

Retirement: TIME TO HAM IT UP

By Cindy Downes

Dressed in a Tour de Cure T-shirt, blue jeans, and a variety of gadgets hung from his belt, Ben Joplin begins his climb up the 50-foot ladder to the top of the water tower high above Skiatook, Okla. Intermittent crowing from a rooster on a nearby farm punctures the sound of a generator humming in the background. As Joplin climbs higher, past graffiti and vine-covered metal walls, the wind tosses his thick, gray hair making him look younger than his 68 years.

This Verdigris Valley Electric Cooperative member spends his retirement building antennas, climbing towers, and working communication command posts. Joplin is an amateur radio operator, also known as a ham.

Joplin was born in Hollywood, Calif., and grew up in Los Angeles. Yes, he is related to Janis Joplin—a third cousin. In 1968, he moved to Edmond, Okla., to work for General Electric and earn his business degree at Central State College. After graduating from college, Joplin started his own company, Joplin Express. In 1976, he sold his business and went to work for Mapco, which brought him to Tulsa.

At Mapco, he met Dan Bates, a ham radio operator, who became his mentor. Between 1976 and 1979, Joplin advanced from Technician to Extra Class ham operator and earned the call sign WB5VST. He joined Tulsa Repeater Organization (TRO) and began volunteering in community events such as The Great Raft Race and Tulsa State Fair parades.

The Great Raft Race, sponsored by Tulsa radio station KRMG, featured a race down the Arkansas River in homemade rafts built from tubes, Styrofoam and even beer cans. Ham operators were stationed along the banks of the river from Sand Springs to 21st Street to watch for race participants who needed assistance.

When working the Tulsa State Fair parades, ham operators were responsible for lining up the marching bands in correct order.

"I did this so many years that I saw kids who marched in the junior high band come back as band directors," Joplin said.

During the floods of the 80s, Joplin and other ham operators were stationed as spotters up and down the Arkansas River to check for dangerous flood situations.

"The worst problem was the snakes going for high ground," Joplin said. "It can be very dangerous for operators."

Today, Joplin is looking for storm damage to TRO's antenna. The wind conditions prevent more than a cursory glance, so he scrambles down the ladder and heads for an outbuilding to check the radio equipment housed there.

"I like the challenge of making things work," Joplin said.

Although he doesn't build his own radios anymore, he still repairs equipment, builds antennas and installs them.

He also enjoys participating in local bike races and marathons. It takes Joplin about a week to prepare for these events as he oversees the Automatic Position Reporting System (APRS) used to track the ham operators participating in the events.

During the week before the event, he programs the APRS systems, makes sure the equipment is charged and working, sets up portable digipeters to move the signals around, and then tests the system to ensure that the output is broadcasting properly.

"Ben is invaluable," said TRO's president, Stan Callahan. "TRO wouldn't function without men like Ben."

Joplin is also the Zone Emergency Coordinator for Amateur Radio Emergency Services (ARES), an organization that, when disaster strikes, provides communications to agencies such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army. On a regular basis, he and the



Verdigris Valley Electric Cooperative member Ben Joplin, 68, climbs up and hams it up as an amateur radio operator, known as "ham." Joplin is enjoying retirement while working on command posts, building antennas and climbing towers. Photos by Bill Downes

other ARES volunteers travel to these various agencies, make sure the agency's equipment is operating properly, and conduct an on-air meeting as if it were a real emergency.

Once a year, Joplin participates in a Simulated Emergency Test, a nationwide exercise sponsored by American Radio Relay League. On this day, ham operators throughout the United States act as if a real emergency or disaster has taken place, set up equipment in a remote location and conduct communications in an emergency-like deployment.

All this practice is preparation for the real thing. When disasters strike, ham operators are often credited for saving lives; and Joplin is no exception. During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Joplin made national news when he provided the radio communications for the Red Cross that ultimately led to the rescue of fifteen people stranded on a rooftop in New Orleans.

The work that Joplin and other ham radio operators do is all on a volunteer basis. When asked why he does it, Joplin said, "For the love of doing it. I just want to help."

Retirement for Joplin is about keeping busy and doing good in the community.

"Find something to do after retirement," Joplin said. "My dad's generation was convinced that everybody died five years after retirement. He didn't have a hobby afterwards and only made it to 68. I decided ham radio was a good thing. I couldn't play soccer much past 40, and ham radio doesn't take much physical effort. You don't have to be out in the weather to do it, and it keeps you involved with other people."

"I didn't retire," Joplin said. "I've been busier since I retired than I was when I was working." **OL**

