

By William J. Newman, K0NSA and Mary Joseph, N0TRK

"So People Still Do That?"

The Ak-Sar-Ben Amateur Radio Club in Omaha, Nebraska "went to the movies" and told the story of Amateur Radio.

That was the phrase that the members of the Ak-Sar-Ben Amateur Radio Club heard the most during the opening weekend of the movie *Frequency*. Not only did we assure theater patrons that we still did "that," we showed them all the cool new things that we do *now*!

The planning for the event started about 12 weeks before the opening when members of the club first heard about the movie and its tie to Amateur Radio. The club's public relations committee contacted various theaters to find out which ones were going to show the movie and which would be receptive to hosting the club in its endeavors to use the movie to promote Amateur Radio.

The 20 Grand says "Yes"

The 20 Grand Theater, a 20-screen mega-theater, jumped at the opportunity to have us set up a display and was enthusiastic about our plans. We were given free run of the theater including the projection area and the roof for equipment and antenna set up. Their large free-access lobby allowed us to set up in a prominent location without being

directly in the way of weekend movie crowds. The theater even said that they would place a notice in the local newspaper advertising the fact that we would be there during opening weekend.

While the actual release date for the movie had not been set, the theater assured us we could be there no matter when the movie debuted. So, with the location secured, the planning of what we were actually going to do got underway. Our first job was to build enthusiasm and awareness about the movie with area hams.

The club's public relations chairman set up a multimedia extravaganza at several club meetings to show the movie's trailer, and we took every opportunity to talk up the event on area repeaters and

weekly radio nets. Once the excitement and anticipation began to build, ideas started flowing in. We circulated event sign-up sheets at club meetings/gatherings. We began to assign tasks, locate needed equipment, and schedule club members to staff the booth from the Friday afternoon opening until tear down Sunday evening. Our over-riding goal was to knock the public's socks off with the capabilities and advanced technology of our hobby! The club and its membership were firmly behind the project and it became the talk of the local repeater.

Sneak Preview

When the movie was suddenly available for an earlier-than-expected sneak preview, one call to the theater secured our seats. The movie was fun, entertaining and the audience loved it—we knew we could capitalize on the interest it generated. Members of the club attended four sneak previews at theaters around the city, setting up information booths at theaters where possible. The audience reaction to our displays was

The author demonstrates 2-meter FM in the theater lobby.



This static display was available to theater patrons throughout the week.



It's a good night for a movie—and Amateur Radio—at the 20 Grand multiplex.

always positive, especially after they saw the film. It was a "feel-good" movie and Amateur Radio was a part of that feel-good feeling!

Setting Up

Once club members had seen the movie preview and realized its potential for generating positive interest in Amateur Radio, our plans grew. The Friday of opening weekend (April 28, 2000), the members of the club began their invasion of the theater. The first to go up was the convention-style display booth, on which we hung four custom color posters explaining all about Amateur Radio and its many facets. Large fluorescent lights built onto the display booth increased its visibility and really brought out the colors in the posters even from across the expansive lobby.

As an additional movie tie-in, we also installed a rotating red and blue police/fire light above the center of the display booth (in *Frequency*, the character of Frank Sullivan was a firefighter and John Sullivan was a cop). The flashing light guaranteed that we would be seen by all movie patrons, and was very effective in generating interest in what we were doing, especially with younger theatergoers.

Next we hung a large, professionally made 6-foot blue-and-white banner over the entire display which read, "Amateur Radio Communications" so there was no doubt who we were. We then set up three banquet tables that were covered and skirted blue and white to match the banner. On these tables, we set up radios, computers, ARRL and club literature and a Heathkit SB-301 transceiver similar to the rig used in the movie.

The display was very attractive and the local Dayton Hamvention veterans declared it to be "commercial quality." Even the theater management said that this was the most attractive display they had ever had in their lobby.

Information about ham radio adorned the booth walls behind a row of computers sending Morse code, running APRS (Automatic Position Reporting System) displays, slow scan television, and QSO logging and radio interface software. Plenty of handouts were ready and the theater provided us with *Frequency* movie T-shirts and hats to wear, and a stack of movie posters to give out along with our ham radio pamphlets.

In a prominent location in the display sat the Heathkit SB-301, which was often recognized by the theater patrons as the "radio from the movie," and helped to attract even more visitors to our booth. Many visitors were truly surprised by the



The booth enjoyed steady visitor traffic.



Our booth is set up and ready for the first visitors.

advances in ham radio over the years. These advances were dramatically highlighted when we compared the Heathkit "movie" radio with Icom's latest state-of-the-art rig—the ICOM IC-756 PRO, which was being used to make HF contacts.

Greeting the Throngs

The display was designed to be very interactive. Visitors could try their hand at sending Morse code on the computer, logging HF contacts made with the computer-controlled 756 PRO, talking on HF, or tracking moving vehicles and weather conditions around the city with APRS. One of the biggest hits of the weekend with the younger crowd was SSTV. This was done using a Kenwood VC-H1 hooked up with a Kenwood D7A.

On the receive side of the SSTV

One young lady of about 13 years of age stopped by and asked, "What's all this?" When we explained to her what it was, she asked, "Can I talk on it?" We made a quick contact to another ham on the local repeater and she had a wonderful time.

system was an ICOM H-T hooked up to a Pentium computer. A club member would approach a group coming out of a movie, and ask them if they wanted to be on TV. Their picture was taken and they would be directed to go across the room to our booth to see it on the computer display. Once they were at the display they all had questions. When we explained that there were no wires, that the picture had been sent across the room via radio everyone was impressed. They were amazed we could do that without wires and even more amazed when we explained that we could send the pictures across the room, across town or even around the world.

