

CW by Wayne Burdick, Elecraft Designer...

I find that CW has many practical and engaging aspects that I just don't get with computer-mediated modes like FT8. You'd think I'd be burned out on CW by now, over 45 years since I was first licensed, but no, I'm still doin' it :)

Yes, FT8 (etc.) is a no-brainer when, despite poor conditions, your goal is to log as many contacts as possible with as many states or countries as possible. It's so streamlined and efficient that the whole process is readily automated. (If you haven't read enough opinions on that, see "The mother of all FT8 threads" on QRZ.com, for example.)

But back to CW. Here's why it works for me. YMMV.

CW feels personal and visceral, like driving a sports car rather than taking a cab. As with a sports car, there are risks. You can get clobbered by larger vehicles (QRM). Witness road rage ("UP 2!"). Fall into a pothole (QSB). Be forced to drive through rain or snow (QRN).

With CW, like other forms of human conversation, you can affect your own style. Make mistakes. Joke about it.

CW is a skill that bonds operators together across generations and nations. A language, more like pidgin than anything else, with abbreviations and historical constructs and imperialist oddities. A curious club anyone can join. (At age 60 and able to copy 50 WPM on a good day, I may qualify as a Nerd Mason of some modest order, worthless in any other domain but of value in a contest.)

With very simple equipment that anyone can build, such as a high-power single-transistor oscillator, you can transmit a CW signal. I had very little experience with electronics when I was 14 and built an oscillator that put out maybe 100 mW. Just twisted the leads of all those parts together and keyed the collector supply--a 9-volt battery. With this simple circuit on my desk, coupled to one guy wire of our TV antenna mast, I worked a station 150 miles away and was instantly hooked on building things. And on QRP. I'm sure the signal was key-clicky and had lots of harmonics. I've spent a lifetime making such things work better, but this is where it started.

Going even further down the techno food chain, you can "send" CW by whistling, flashing a lamp, tapping on someone's leg under a table in civics class, or pounding a wrench on the inverted hull of an upside-down U.S. war vessel, as happened at Pearl Harbor. Last Saturday at an engineering club my son belongs to, a 9-year-old demonstrated an Arduino Uno flashing HELLO WORLD in Morse on an LED. The other kids were impressed, including my son, who promptly wrote a version that sends three independent Morse streams on three LEDs. A mini-pileup. His first program.

Finally, to do CW you don't always need a computer, keyboard, mouse, monitor, or software. Such things are invaluable in our daily lives, but for me, shutting down everything but the radio is the high point of my day. The small display glows like a mystic portal into my personal oyster, the RF spectrum. Unless I crank up the power, there's no fan noise. Tuning the knob slowly from the bottom end of the band segment to the top is a bit like fishing my favorite stream, Taylor Creek, which connects Fallen Leaf Lake to Lake Tahoe. Drag the line across the green, sunlit pool. See what hits. Big trout? DX. Small trout? Hey, it's still a fish, and a QSO across town is still a QSO. Admire it, then throw it back in.

(BTW: You now know why the Elecraft K3, K3S, KX2, and KX3 all have built-in RTTY and PSK data modes that allow transmit via the keyer paddle and receive on the rig's display. We decided to make these data modes conversational...like CW.)

Back to 40 meters....

73,

Wayne  
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