

NCJ Profiles: Mark Aaker, K6UFO

When it comes to contesting, K6UFO is not an “unidentified flying operator.” Known in the contesting community as a tough QRP competitor, Mark Aaker has fine-tuned his operating skills and station capabilities to win or place high in almost every contest he enters in his chosen category. He also may run low power, but he is highly versatile, competing on CW, SSB, and RTTY with equal ease. Of course as the NAQP RTTY Contest Manager, we know which mode is his favorite. Here is Mark’s Amateur Radio story in his own words.

I grew up in Wisconsin in the 1960s, and, as a youngster I always liked science, probably because my dad was a high school science teacher and let me explore the supply room and go on the field trips. I loved reading about science, especially “rocket ships.” I did the usual Boy Scout stuff, but I enjoyed “taking things apart” more than going on camping trips. I read all the electronics books in the school library, and I especially liked *So You Want to Be a Ham* by Robert Hertzberg, W2DJJ. I studied the old ARRL *Handbook* and *Novice Study Guide* and found the local radio club. In 1971 at age 14, I passed the Novice code and written exams to become WN9HLN.

Some cheap, used gear got me on HF: An old broadcast receiver that had a BFO and an EICO 720 transmitter, eventually replaced when I built my own Heathkit HW-16 transceiver. I had a homebrew version of the famous Gotham vertical. This was adequate to make contacts with the other area Novices and a few exciting out-of-state contacts. Once, I even contacted California! I recall participating in the Novice Roundup during those two years as a Novice. I did a lot of shortwave listening too, and enjoyed the broadcasts from Radio Nederland, the Voice of America, and Radio Canada International.

I studied hard, and my dad drove me the 2 hours to the FCC Field Office in Minnesota, so I could pass the General and Advanced exams. This was the 1970s — the heyday of 2 meters and repeaters, and I had an old Motorola hand-held transceiver converted to amateur frequencies. I needed a new HF radio to get on SSB, and earnings from my paper route weren’t enough, so my parents contributed half the money to get me a Heathkit HW-101 transceiver kit. Building and testing that kit kept me busy for a whole summer. When I went off to college, the radios went to the used gear sales at



Figure 1 — The K6UFO QSL

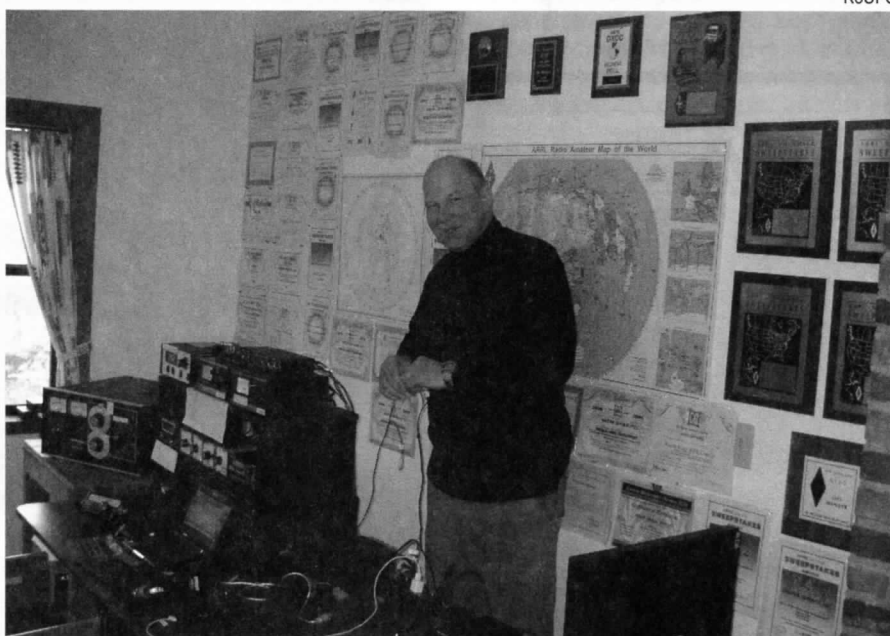


Figure 2 — K6UFO in his Vashon Island shack

Amateur Electronic Supply in Milwaukee.

