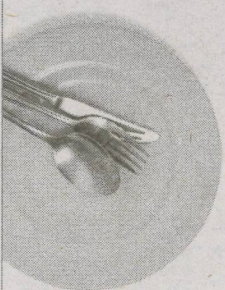


# metro

**GOING OUT TONIGHT?**  
See who made the grade in our restaurant inspections list. **B-4**



**AROUND REGION**  
News and notes from around the First Coast. **B-3**

# Amateur radio operators have field day

Emergency communications skills honed, contact made in U.S., Canada

By Teresa Stepzinski  
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**ORANGE PARK** | Be it hurricane, wildfire, flood or tornado, when disaster wipes out communications at home or abroad, Clay County volunteers are ready to relay messages so emergency authorities can get help where it's needed and let families know their

loved ones are safe. On Sunday, members of Clay County Amateur Radio Emergency Services and the Orange Park Amateur Radio Club honed their emergency communications skills as well as demonstrated their capabilities for the public during the final day of the annual American Radio Relay League Field Day. A

training exercise intended to be fun as well as informative, the event began at 2 p.m. Saturday and continued nonstop through 2 p.m. Sunday.

All volunteers, about 40 operators set up a remote basepowered by emergency generators and transmitted via a mini-forest of portable radio antennas reaching skyward at Orange Park High School. They reached out to their counterparts at similar emergency radio bases throughout the United States and Canada using

Morse code as well as voice transmissions

"Basically, what Field Day is is an emergency test. We take our equipment and our goal is to set up as if there was no power, no communications anywhere and we set up," said Scott Roberts, public information officer for Clay County Amateur Radio Emergency Services.

"We make a game out of it to see who can make the most contacts, and who can

**RADIO** continues on **B-2**



Jim Winfrey attempts to make contact with another radio operator during Sunday's field day at Orange Park High.

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# RADIO

Continued from B-1

make the farthest contacts and all that. But it's actually a serious test so that we know if anything ever were to happen, like a hurricane or another Superstorm Sandy, then we could set up anywhere and run communications," Roberts said.

A brightly colored computer map depicting the United States and Canada pinpointed every area the operators had contacted during the two-day event. The map started out white. As the Clay and Orange Park operators established contact with counterparts in each of the 50 states, Puerto Rico and each province of Canada, it turned color on the map, Robert said.

"Our goal is to make contacts in every state, every province in Canada and cover North America," said Roberts.

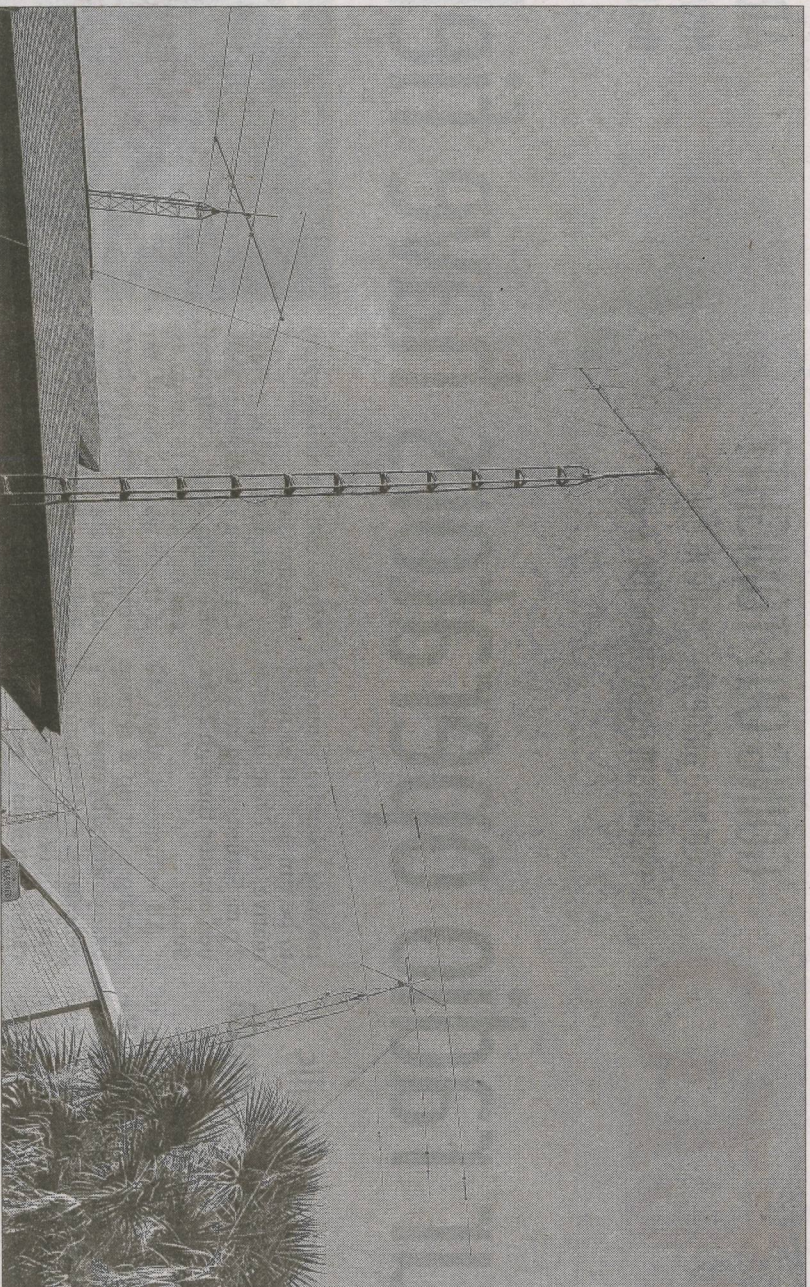
"We've gotten all of Canada except for Newfoundland and the Northern Territories, which are pretty difficult to get," he said.

