

This article, which appeared in QST magazine, was written by Jim Cain, then Senior Editor, at the OMIK Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada 1994.

The Meaning of OMIK

OMIK (pronounced "Oh-Mike"), is a national Amateur Radio organization of (mostly) African-American radio hams that is doing good work for Amateur Radio. You may have seen their booth at the Dayton HamVention.

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Photos by the author

Last spring, ARRL's Washington Area Coordinator, Steve Mansfield, N1MZA, called on OMIK for help in answering a question posed to Steve by a US Congressman. The Congressman represented a predominantly minority district, and he wanted to know how many licensed hams are black (which nobody really knows), and how Amateur Radio was specifically able to help solve the problems of inner cities.

Mansfield called on OMIK, who wrote to Congress on Amateur Radio's behalf. Then OMIK's president, Dub Washington, KR0Z, told him the association would like a little more ink in the pages of QST.

So I called Dub Washington, saying that the League promotes Amateur Radio as being blind to race, creed, color and sex. I also mentioned that OMIK probably got as much QST coverage as other special interest groups, and I cited the Quarter Century Wireless Association as an example, pointing out that the QCWA has a much larger membership than OMIK's 500 or so.

Bright Lights, Big City

"Why don't you come to our annual OMIK convention, Jim?" Dub suggested. The timing was perfect, with the convention scheduled for about two months down the road in Las Vegas. The boss said okay, even when I suggested taking my travel advance in silver dollars.

"Dub," I said, "I'd be honored. But I don't want to come as a visiting celebrity. I'd like to come as an observer and writer," I said. "I want to report a story, not be a part of it."

This came back to haunt me, naturally. At the convention, Dub brings the house down when he introduces me, the only white face at the banquet, for those who wondered about the guy lurking around with a camera and notepad. I stood up while Dub announced that "Jim Cain said he wanted to keep a low profile." Right.

I slip up at the banquet, too. A head-count would determine which call area had the most attendees, and everyone was counted, including guests. When the tally indicates no one from the first call area, Dub points an accusing finger in my direction and I wave my hand. I am the only person from New England. The sixth call area is best represented.

In an Associated Press article last August about how language divides blacks and whites, a professor of English at Michigan State University said "A lot of ... language use is subliminal. It's very unconscious. I do not think people always set out to talk in such a way [as] to aggravate the other person.

"We still live in these two separate worlds, and because of that, we don't know enough about each other. We need to learn," Geneva Smitherman said.

A local friend of mine (and an OMIK member) told me that OMIK was formed in the early 1950s because blacks found themselves ostracized on the ham bands. "On phone," he said, "we often could be identified by our speech patterns, and a QSO would sometimes be mysteriously cut short."

I could hardly believe this. For in more than 30 years I've worked thousands of people on the air without ever giving a thought to such things. I began tuning into the OMIK net and listened carefully. Yes, I guess these operators sound "black," whatever that means. I checked in, wondering if I sounded "white."

My African-American friend said this was why he'd stuck to CW most of his ham career.

The Origins of OMIK

In the early 1950s, race relations took on new tension after a lull produced by World War II (when it didn't matter what color the man next to you in the foxhole or the woman beside you on the production line was). The economic boom of the '50s--that brought such cultural advances as the Edsel and Formica--also widened the gap between America's ethnic groups.

My local OMIK friend grew up in West Virginia and tells of automobile trips to his grandparents' home in Virginia. "Aside from the separate drinking fountains," he remembers, "there were some filling stations you could stop at and others you couldn't. The same was true of motels. This was one of the founding reasons for OMIK, and to this day mobile hamming is very popular among OMIK members. Amateur Radio was our 'intelligence network.'"

In Detroit, at the time the most ethnically diverse northern US city, Llewellyn Scarce, W8TKE, began to form a network of African-American hams within range in the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Kentucky. Hence, OMIK.

