

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

How the North Fulton Amateur Radio League Saved Itself

By: Ian Kahn, AK4IK, and Jim Stafford, W4QO

Part I

The North Fulton Amateur Radio League, outside Atlanta, was in 2006 suffering from the same maladies that probably affect dozens of clubs throughout the country. We had a dwindling club membership, low participation at club events, very few new members, and a general lack of interest. In short, we were tired. Attendance at club meetings which was simply a gathering for a low priced dinner ranged from 6 to 12. Rarely did we have even a modest program anymore, just general rag chewing amongst the aging members. By the summer, it had reached the point where no one even cared if we had a Field Day showing. So we didn't! At the August meeting that year, we faced the reality that we might have to disband the club. Oh, we had one of our three repeaters working but very little traffic on that one. Should we call it quits and find a place to give the smallish club treasury?

We had 12 at that meeting and the question was raised "Should we make one last push to see if we can get the club to grow?" Everyone said they wanted to see the club survive and four people agreed to get heads together and see if anything could be done. That was Fred Moore, N4CLA, Walt Woron, KJ4HE, Steve Knittel, KC4YBO, and Jim Stafford, W4QO. All had been members for many years but had also suffered burnout or found other avenues of interest in recent times. Still these four met and tried to come up with a solution. We couldn't, except one. We'd invite our Section Manager, Susan Swiderski, AF4FO, to come to our next meeting and see if she had any ideas. She could and she did. At the September meeting, with some emailing, we had 19 and received Susan at our BBQ restaurant which provided a really poor setup for even her to talk to all of us. In addition to the anticipated pep talk, Susan gave us the very best idea that we would eventually parlay into the growing club we have today - ACT LIKE A CLUB! This meant - quit having a dinner meeting and meet at a separate facility, get a very good line up of speakers, and go after members in a very aggressive way.

At this time, the club had 56 members; some were way in arrears on their dues. So the "gang of 4" met again as an executive team and started laying out plans for the fall season. We came up with some meeting ideas and contacted speakers for the October (Winlink) and November (DXing) meetings. It doesn't hurt that we have several thousand hams in Atlanta and many prominent ones such as Bob Allphin, K4UEE, of DXpedition fame. By the November meeting, we had had reached 25 at our meetings and we were feeling great! We had about the same number at our holiday party and began looking into 2007.

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

We started planning some extra activities which we called Mid-Month Madness between meetings. This included setting up tables at local hamfests, field trips to local electronic stores, a good Field Day effort, shack tours, and a fund raising effort. By mid-2007, the exec team had grown to 6 and word was spreading that the NFARL was on the move. Meeting attendance was running in the high 30s. For fund raising, the club members prepared a CD of ham material with contributions from all over the world. It was called the *NFARL Nuggets 2007* with over 400 megabytes of information. These were being sold at meetings and at hamfests, including at a table at the Huntsville AL hamfest in August. The club has raised over \$1000 with the CD sales.

The club hosted a “build-a-thon” project by year end, the newly appointed EC for North Fulton W4UOC developed strong contacts with agencies and managed a very successful SET, and there were over 100 members in the club. Meetings with programs such as D-star, QRP, vintage radio, historical recaps, and technical tips/techniques really drew crowds. Almost 60 attended the holiday party. Club clothing was being sported by several dozen members and 12 issues of the club eNEWS (electronic) began to catch a lot of attention.

Other 2007 activities included a 3 month long *Techs on Ten* net for newly privileged Technician licensees and introduction of the Hungry Hams lunches on Wednesday. Both saw a lot of new faces. The club’s long dormant mail reflector was now alive with over 100 messages per month flowing by April. New hams began to seek us out. This led us to begin mentoring new hams who needed help. Old members began to return. We started tracking membership numbers with a passion and aiming our activities at getting new or renewed membership to grow.

During 2007 all 3 club repeaters were restored to full service and we added a fourth repeater -- a joint venture with a nearby club - the Metro Atlanta Telephone Pioneer Club (MATPARC). In 2008, Echolink was added to our primary repeater - 145.47 - and a fifth repeater -224.62- was added; it is also a joint venture with the MATPARC club. Activity picked up on the repeaters so that you can find someone there if you call at about any hour.