One young lady of about 13 years of age stopped by and asked, "What's all this?" When we explained to her what it was, she asked, "Can I talk on it?" We made a quick contact to another ham on the local repeater and she had a wonderful time. All smiles, she ran off to join her friends saying: "I talked on the radio!"

The computer-controlled HF station was also a hit. The most-heard comments were: "Is this going through the Internet?" or "Are you getting that off of a satellite?" We explained that the radio and the computer were connected together, but every conversation was conducted via radio. We explained how each area of the world had a unique way of issuing its Amateur Radio call signs. By entering the call sign of the station we were talking to, the computer would give us their call sign information and approximate location on a world map. They were quite impressed, but even more so when they were told we had spoken with Japan, Germany and other countries earlier that day (or when they witnessed these contacts first hand).

We even contacted a few theaters around the country where other Amateur Radio operators there were doing much like we were, setting up our stuff and showing Amateur Radio to the masses. Several theater patrons, from small kids up to adults, were able to get on the radio and talk to other hams. Since the Nebraska QSO party was running that weekend, we used the Ak-Sar-Ben ARC's call sign—K0USA—to give out some Nebraska contacts from the theater.

Amateur Radio activities were chosen for display according to their visual and technical impact. HF communication with the new state-of-the-art computer-controlled-radio was the showpiece, but the APRS and SSTV displays drew a great deal of interest as well. The Midlands ARES group serves the National Weather Service during severe weather and is actively setting up APRS



Moviegoers pick up their popcorn, then check out our display.

weather stations around the area to assist during SKYWARN operations. We were able to demonstrate this use of APRS and explain why ham radio operators are often the spotters that the meteorologists refer to when a weather warning is issued.

Also, numerous mobile APRS stations were active in the area and we were able to track them on the live display. Again, theater patrons were surprised to see that such a thing was possible.

A Long-Term Success

The interactive display ran from Friday afternoon until Sunday night at around 6 PM, exposing ham radio to 7500 theater patrons. While a core group staffed the display most of the time, nearly 30 other club members stopped by to help, and to demonstrate the equipment and explain Amateur Radio to theatergoers. No matter what time it was, someone was always available on the repeater to give us a contact.

After Sunday, the radios and computers were removed, but not the display booth or the Amateur Radio literature. Instead, the booth (with posters and handouts) was moved to another high-traffic area where it remained for the following week. Stocked with handouts on ham radio, the ARRL and the Ak-Sar-Ben Amateur Radio Club, the display continued to have an impact on theatergoers. AARC club members visited the theater daily to make sure the handouts never ran out.

In order to take immediate advantage of the interest we had generated, a

In order to take immediate advantage of the interest we had generated, a Technician license class was started in early May. We are proud to say that all the students enrolled did so as a result of seeing the display we had at the theater.

Technician license class was started in early May. We are proud to say that all the students enrolled did so as a result of seeing the display we had at the theater.

Making Friends with the Theater

The cooperation of theater management really helped us pull this off flawlessly. We were denied nothing that we asked for, including an early Saturday morning set-up time to install the HF station before the theater opened to the public. We were a little concerned that the antenna, an MFJ loop on the roof, might interfere with the Dolby sound systems, but tests revealed that this was not the case. Not a peep was heard in any theater throughout the event, and the theater's neon lights were also clean—no nasty buzzing was heard on any frequency.

The theater security guards strolled by to talk with us numerous times during the weekend. The theater promotions manager and the general manager both frequented

the display booth and asked many questions. They were so happy with the professionalism of the display and of the hams who staffed it, they have invited us back—with or without a movie promotion! The successful display was a direct result of the commitment of the membership of the Ak-Sar-Ben Amateur Radio Club to community service and increased community awareness of ham radio.

The public display was a great boost for the local ham community. Hams who have not been active in club activities came out to see the display and the movie. Many took their turn at showing off the hobby. Others drove in from nearby towns to see what they had been hearing so much about. Many commented that it was like a mini Field Day—only much more comfortable!

The mix of male and female hams staffing the display also encouraged both men and women to stop by. Some of our visitors were inactive hams who decided to get back on the air after seeing the activity. Thanks to the variety of informational displays, the mix of equipment being used (Kenwood, ICOM, MFJ, Kantronics, Comet, Diamond, Astron, etc), and the use of computers, it was readily apparent that Amateur Radio is alive and thriving in our high-tech world.

Our Story Needs to be Told

This type of promotion was a great catalyst, but we do not have to wait for the next “ham radio movie” to publicize our hobby. Our experience from this event is not that Amateur Radio is not interesting to people, or that it has a bad image, rather—in many cases—it has *no image*. We need to get out among the people and tell our story. The public needs to know that we are here. They need to know that we are a diverse group of people from all ages and backgrounds, and that we are doing exciting things with state-of-the-art communications technologies. They need to know how we use our technical knowledge and communication skills to serve them in times of need.

Yes, cellphones and the Internet have removed some of the uniqueness of personal communication from Amateur Radio. However, if we take the time to shine it up a little and tell our story, ham radio is just as interesting to the technosavvy kids of today as it was in the past. We just need to make sure we keep up with them.

We have a great story to tell—it just needs to be told!

You can contact K0NSA at 15041 Binney St, Omaha, NE; k0nsa@arrl.net. N0TRK can be contacted at 1819 N. 110th St, Omaha, NE 68154; n0trk@arrl.net. **QST**