Then Lawrence D. Sallee, W8ZAW, took up the cause, and on August 17, 1952, 11 radio amateurs met at Wilberforce College (now Central State University), in Ohio. Among the names suggested for the group were United Radio Association and Amateur Radio for Defense. They settled on OMIK (the full, official name of the group today is The OMIK Electronic Communications Association Inc).

The official history of OMIK (written by Everett Renfroe, W9HG) attributes rapid early growth in membership to "numerous unpleasant situations" in which members had been "called derogatory names," and had heard other operators "advising other operators not to talk because of [our] racial heritage and deliberately jamming transmissions," and being denied membership in local city Amateur Radio organizations.

"Some also experienced this same situation by the military services of our own country," the history records.

One of the first OMIK members was a man I knew more than 30 years ago: Russ Garrett, W9KQE. Mr Garrett was a technician at Rodefeld's electronics store in my Indiana hometown, back in the days when a city of 40,000 had a real radio emporium sporting a full rack of ARRL publications, resistors and capacitors for sale in single units rather than packages of 10, aluminum chassis and Bud cabinets, and even the Hallicrafters S-120 I bought there for my first shortwave receiver.

Not only did Russ Garrett host an OMIK meeting in Richmond, Indiana, in 1956, he was, according to OMIK's history, "the first member to operate SSB and he pioneered the membership in converting to this mode of transmission."

Today Rodefeld's is a mere shadow of its former radio glory days but I thought of Russ Garrett when, during a recent trip home, I walked by the store, which is still on the same corner. Mr. Garrett not only helped me and my Novice friends with advice, he even supplied us with old tubes and other parts from the equipment he repaired.

OMIK Today

By 1970, OMIK was still very informal. Attempts to compile a membership roster were not very successful, but on-the-air gatherings grew and, as members came aboard from around the country, the 80 and 160-meter nets were augmented by new schedules on 40 and then 20 meters. Geographical scattering made in-person meetings more difficult, and various cities formed unofficial chapters made up primarily of OMIK members. These continue today. OMIK publishes a regular newsletter, the Communicator, to keep its members aware of all the news of the organization.

In addition to the social and mutual-support aspects of OMIK, the organization has a noteworthy scholarship program for high school seniors and college students. Last year, OMIK awarded 16 scholarships to deserving students, with four of the students receiving the top scholarship of \$1000. See the sidebar for the address of Joyce Spight, KA9IVB, the OMIK Scholarship Committee chair, if you would like more information on this program, and especially if you would like to make a donation to support their efforts.

OMIK is not limited to licensed amateurs; anyone "interested in applied electronics" is eligible. But "we cling together because of one common interest--Amateur Radio." OMIK's constitution says: "Any licensed Amateur Radio operator and other individuals of good character who support the purpose of the association are eligible for membership in OMIK."

Dub Washington and I are walking back from breakfast, where he is pleased to note that I am a grits and Louisiana red hot sauce man. We approach one of the ever-present people hawking "coupons" for casinos and nightclubs. I've learned just to shake my head, but Dub says to a rather persistent one, "I can't read."

I think to myself, "Why didn't I think of that?" and laugh. Dub knows what's on my mind: that he can get away with a line that I can't. He laughs, too.

An organization like OMIK requires great leadership to thrive, and Dub, 49, fills the bill. He was one of six children born in Picayune, Mississippi. Dub, his father, and a brother built a shortwave receiver when Dub was 8 or 9 years old. Dub majored in music at Mississippi Valley State University and was a high school music teacher and band director in Mississippi before moving to Peoria, Illinois, where he worked for the Boy Scout Council.

Dub is now with the City of St. Louis as a health planning officer. Dub says he was always fascinated by the Morse code (not unusual for a musically inclined person) and finally went to a local class in Peoria and got his first ticket, WD9FQP, in 1977. He and Irma were married in 1984 and between them have five grown children.

We have breakfast with Polycarp Gadegbeku, WB4LPC, a physician, and his wife Toni, who's awaiting her ticket. They came from Liberia and live in Kingstree, South Carolina. Dr Gadegbeku loves toys and is showing off his latest--a videocam with viewscreen.