The operators live by the motto: "When All Else Fails, Ham Radio Works."

The operators provide backup communications for area law enforcement as well as fire and rescue and emergency management agencies. They also aid the American Red Cross and Federal Emergency Management Agency during disasters, said Greg Fitcher, president of the Orange Park Amateur Radio Club.

"The big reason I'm here is that I love people. I like to help people realize their potential and give them opportunities to do things that they didn't think are possible," said Fitcher, noting the hobby spurs creativity and innovation.

Each member nationwide is licensed by the Federal Communications Commission to own, maintain and operate private radio equipment. They use VHF and UHF radios for local communications, and HF (short wave) radios for statewide and international communications. During a disaster or other emergency, they use that network of amateur repeater stations



Portable antennas are set up for the amateur radio field day at Orange Park High School.

Photos by Will Dickey@jacksonville.com



Bob Ivey works with Morse code to communicate with other operators.

to send emergency messages.

The weekend event concluded the weeklong Amateur Radio Week sponsored by the nonprofit American Radio Relay League. With at least 150,000 members nationwide, the organization is the largest member-

ship association of amateur radio enthusiasts in the country.

"The fastest way to turn a crisis into a total disaster is to lose communications," said Allen Pitts, relay league spokesman. "From the earthquake and tsunami in Japan to tornadoes

in Missouri, ham radio provided the most reliable communication networks in the first critical hours of the events."

Ham radios don't depend on the Internet, cellphone towers or other infrastructure, he said.

"They work when nothing else is available. We have nothing between us but air," Pitts said.

Amateur radio is growing both in Northeast Florida and nationwide. Clay County Amateur Radio Emergency Services has about 50 members; there are slightly more 100 in the Orange Park Amateur Radio Club. Their members range from teens to retirees. Many build their own equipment, either trading or scavenging for parts. It's a point of pride in self-reliance, they said.

"People are realizing that it's fun, it's interesting and it stimulates creativity because you can make antennas.... You can make radios if you want to," Fitcher said of the hobby's appeal.

Some of the club's members, Fitcher said, dubbed "makers" meet twice a month, think of things to build and then build them.

There are about 700,000 amateur radio licensees nationwide, and about 2.5

million around the world, according to the American Radio Relay League.

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## CONNECT WITH AMATEUR RADIO OPERATORS

■ For more information or to join the Orange Park Amateur Radio Club contact Greg Fitcher, president, at [gfitcher@icloud.net](mailto:gfitcher@icloud.net), or visit its website: [www.oparc.net](http://www.oparc.net). The club meets at 7:30 p.m. the third Thursday of the month in the cafeteria at Orange Park High School, 2300 Kingsley Ave., Orange Park.

■ For more information or to join Clay County Amateur Radio Emergency Services contact Scott Roberts, public information officer, at [kk4ecr@gmail.com](mailto:kk4ecr@gmail.com), or visit its website: [www.clayares.org](http://www.clayares.org). The organization meets at 7 p.m. the first Tuesday each month at the Fleming Island branch of the Clay County Public Library, 1895 Town Center Blvd., Fleming Island.