I started college in 1975 at Northwestern University in Chicago to study, of course, electrical engineering. Since Heath was right across Lake Michigan, the radio club had a lot of Heathkit gear, and I think we spent more time repairing and modifying those rigs than we did operating. I also helped at the college FM radio station WNUR, since I had acquired a first-class commercial license. After my first year of college, I joined a co-op program, work-

ing half the year and attending classes for the other half. My employer was Motorola Communications Division, where I worked on the latest versions of the same old Motorola hand-held transceiver I used to use on 2 meters.

After graduating in 1980, I took a job at NASA at Moffett Field, California, working on large computer systems rather than rockets. I was with NASA for 8 great years, although the space shuttle *Challenger* disaster happened while I was there.

During this time I completed a master's in engineering, attending part-time at nearby Stanford University. Traveling back and forth to Stanford 3 days a week, I played code tapes in the car's cassette player until I had memorized all the 20 WPM QSOs. I traveled to the FCC Field Office in San Francisco and passed the Amateur Extra class code and written exams, becoming NT6G. I also first visited the Stanford Amateur Radio Club station W6YX, situated in a little trailer in an empty field west of campus. It was with the Stanford Club that I (and a dozen others) contacted astronaut Owen Garriott, W5LFL, on the space shuttle in 1983 using "the Big Dish" in the hills behind Stanford. Scotty, W7SW, and I set up a "big" station in my house with a 2 element Yagi and a Swan 500 transceiver. We could work the world, including the new BY stations starting to show up from China.

In 1988 I completed a law degree, going evenings to Santa Clara University, then passed the exams to become a patent attorney. I moved into the "booming" semiconductor industry, working at Fairchild, National Semiconductor, and finally — thanks to Bob, N6MZV (now K6RTM) — at Apple Computer. I was with Apple through the 1990s and the dot-com boom, doing very interesting patent work. At Apple I met Bill, WB6JJJ (the longest call sign in California), Chen, AA6TY (now W7AY and author of *CocoaModem*), and a lot of other great hams, but we were too busy to do much operating.

When vanity call signs were introduced in 1995, I obtained K6UFO, to recognize another interest of mine, UFOs, and because it is a highly memorable callsign. Using my home station I made the DXCC Honor Roll in 2003, and then lost interest in operating, until I returned to the Stanford University club W6YX, where they had a lot of passion for contesting. I was coached into becoming an adequate contester, thanks to Mike, N7MH (profiled in the Mar/Apr 2012 *NCJ*) and the W6YX station manager John, W6LD. From 2004 to 2006, the Northern California Contest Club was making a big push in the ARRL November Sweepstakes, and I posted a few reasonable scores from Stanford or by operating "split," using Stanford on Saturday and my home station on Sunday.

In 2007 I was able to retire early from Apple, thanks to the increasing stock price. I had been looking toward the Pacific Northwest to retire, since my parents and a sister lived there. In 2006 I learned that Ward, NØAX, wanted to sell his place on Vashon Island, Washington. I bought the place and have had lots of fun projects adding another tower, changing the equipment, and stringing wire through the tall trees. It helps my signal that I'm on an island as well as on a hill above salt water. From NN7SS I have