Pajama Party

The OMIK convention is held at the Tropicana, a nice spot at the very end of The Strip and near the airport. We occupy part of one wing, with the OMIK check-in desk conveniently next to several rows of slot machines.

The convention is pretty typical from a radio standpoint but very different socially. On Thursday evening while I'm still suffering from jet-lag, the OMIK Prime Time Players put on a skit. This attracts spouses and even children, with a competition for best thespian among various regional directors. A lot of fun and a good way to relax. Another weird event is the Friday evening Pajama Party, which obviously is intended to make people feel at home. Beats sitting in a gin mill, come the dawn.

Much more typical are the ham station set up in one of the rooms (the antennas probably breaking Heaven knows how many hotel rules, Yeah!) and the use of 2-meter hand-helds to coordinate things. There's an amateur fast-scan television tutorial by a visitor from Southern California, Roland Hoffman, KC6JPG, and demonstrations of the "Information Superhighway," TCP/IP and more ATV.

It occurs to me that instead of the usual hamfest format of sitting around swapping lies about past triumphs, the focus is on learning about the latest techniques and advances.

When I sign in at the registration table and make out a check for my banquet ticket, I am invited to join OMIK. "Journalistic ethics" (I know, I know, that's a contradiction) tells me to decline. Not being a member eliminates me from the OMIK general membership meeting, but I read the minutes. The group's board of directors meets, too, while families tour Hoover Dam and other local spots.

The Tropicana is so big you can't find your way around without a road map; fortunately, the hotel provides one. I locate the hamshack, where Freddie Demerson, N5AKL, and Major Talton, NW5Q, are talking in some of the mobile stations on their way to the convention.

There are about 150 hams and spouses here, and it looks like every one of them is at the banquet, where the real flavor of this organization (and event) are clear. A benediction by Rev Phil Wilson, WA6FOV, opens things, followed by a solemn extinguishing of three candles, signifying the deaths of three members since the last convention.

New officers, elected that afternoon, are recognized as are regional directors and committee chairpeople, and Everett Renfroe, W9HG, is called in Chicago (see the sidebar). President Washington mercifully brings the speeches to a rapid conclusion, whereupon a dance band begins to play and I decide to postpone any further interviews.

My low profile was now in tatters, at least a dozen people introduce themselves, thank me for coming, and take my picture. This was the best Amateur Radio gathering I've been to in years, perhaps ever.

I am not a sociologist and wouldn't even pretend to draw any grand conclusions from my OMIK experience. This much I do know--OMIK members both as a group and individually find the spare time and a few extra dollars to do good things for other people. That Amateur Radio is both the common bond and the vehicle for their programs raises all of our stock.



OMIK's senior member Everett Renfroe, W9HG

A highlight of the banquet was a speaker-phone call to Everett Renfroe, W9HG. Everett, age 91 and the oldest OMIK member, who at the last minute had to cancel plans to attend the event because of illness. ***He recently became a 'silent key' in May 1997.***

Everett Renfroe was first licensed as 9DOS in 1921 when he entered the Chicago downtown post office to take his amateur exam the examiner asked "what are you doing here?" Everett said "Sir, I came to get a license. The first paragraph in the book says that regardless of age, race, creed or color, if you pass the examination you can get a license." Everett Renfroe was one of two to pass the exam.



John Pulliams, W6HCW, was one of the very first black Army Air Corps pilots (for most of WW II the military "knew" that "Negroes" couldn't possibly be pilots). He served with the 447th Bomber Group, part of the 99th Pursuit Squadron based in Tuskegee, Alabama, at the famous Tuskegee Institute founded by George Washington Carver. John stayed in, became part of the new US Air Force in 1947, and retired as a chief warrant officer at March AFB in Riverside, California, after 30 years of service. John is OMIK health and welfare coordinator for the US west of the Mississippi, gathering information on members and sending get-well and condolence cards on behalf of the organization. He's active on the air every day and "everybody knows John." ***He recently became a 'silent key' in July 2002.***