The expanded executive team of 8 looked toward the new year with anticipation. We could not imagine what was to come. To start us off, one of our new ham members (Bill Cobb, K4YJJ, a retiree) took over the static club website and did a complete makeover. The www.nfarl.org web site is now our pride and joy with up to the minute information and the recap of activities. Our first effort, in 2008, was to hold a pancake breakfast at our new VP’s (Mack McCormick, WB4MAK) QTH. By the way, we didn’t even know Mack a year earlier. We are blessed in that we have over 800 hams within a 10 mile radius of our club meeting location. We took one zip code with about 100 hams and excluding members, divided up the list into groups of ten. Each exec team member took

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

a list and wrote letters inviting them to the breakfast. We had about 20 accept our invitation and some of our currently very active members came from that breakfast.

In early 2008, the club applied for and received the Special Service club commendation which we proudly proclaim. For the second year in a row, we set up a display at our neighboring club's TECH FEST held by the Gwinnett ARS club. At each event, we found ourselves signing up 2, 3, or more new members. It began to add up. To raise money, we held an online auction of club member-donated items and raised over \$500. Our new VE testing sessions, starting in late February, netted more new hams and new members. We kept the pressure on for great club speakers and we started to hit over 50 at our meetings. One thing we have insisted on is that the club business would be dealt within the executive team with no long drawn out reports at our meetings, just announcements. The club has been willing to entrust the executive team with these details and it has made for very smooth running meetings.

Our next big event was a ham radio class called HamCram. We are a general purpose club with interests in just about every area of ham radio. We had a list of folks who wanted to join in this but didn't have a license. Following the HamCram methodology that has been around for over 10 years, we set up our one day Technician class. It's not quite that simple as we provide students with material that they must read through the 3 weeks prior to the class. The first HamCram netted 24 new hams and most of the local attendees joined. Then came Field Day!

The membership goal we had set of 150 by year's end was almost met by Field Day and we were positive that we wanted to do it right this year. Our FD captains – Steve Knittel, KC4YBO and Ian Kahn, AK4IK - worked up a plan that started where it should - publicity. Putting together a P/R program that was able to make it into the main Atlanta newspaper a week before the event with details on location and our RADIO merit badge class, we knew we would have to do our best. Although it was a lot of work by a lot of members, we succeeded in filling all slots for our 3A plus GOTA station. AK4IK had also invited a number of elected officials to our event. With over 60 club members participating and great publicity, we saw results of 194 people attending our FD site and 2250 QSOs. Included in this number was a GA Senator, a congressman, and several mayors/councilpersons. We also had 8 Scouts graduate with their merit badges. And yes, more people joined!

By now, we had outgrown our first meeting location due to reaching as high as 60 at our meetings. A move down the street to the Masonic Lodge ensued, thanks to efforts of a couple new members who swung some weight there. Our first meeting there resulted in over 90 in attendance. It now takes almost 10 minutes to have everyone introduce themselves.

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

As fall approached we began to plan for JOTA and another HamCram. The former netted 10 more RADIO merit badge holders and many contacts on the JOTA station, W4S. In early October, we had another 18 pass our radio class. We have had several get on Echolink, which we installed on one of our club repeaters early in the year. This is a way to get new hams “on the air” even before they get the antenna strung. Of course, we’re always ready to help on that and we also have various rigs to loan out to new hams.

With all this, the club that almost folded has hit the 240 member level, way above our goal. We are all pretty amazed that our efforts have paid off so well. We’ve had several inquiries on what happened and why. You can tell quite a bit by visiting our website but here are our thoughts in summary:

1. Don’t meet where you eat - Sure we have dinner before the meeting but we don’t meet there. New people find it difficult to join a meal whereas they can walk into a meeting and hide in the back the first time. Of course, we don’t let them do that. We make everyone wear a name tag, either one of our new club badges or the paper kind.

2. Get a dedicated core of folks to operate the club. Our exec team will not ask members to take on an activity they couldn’t do by themselves if need be. Sure this looks like the old 80/20 thing where a few do a lot of the work. So what? 20% of 200 is a lot more than 20% of 56! We keep an eye out for new folks to take over and many are progressing through that process. We’re working on officer succession now and it seems to be working.

3. Don’t count on the old hands - get new ones! This does not mean we don’t look to our “experienced” members to do things but many are burned out, tired, have other interests. Run a radio class, attend hamfests - each will net a few new members. New members means that we MUST have a great mentoring program. It is not formal in our club but the exec team makes sure that when a plea for help goes out on our Yahoo reflector, we get someone on the case whether it’s an antenna raising or a troubled radio situation.

