

# Where Did "Ham" REALLY Come From?

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QST's first mention of the word "Ham" appears in this edition.

So, where did the term **Ham** really come from? In the January *President's Corner*, Jack told a story that is often repeated as fact, about the little "Hyman-Almy-Murray" station at Harvard University that saved Amateur Radio from hostile legislators in 1911. That story is told and debunked on today's Harvard Wireless Club's web site:

[www.hcs.harvard.edu/~w1af/hamorigin.html](http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~w1af/hamorigin.html)

The real truth is... nobody really knows. But the search is fascinating. There's lots of information on the web, and if there's a "smoking gun" that reveals all, it's probably hiding in an article or letter from an old telegrapher back in the 19th century.

**But there are some clues.** The first-ever mention of the word "Ham" in **QST** comes in the November, 1916 issue, in an article titled *Rottenest Luck Ever*, by an author using the pseudonym "El Amateur." **QST** was less than a year old at this point, and it was a fairly stuffy magazine, except for a popular series of articles under the theme *Rotten* this and *Rotten* that. The initial articles were written by ARRL founder Hiram Maxim W1AW,

disguised under the name "The Old Man." He used the articles to complain about bad operating, bad conditions, and bad luck in general. Soon the style and the "Rotten" thread were picked up by several other anonymous authors. El Amateur told a story of woe about trying to keep an antenna up and working, and concluded with the phrase "Say fellow "Hams", doesn't this beat 'em all?"

The term "Ham" pops up here and there over the next few years of **QST**, becoming increasingly common, until in November of 1923, the *Classified Advertisements* section, a **QST** staple since the first issue, took the name *Ham-Ads*.

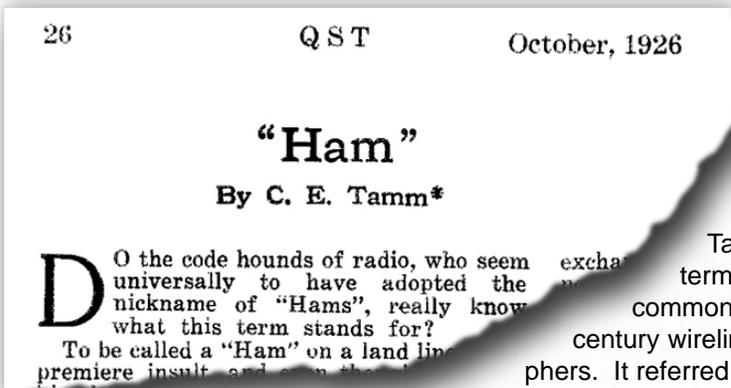
Interesting, but it really doesn't shed much light on the origin of the term. It does show that "Ham" was in popular use, at least informally, from **QST**'s inception, if not before. But it wasn't a big enough deal to write about.

In October 1926, a **QST** article simply titled *Ham*, by



"Classifieds" changed to "Ham-Ads" in 1923, and remains that way today

C.E. Tamm (no callsign listed) of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, finally tells the story. He wrote, "Long before Marconi and DeForest had produced anything that would transmit characters without the aid of wires there were 'hams'. To the railroads goes the honor of producing the real dyed-in-the-wool 'ham.'"

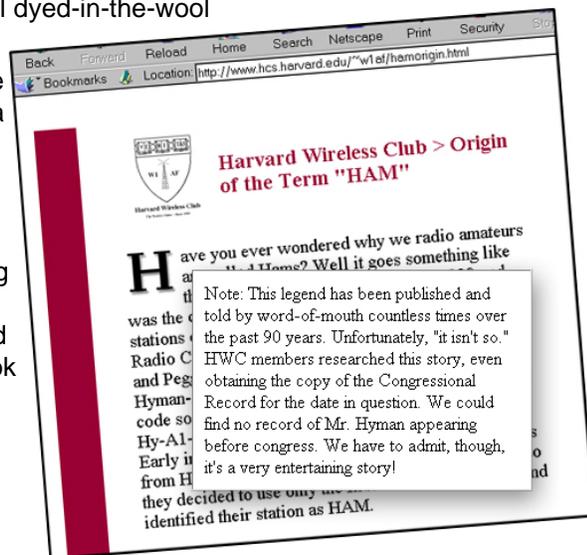


This article by C.E. Tamm says the term "Ham" began with railroad telegraphers

difficult, odd jobs for some time, looking to work their way up to the coveted job operating the key. At midnight, when the office was closed, the kids took over the wire and practiced, until one day they were good enough to take their exam. If they passed, they got the job and became telegraph operators. "Then he became, in the parlance of the commercial and railroad operators in the relay office, any number of dashed and blanked kinds of a 'HAM!'"

Mr. Tamm doesn't know why the telegraphers, an old and legendary species even back in

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The Harvard Wireless Club web site debunks the "H-A-M" Station story.

## HAM continued from page 10

1926, called their newcomers *Hams*. The origin was already lost to time. But he explains that "it is generally conceded that the term 'Ham' was applied to the plodding student because his Morse characters sounded a great deal as if they were being formed by a huge ham instead of a hand, on the sending key." His theory is that the term simply transferred from wire to ether when radio came along.

