal wave.”

Verna St. Louis, amateur radio operator, sat down at the transmitter. Her fingers twitched the brass telegraph key.

“CQ ANCHORAGE. CALLING ANCHORAGE.” the signal flicked out into the air. “THIS IS KL7AX, NAKNEK.”

By now most of the village was clustered anxiously outside the radio room. Inside,

Verna strained to catch the faint answering dots and dashes.

“A ninety-foot tidal wave,” she said finally. “Due here in three hours. We’ve got to get out — fast!”

When the waters hit Naknek, all its people were inland. Verna’s work had saved scores of lives. She’s typical of the 2,000 women ham-radio operators steadily invading a “man’s field.”

Known as YL’s — young ladies — female hams range from schoolgirl to grandmother. One of the country’s first YL’s is still active at 80; and a nine-year-old girl was a world’s code speed champion.

New Way to Gossip

NORMALLY the YL is busy at her unique form of back-fence gossip, rag-chewing over the short waves about skirt lengths or crystal oscillators. Her lapel pin or license plate carries the “73-88,” ham language for “best wishes, love and kisses.” Her call letters are appliquéd on bedspreads and blouses.

But in time of emergency the YL’s telegraph key or hand microphone is often the only means of communication for a flooded or

BY NORMAN AND AMELIA LOBSENZ

fire-stricken city. Every major catastrophe sees YL's at work. Those with portable sets operate from the center of the danger zone. When current is cut off, those with battery-powered equipment handle messages for police and fire crews, Red Cross units, government agencies.

Mildred Wildman, W8PZA, of Cleveland, flashed emergency messages during Ohio floods and a Cleveland Heights gas explosion in 1944. In the Texas City disaster, W5IZL, Ruth Brown, operated 24 hours a day to speed messages to and from the stricken area.

And when a child was lost in a Maine forest, W2HXQ, Kay Kibling, won national acclaim by handling radio contacts with the searching parties.

The Federal Communications Commission doesn't let chivalry soften its rigorous licensing exam. A YL, like any ham, must send and receive 13 words a minute in international Morse code, know radio theory and laws, and diagram such things as amplifier circuits and wave traps.

Feminine interest in ham radio usually occurs simultaneously with interest in a ham. Alice Stewart is one of hundreds of girls who met

their husbands-to-be on the short waves, got their marriage licenses along with radio licenses.

YL's are often members of "ham families." Mary Ann Tatro, Olympia, Wash., practiced by putting a telegraph key on the dinner table and asking her husband and son for "more salad, please" in code. And Maude Phillips, VE6MP, of Alberta, Canada, turned ham after years of vainly trying to get her husband to meals on time. Now she has to tear herself away from the transmitter to get the meals ready.

Usually a Hobby

TO MOST YL's hamming is only a hobby, but for some it leads to engineering careers. Take Elizabeth Zandonini, for instance. She's a radio-wave refraction expert, has been a U. S. Bureau of Standards engineer for 25 years, and is a member of the jealously masculine Institute of Radio Engineers.

Hundreds of YL's go into aviation communications and broadcast work. One with an unusual job is Dorothy Hall, radio control

operator for the New York City Fire Department. She alerts mobile units—rescue squads, ambulances, fireboats—and keeps in touch with portable transmitters at fires to relay requests for extra men or equipment.

On her own amateur station Dorothy has aided half a dozen sea rescues, served as "home base" for expeditions, once short-waved a corn-bread recipe to the hungry crew of an ice-trapped Arctic survey boat. She made the most famous contact in ham history when she picked up an appeal for food and medicine from starving Pitcairn Island and got a relief ship there within 30 hours.

YL's figured importantly during the war. They taught code to Air Force trainees, worked in Signal Corps labs, staffed assembly lines in electronics plants.

But mostly the girls are riding their hobby for the fun of it. One YL is playing Cupid. An Alaskan amateur, unable to get mail out during the winter, telegraphs his letters to the YL, who writes and mails them to his sweetheart in California.

But all YL's are sending out their CQ in search of old friends, and in hope of finding new ones. For to the YL, ham radio is, above all, a combination coffee-klatch, town meeting, afternoon bridge club. It's a personal window on the world.

The End



Verna: "We've got to get out fast!"