4. Don't count out old(er) prospects - Sure we want to recruit young hams and we have about 10 under 18 years of age in our club, but keep an eye out for retirees who are looking for something to do with their time. We’ve found many that are willing to take a big role in the club. And some of the previously inactive members have come back to lead the charge. Yet we have a major emphasis on Scouting in our club so we work both ends of the scale!

5. Do all the boring club business outside club meetings - Make the club meetings move along swiftly. Get the best speakers you can and have a real mix of both subject and depth. The new hams are not always (but many are) highly technical.

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

No matter how great the speaker is, no more than half will find it interesting; the others are just courteous. However, they won't come back if they have to sit more than 45 minutes through a program they are not interested in. We also run announcements on a PowerPoint presentation the 30 minutes before the meeting so folks can be aware of all our activities even before the meeting. We have never taken minutes at a meeting and never present a secretary's report. This is not the US congress, for heaven's sake!

6. Be tenacious about membership - Count every person and keep up with them. If you don't see them for a while, find out why. This leads to a very crucial infrastructure item - great bookkeeping! Our membership person keeps detailed records and up to the minute email addresses. Our treasurer keeps very good books and we know where every penny goes, yet we almost never give more than the bank totals at the meetings, if at all. Mentoring is a big part of our club. We have folks that enjoy putting up antennas, fixing equipment, and solving software challenges. To that point, the club has just introduced a "virtual" club radio station. An Kenwood TS-2000 HF transceiver that can be operated remotely by club members allows them to get on the air despite finances, deed restrictions, and time concerns, even while traveling on business.

7. Have lots of activities - As many as you find an interest for. Some we have a lot of members participating such as FD and others we may only have a half dozen. We have run build-a-thons where we learned soldering by building a crystal oscillator, one where we built a sound card interface and one where we built a 6M squalo. We've gone to almost every hamfest we can get to with a club table. Members help staff the table and it draws a lot of attention especially with our club's P/R Powerpoint running on a screen behind the table. Our Hungry Hams lunches now draw 20 to 25 regularly, triple what we had at meeting just 2 years ago. This is a great place for newbies to get help as well.

8. Have a club net with a purpose on your repeater - We have tried several varieties but the one we like now is a TECHnet. We encourage anyone - new or old - to bring technical questions to the 2M net. We also have an Internet CHAT room we run in conjunction with the net where members can post links found by "Googling" during the net. And of course, we encourage folks to check in via Echolink. Many do even before they have a rig.

9. Publicize - We have business cards that we ask each member to carry. These cards have our email address, the club meeting details and location, and our repeater frequency. We hand them out to anyone we come across who is a ham or has a ham tag. We have found that many hams have found us through our announcements on our repeater a few days before our meetings. We're in local newspapers, we have a club brochure (you can download it at our website), and we have attended non-ham street festivals where we pass out info and have found hams in the area that didn't know about us.

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

10. Make joining and renewing as easy as possible - Like many clubs, we have found that Paypal payments make life easier on many folks. Our retention rate has gone up with this feature on our website.

Obviously, we're excited about what's happening. We hope this has helped to give you new hope that there are folks out there that are still looking to be ham radio operators and still club members that are getting excited about helping them get their tickets.

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

Part II

Many people read my original article, *North Fulton Amateur Radio League Field Day 2008 -- A Phoenix Rises from the Ashes in Georgia*, as posted on the ARRL Web Extra on October 28, 2008. This led to many questions sent to both myself and Jim Stafford, W4QO, the NFARL president. Most of these questions centered around the same theme: How, exactly, **did** the North Fulton Amateur Radio League recover from what seemed certain failure? Many times, the questions came from club presidents in the same position Jim found himself in when he took over the reigns of NFARL in January 2007. Jim and I talked about this, and we decided to jointly write an article answering (hopefully), from our perspective and based solely on our experiences, this question. Jim's comments come from the perspective of the president trying to save his club. My comments come from the perspective of the new member watching what is happening and actively participating in the club.