But that leaves the term as an insult, if sometimes an affectionate one. The transformation to a term of endearment remains a missing link.

An article in the 1969 *ARRL Operating Manual* confirms the notion that *Ham* came from the wired telegraph operators. Louise Ramsey Moreau W3WRE found this definition in G.M. Dodge's *The Telegraph Instructor*, a book that predated radio:

"Ham: a poor operator. A 'plug'"

Louise adds that in the early days of radio, when a single broad spark signal occupied essentially the whole usable spectrum, and two amateurs chatting across town blocked all signals from commercial and military stations, the wire telegraphers-turned-radio operators would signal each other "SRI OM THOSE #&\$!@ HAMS ARE JAMMING YOU." She speculates that "Amateurs, possibly unfamiliar with the real meaning of the term, picked it up and applied it to themselves in true "Yankee Doodle" fashion and wore it with pride. As the years advanced, the original meaning has completely disappeared."

Perhaps. Probably. Sounds good to me. But evidently as it happened, nobody wrote it down. We may never know for sure. ■

## Snapshots



More Fox Hunt Equipment - NZ0I uses this clever "offset attenuator" to reduce the signal from the Fox when working in close. Details at [www.qsl.net/nz0i](http://www.qsl.net/nz0i)

## League Files Partial Reconsideration Petition

ARRL Letter

The ARRL has formally asked the FCC to reconsider and modify two aspects of its December 30, 1999, Report and Order that restructured the Amateur Radio rules. The League wants the FCC to continue to maintain records that indicate whether a Technician licensee has Morse code element credit. It also seeks permanent Morse element credit for any Amateur Radio applicant who has ever passed an FCC-recognized Morse exam of at least 5 WPM.



**Amateur crowned Miss Topeka 2000:** Heather Hollenbeck, KBØMDX, recently was crowned Miss Topeka 2000 and will compete in the Miss Kansas 2000 pageant this June. Heather comes from a ham radio family. Proud mama is Missy Hollenbeck, AAØOF; her dad, Fred, is NØWSA; her brother, Jacob, is KBØRMK, and her granddad, Gary Hoffsommer, WØTI, introduced her to Amateur Radio.

## TRIAD Spotter Training April 15



We will have our Guilford County spotter training on April 15, 2000 at Westover Church in Greensboro, NC, from 12:00 noon to a little after 2:00 PM. The session is free of charge and all are welcome to attend. For directions to Westover Church, go to [www.westoverchurch.com](http://www.westoverchurch.com).

For more information on Triad Skywarn, go to [www.netpath.net/~skywarn](http://www.netpath.net/~skywarn).

Bill Boyes KB1G  
Emergency Coordinator  
Triad Skywarn



*She sells...  
Hamfest Tickets!  
Cyndi KD4ACW sells a ticket to the RARSfest to Carl W4EAT from a booth at the Charlotte fest. Cyndi sold about 40 tickets, a handful of tables, and signed up some commercial vendors.*

INTERNET ARCHIVE  
Wayback Machine BETA

http://hcs.harvard.edu/~w1af/hamorigin.html

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## Harvard Wireless Club > Origin of the Term "HAM"

**H**ave you ever wondered why we radio amateurs are called Hams? Well it goes something like this--the word *ham* was applied in 1908 and was the call letters of one of the first amateur wireless stations operated by some members of the Harvard Radio Club (*sic*). They were Albert Hyman, Bob Almy and Peggie Murray. At first they called their station Hyman-Almy-Murray. Tapping out such a long name in code soon called for a revision, and they changed it to Hy-A1-Mu, using the first two letters of each name. Early in 1909 some confusion resulted between signals from HYALMU and a Mexican ship named Myalmo, so they decided to use only the first letter of each name and identified their station as HAM.

In the early pioneer and unregulated days of radio, amateur operators picked their own frequencies and call letters. Then, as now, some amateurs had better signals than some commercial stations. The resulting interference finally came to the attention of Congressional Committees in Washington and they gave much thought to proposed legislation designed to critically limit amateur activity.

In 1911, Albert Hyman chose the controversial Wireless Regulations Bill as the topic of his thesis at Harvard. His instructor insisted that a copy be sent to Senator David Walsh, a member of the committee hearing the Bill. The Senator was so impressed that he sent for Mr. Hyman to appear before the Committee. Hyman was put on the stand and described how the little amateur station, HAM, was built, and he almost cried when he told the crowded committee room that if the bill went through, they would have to close up the station because they could not afford the license fees and other requirements which were set up in the Bill.

The debate started and the little station, HAM, became a symbol of all the little amateur stations in the country that were crying out to be saved from the menace and greed of the big commercial stations who didn't want them around. Finally the Bill got to the floor of Congress and every speaker talked about the poor little station, HAM.

That's how it all got started. You can find the whole story in the Congressional Record. Nationwide publicity identified the station HAM with amateurs. From that time to this, and probably to the end of time, in radio, Every amateur is a ham.

Note: This legend has been published and told by word-of-mouth countless times over the past 90 years. Unfortunately, "it isn't so." HWC members researched this story, even obtaining the copy of the Congressional Record for the date in question. We could find no record of Mr. Hyman appearing before congress. We have to admit, though, it's a very entertaining story!

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