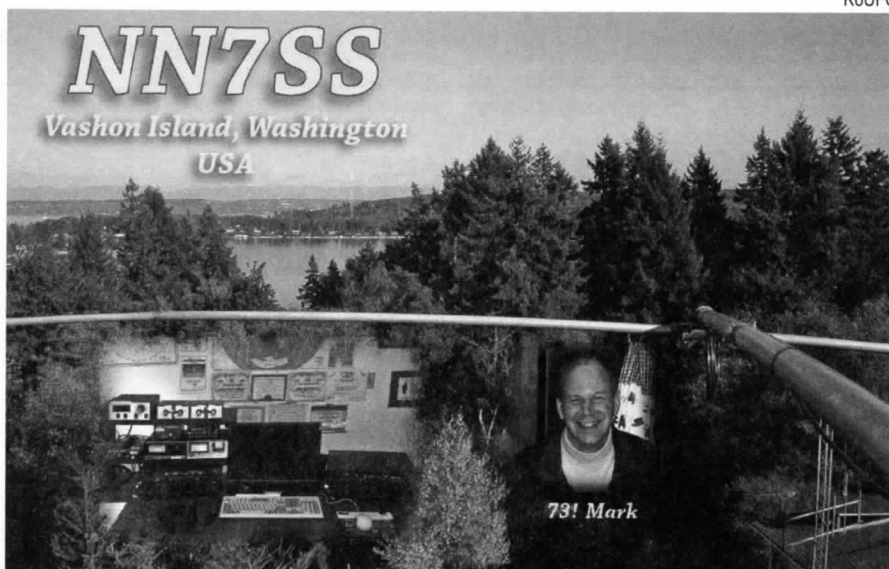


Figure 3 — The NN7SS QSL

made lots of Top 10 finishes and several first place wins in the North American Sprint and North American QSO Party. After 9 years of Sweepstakes operating I finally made a first place in Sweepstakes SSB in 2011. From NN7SS we've done a few multiops, and I've had a few visitors such as "The Locust," K6VVA/7, to put IOTA NA-065 on the air for the IOTA Marathon. The local club, the Western Washington DX Club, is a good group, and I'm only 10 miles away from my QRP hero Danny, K7SS who, despite my efforts, still holds the Sprint CW record for QRP.

Since my wife Gail, KB6EZB, still works in San Francisco, I split my time between there (operating from W6YX) and Vashon Island. I don't have a station in my small apartment in San Francisco, but I drive an hour down to the Stanford station. From W6YX we make lots of multiop noise and have won the NAQP RTTY M/2 in something like 20 of the last 22 contests. I have also operated from Puerto Rico, Ste Pierre et Miquelon, and Aruba, but I prefer operating from my familiar home stations.

I almost always operate QRP these days, except when multiop or if there is no QRP category. I find QRP operating more interesting. It builds my skills faster, and I have a greater sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in making each contact. QRP continually motivates me to improve my efficiency and operating techniques. I enjoy tuning and finding stations, more than just running. I have worked more than 100 DXCC entities while QRP in each weekend of the CQ World Wide and hold the CQ WW SSB US record in QRP all-band assisted category. Being on the West Coast, I usually prioritize the domestic contests over the long DX marathons. I have given talks on QRP operating to several radio clubs (just doing my small

part to boost amplifier sales).

RTTY is my favorite mode, and I was able to learn SO2R in RTTY, since the computer will keep the data on the screen until I need it. I've tried lots of the digital modes, but only RTTY offers me any contest activity. I also do well in SSB, since so few people accept the challenge to operate QRP SSB. My CW skill has greatly improved over the past few years by operating the Thursday night NCCC Sprints. I really enjoy the short 30 minute, five band format. I've learned a lot about "moving fast."

For many years my favorite contest was NAQP RTTY, especially M/2 from W6YX, and in 2010 I became the NAQP RTTY Contest Manager. I have really enjoyed working with the NCJ team to make the contests enjoyable for all participants, from beginners to experts. I still enjoy "the magic of wireless," where a little radio signal can be heard across the country and around the world. But this is a *cooperative* as well as competitive hobby, so I thank all the operators for being on the air during the contests.

Looking forward, I plan to continue to attend Dayton Hamvention about every other year. I have attended Contest University twice and enjoyed learning more about "advanced" contesting, and I attend the International DX Convention each year.

In my spare time, I try to give back to the hobby by presenting talks at local radio clubs, organizing Contest Academy for the IDXC and being a volunteer examiner.

Thanks, Mark, for sharing the stages of your ham radio career. It's always fascinating to learn how successful operators got their start in ham radio. I hope your story will inspire others to try different modes or lower power for a change. We wish you continued success, and we'll look for you in the pileups.

NCJ