Passionate Leadership

The first characteristic/item leading to NFARL's resurrection is the leadership team. The board over the last two years consists/consisted of leaders who are passionate both about the club specifically and ham radio in general. Most earned their licenses 20+ years ago (Jim Stafford, W4QO, has been a ham for over 50 years). Like most of us, they enjoy their own particular favorite aspects of the hobby. However, they tried them all and can talk reasonably intelligently about almost any aspect of the hobby. Most of our board members enjoy speaking to different groups, and do so on a regular basis. It is amazing to hear about someone like Mack McCormick, WB4MAK, lecturing to different local clubs about software defined radio. Watching and listening to Jim Stafford talk to anyone about ham radio is exciting, but when he talks to a group of kids, the rules of the game change for him, in the best possible way. Jim's eyes light up, and he has a way of making kids of any age want to go learn CW as fast as they can (must have something to do with the excitement he feels at having a QSO with someone in Europe with 2 watts and a tuna can 40 meter CW transceiver). Walt Woron, KJ4HE, always plans outstanding programs for our meetings, and we can tell how much fun he's having when he presents the speaker each month with the "often imitated, never duplicated, limited edition NFARL certificate of appreciation." Lee Juckett, AF4IA, our Hamfest Chair, works the room each meeting to line up people to work our table at the upcoming hamfest(s). But he does much more than that. He also lines up volunteers from the club to help out with other communications activities, such as road races and bike-a-thons. And Tom Koch, W4UOC, handles ARES for our group. I'll get into that more later in the article. The big point I hope I am making is that it all starts with impassioned leadership, people who are not just passionate about belonging to a club or organization, but who share the passion for ham radio as well.

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

It's All About the Activities

Impassioned leadership is important, but without the activities to bring in the masses, they really just amount to a group of people sitting around a table discussing pipe dreams. Fortunately, NFARL's above-mentioned leaders are not just good at putting their heads together. Over the last two years, this club engaged in activities of all sorts, ranging from shack tours and build-a-thons to hamfests and community service activities, not to mention the regular monthly meetings.

Here's a brief run-down of some of NFARL's recent activities:

Monthly Meetings – The third Tuesday of every month is NFARL's regular monthly meeting. This activity starts with a group of us (lately between 20 and 25 people) meeting for dinner at a restaurant near our regular meeting location. We enjoy the camaraderie and rag chewing that comes when you put that many of us together in one room for an hour or hour and-a-half. After dinner we make our way to the meeting location for more socializing prior to the start of the business meeting. We typically have more than 70 people attend the meeting. The meeting itself usually consists of three major parts. Part one is the regular business of the club. This is where we find out about current goings-on and handle our “business” consisting mostly of announcements. This is limited to 30 minutes! Part two is our speaker. Every month (except December) we have a ham-related speaker. The speakers talk on a variety of topics, from DXing and QSLing to QRP to contesting, and a host of other topics. Some of our recent topics included VHF/UHF contesting, RF on the railroad, Linux in ham radio, and a demonstration of the Flex-5000 SDR. In December we hold our annual holiday party. This is an opportunity for everyone to mix and mingle, and we also collect presents to donate to a worthy organization. Part three is the monthly door prize drawings. Think of this as a ham fest bone yard where everything is raffled off instead of sold. Members donate items they are no longer using, and at the end of the meeting we draw for door prizes. And, of course, we are fortunate to have a Ham Radio Outlet here in Atlanta that provides one gift card a month as a giveaway as well.

Mid-Month Madness – OK, it isn't really in the middle of the month. It typically falls midway between club meetings. This is a smaller, less formal activity, designed to keep club members engaged in amateur radio activities. Our most recent mid-month madness was a tour of the bone yard at the most recent local ham fest. Two of our more experienced members took a group of new(er) hams through the bone yard and helped people learn what makes a good deal, what makes a bad deal, what to head for, and what to run from. By all accounts it was an incredibly successful event. We've also held shack tours, antenna builds, other kit builds, and other events to keep membership engaged and learning new things about ham radio.

Regular Nets - Like any other ham club, NFARL has its share of nets. When I first joined the club about 18 months ago, we held a regular weekly net called Techs on Ten.

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

The point of this net was to get new Technician class licensees active on HF, specifically ten meters, and encourage them to upgrade to General or Amateur Extra. We ran this net for several months, until it became apparent we were getting the same five or six people checking in every week, and all of us were General class or higher. We also tried to hold a Morse code class net. That ran for a few weeks, and was fun for the participants, but eventually ran its course also. The big net we've got going on now is our weekly Tech Net on one of our 2 meter repeaters (145.470 (-) PL100 if you're ever in Atlanta on a Monday evening). The whole point behind this net is to discuss the technical aspects of amateur radio and get any questions answered. The net regularly garners 30+ attendees. What makes this net unique is that it incorporates both the repeater and an Internet chat room running simultaneously, plus we encourage Echolink check-ins from anywhere in the world. Participants use the net to research questions and discussion topics while the net is happening. This makes it fun, informative, and motivational for everyone.

Please bear in mind, I've just scratched the surface of our regular activities. There is no way I could talk about everything the club does as a fairly regular activity in the confines of this article.

