

A day in the forest....

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(Excerpt from the November 2000 issue of the Wireless Association of South Hill's, WASHRag, www.washarc.org)

(Both photos courtesy of Steve Lane W3SRL)

When you realize, early afternoon, that the highlight of your day so far has been the Steak & Eggs Breakfast at Bob Evan's at 7:30 AM, it strikes you that you've had better starts to a PA QSO Party operation.

The plan was simple. Almost everyone would meet in Cranberry for breakfast, head up to N3SBL's Clarion cabin in time to get N3SH set up, then head down the road to Forest to set up my little station. Of course Murphy struck. Our first problem was getting OUT of Cranberry, as the US 19 was jammed with people heading down the road to the hospital - no, we never found out why. We got in a little later than expected, but still with plenty of time, and started setting up the club HF6V & ICOM rig, waiting for the arrival of W3SRL with the rest of the antennas and equipment. Never doubt the value of splitting up the gear responsibilities; Steve (a professional Fire Fighter for Mt. Lebanon PA) had a call 10 minutes before shift ended, and also arrived much later than planned & dead tired. Finally N3SH was completely set up & QRV, a bowl of NØVLR's 2 Alarm Chilli for lunch, and Paul, Bob KB3EPC, the WACOM trailer and I were ready to head down the road to Forest. (By the way, make sure you invite Paul to your next contest operation - as long as he brings a pot of his chilli along!)



It was at this moment that the spring on my van's rear door latch broke off, making it impossible to now open the back of the van. Everything would have to go in and out the side door. If we could lift it over the rear seat. Like some nice heavy ex-cell site batteries.

Our spot has been a public parking area outside of a State Gamelands. We arrived to find a hunter's muddy pickup parked right smack in the middle - right where we wanted to put the trailer. Still, got the trailer in position, station set up, hoisted my trap dipole, and went to check the SWR. 2,500,000:1. Went to lower the tower - and it stuck. We unstuck it, and discovered that when it was raised, the copper wires attaching the dipole to the balun had snapped off. (Breakfast looked real good just then!) Fortunately, Steve had sent us out with his R7. Unfortunately, that would mean that we'd be skipping right over a lot of the local WPA stations because of the vertical's radiation angle. FINALLY got on the air, now late afternoon, and Paul headed back to N3SH, leaving Bob to keep me company and observe.

The going was slow, and Forest wasn't that rare this year as there were at least 2 other stations on. Realizing I had no shot at winning the county, I was settling for working 100 stations to qualify for a coffee mug.

We had a lot of passerby's wondering what we were doing. A few stopped and asked. Quite a few drove past 3, 4, or 5 times trying to figure it out. Bob & I sat there, taking advantage of a beautiful afternoon, enjoying the fresh air, strange stares, and foreign broadcast QRM on 40 meters.

Trying the high bands for multipliers didn't work out, either. 20 was crowded, and I never heard much on 15 or 10. Worked the DX multiplier and a few others, and back to 40.

As dusk fell, NØVLR & W3SRL came down to see how we were doing and help pack up the station. It was obvious that I was not going to get my last 25 QSO's on 40 at this point, so Steve suggested trying 75 with the auto tuner. It worked! The signal wasn't strong, but we were heard, and thanks to Steve & Paul's help, we were closing in the the magic 102 QSO's (I had two uncertain ones in the log) when a pickup truck that had passed by many times pulled in. State Police? Game Commission? No, just a local, who was trying to figure out why we had a radar antenna and laptop computer there to hunt the bears. Once Paul & I explained, the man's frown changed to a smile (he no doubt thought we were nuts) and he took off. We all breathed a sigh of relief! We'd been wondering if we should have asked Richie if he had a shotgun

handy we could stash just in case...

Finally, pitch black except for the laptop screen, QSO 102 was made. Almost without delay and in record time, the station was shut down, dismantled and packed. It was not only amazing to watch Steve dismantle the R7 in the dark, lit by headlights and flashlights, but to see him do it in record time AND not drop a nut in the process.



NOVLR & WN3VAW Clarion, and Jefferson. cty, Rover effort
PA QSO Party1999

Back at the cabin, the remaining crew at N3SH was having a blast. It was a lot of fun watching K3VX crank out the CW QSO s & NØPEU work 160 (he and W3SRL make a great tag team!).

Since I couldn't stay overnight, I was getting ready to leave at 11:30 when Steve & Paul had a brainstorm. Could I head home via PA Routes 36 & 28 and give them Jefferson & Armstrong counties on 10 meters? 20 minutes later, I'm cresting a hill South of Cook's Forest State Park, dodging deer and barely hearing Steve on the off-center fed dipole and 59 on the HF6V. Armstrong was the challenge. Crossed the county line an hour later, headed up the hill on 28. Just barely copied Steve, but did it, 10 minutes before the contest shut down for the night. I don't know which I was sweating out more, making the QSO before 1 AM, or keeping an eye on the State Police car that passed by me, parked on the side of the road, about 3 times! (It also occurred to us, too late, that if I had headed out I-80 West at Brookville, I would have hit Venango and would have had an outside shot at hitting Mercer right before 1 AM)

I got to go mobile after all! It helped make the ride home a lot more enjoyable. Right up until, at about 2 AM, trying to find a 2 meter repeater with activity I could hit at, I missed a sign in Ford City and somehow ended up on PA 128, the 2 lane 35 MPH back road into Natrona Heights)