Keep It In The Community

Communications support is high on NFARL's list for community involvement. We support an active ARES affiliate, North Fulton ARES (NFARES). NFARES provides emergency communications support for five municipalities in the North Fulton County, Georgia, area. This group, of which a number of NFARL members are also members, was instrumental in getting our local fire and police agencies to license their membership. NFARES also set up command centers in several hospitals, police stations, and fire stations, and provides communications support to other non-profits as they help those impacted by natural or other disasters.

We also support the Boy Scouts of America by teaching radio merit badge clinics. Between Field Day 2008 and JOTA 2008, we qualified over a dozen scouts for the radio merit badge. We hope this helps encourage an interest in amateur radio among these young men, helping make them better citizens and, potentially, future members of our radio club or another club somewhere else.

Members of NFARL also get involved by speaking to local schools, groups, and civic organizations. We have one group of people who specialize in going into the schools to talk about ham radio. We also have people who go to local civic groups. As a result of our Field Day activities in 2008, we were invited to speak before two different Optimist Club chapters in the local area.

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

One of the bigger things we did this past year was participate in an activity called Roswell Alive After Five. The City of Roswell, Georgia, is one of our served communities and our home base. Alive After Five was a merchant's fair held in downtown Roswell the third Thursday evening of the month between April and October. NFARL not only provided a sponsorship for the event, we had a table in the midst of downtown Roswell at every event. We always had three or four club members working the table, answering questions, and educating the public about ham radio. We also had a portable setup there each month, complete with HF radio, antenna, and portable power supply. By getting involved in this activity, we were able to reach out to those who might otherwise never have known about ham radio. We even got a few people interested and licensed as a result.

Of course, nobody should forget the biggest community event of the year – Field Day. In 2008 NFARL held its biggest Field Day to date. But for every Field Day, we follow the same similar guidelines. We operate in a park and put out enough fliers and banners to attract anyone's attention. We make sure there is an information table with brochures and fliers talking about ham radio. But we also make sure we've got the most important element covered – the human element. Club members are always eager to invite visitors into our operation, explain what we're doing and why it benefits the community, and even help them get on the air for a bit.

You've Got to Train Them to Get Them

As with any other organization or group, it goes nowhere if you're not working to bring in new hams and continually educate and upgrade the skills of the hams you have. To that end, we do several things that keep everyone interested and involved.

VEs – Along with other groups in the metro Atlanta area, NFARL has a loyal and dedicated group of Volunteer Examiners. We administer licensing exams quarterly in our served area, and have licensed or awarded 101 elements since we began testing earlier this year. But just offering licensing exams isn't all we do. There's also...

Ham Cram – Ham Cram is a one day event where participants attend a Technician class exam clinic in the morning through early afternoon, then take the Technician class exam in the late afternoon. We've held two of these sessions this year, and are gearing up for more in the future. They've been wildly successful. At the first event this past spring, we licensed over 20 new hams. At the event we held earlier this fall, another 19 participants took and passed the exam. Most recently we held a HamCram for the General level with 30 passing. Of course, we also encourage anyone who obtains a license for the first time or upgrades at any of our test sessions to join our club, and we get a good percentage who do and become active members.

Elmers – Of course, once you get us, you have to keep us. And one of the best ways to keep us is to help us and Elmer us. Everyone in NFARL eagerly mentors to everyone

A PHOENIX RISES FROM THE ASHES

else. I can't think of any time I've asked a question or asked for help when I received fewer than four or five answers. I installed a new antenna at my home over Labor Day weekend and asked for four or five people to come help me. I got a dozen. We had a small club meeting going on in my back yard. Some of us were putting up the antenna, some were getting radios programmed, and everyone was having a good time. The point is, we encourage each other to stay active by helping and teaching each other. To that end, we use the aforementioned Tech Net, and we also have a Yahoo! group and web site to help, as well. We use the web site to publish more general information about the club, our membership, and what we're up to. The Yahoo! group is the perfect place to ask questions, post items for sale, send out event reminders, and handle the day-to-day general traffic that happens in any club.

Merely Touching the Surface

My comments here merely touch the surface of what the North Fulton Amateur Radio League has done well over the past two years, and they come strictly from the perspective of the active member. I've only been a ham and a member myself for the last 18 months, and these are the things that keep me coming back. I hope, however, that this provides some ideas and guidance for struggling clubs, to help them turn around and experience the growth we've experienced over the last couple of years.