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From the Chair in the Shack. What is a HAM?

From Peter VA3PWH

The Biblical baby name Ham is Hebrew in origin and it's meaning is hot. Ham is pronounced hawm. Ham was the second of the three sons of Noah. After the end of the flood, Ham saw his father Noah lying naked and drunk in his tent. He told his brothers Shem and Japheth about it. For this act of disrespect, Ham and his son Canaan were cursed by Noah to be the servants of their brothers. Egypt is called the "Land of Ham" in the Bible.

Biblical reference for baby name Ham:

Genesis 5:32; 6:10; 7:13; 9:18, 22; 10:1, 6, 20; 1 Chronicles 1:4, 8; 4:40; Psalms 78:51; 105:23; 106:22

Strong's Bible concordance H2526

A ham is large and comes out from the bone in much the same way that a large hand comes out from a person's wrist. See the picture of a ham showing the leg bone, below. (The bone is often cut off before a ham reaches a modern supermarket.)



As a result, "ham-handed" came to mean a large hand; by extension, a clumsy hand (since large hands are often not suited to precise work), and by extension from that, any clumsy action. Hams were originally called Ham Fatters in Shakespeare's day, and that the phrase referred more to their being less than the best, not supported by the crown, as the King's Players were, and having to use ham fat to mix or remove their makeup.

Going Ham

Ham stands for: hard as a motherf**ker. Therefore, this word is easily defined as "going hard as a motherf**ker". Every other definition I've seen on this website is definitely not right

Wikipedia

One reason for the slow adoption was related to the word's origin, as one of many insults employed by landline [telegraph](#) operators at the time in referring to a poor operator.[\[2\]\[3\]](#) ("Ham" was also already in more general use as a [slang](#) word meaning "incompetent", most commonly in the phrase "ham actor".) Early radio (initially known as [wireless telegraphy](#)) included many former wire telegraph operators, and within the new service "ham" was employed as a [pejorative](#) term by professional radiotelegraph operators to suggest that amateur enthusiasts were unskilled. In "Floods and Wireless" by Hanby Carver, from the August, 1915 *Technical World Magazine*, the author noted "Then someone thought of the 'hams'. This is the name that the commercial wireless service has given to amateur operators..."[\[4\]](#) Even among amateur radio operators, the term was used pejoratively at first by serious experimenters. For example, in December 1916 [QST](#) magazine, an amateur operator working on long distance message passing describes one way to avoid interference was to send messages "...on Thursday nights, when the children and spark coil 'hams' are tucked up in bed" (a spark coil was an unsophisticated radio transmitter, made from an automobile ignition coil, that produced noisy interference).[\[5\]](#) But only a few months later, in an indication of the changing use of the term among amateurs, a [QST](#) writer uses it in a clearly complimentary manner, saying that a particular 16 year old amateur operator "...is the equal of a ham gaining five years of experience by hard luck."[\[6\]](#) Use of "ham" as a slur by professionals continued, however. A letter from a Western Union Telegraph Company employee, printed in the December, 1919 edition [QST](#), showed familiarity with the word's negative connotations, expressing concern that "Many unknowing land wire telegraphers, hearing the word 'amateur' applied to men connected with wireless, regard him as a 'ham' or 'lid'".[\[7\]](#) But many other amateurs increasingly adopted the word "ham" to describe their hobby and themselves during this period, [embracing](#) the word that was originally an insult, similar to the way [Yankee Doodle](#) evolved, as seen, for example, in Thomas F. Hunter's exuberant "I am the wandering Ham" from the January, 1920 issue of [QST](#).[\[8\]](#)

False etymologies

In spite of—or perhaps because of—its relatively straightforward origin, many interesting and colorful [folk etymologies](#) about the supposed origin of "ham" have been developed over the years. Below are some of the competing later explanations that are often charming, but also false.

Ham-fisted

One alternate explanation is that "ham" is a shortened version of "ham-fisted", meaning clumsy. This is a reasonable conjecture, given that all early amateur radio stations used hand-operated telegraph keys to transmit [Morse code](#), and sending style is referred to as an operator's "fist", so someone who sends badly could be called ham-fisted. But the earliest references to "ham" use only the single word, and there is no evidence that it evolved as a truncation of a longer phrase.

"A little station called HAM".

This widely circulated but fanciful tale claims that, around 1911, an impassioned speech made by [Harvard University](#) student Albert Hyman to the [United States Congress](#), in support of amateur radio operators, turned the tide and helped defeat a bill that would have ended amateur radio activity entirely, by assigning the entire radio spectrum over to the military. An amateur station that Hyman supposedly shared with Bob Almy and Peggie Murray, which was said to be using the self-assigned [call sign](#) HAM (short for Hyman-Almy-Murray), thus came to represent all of amateur radio. However, this story seems to have first surfaced in 1948, and practically none of the facts in the account check out, including the existence of "a little station called HAM" in the first place. [\[9\]](#)

Home Amateur Mechanic magazine

In this version, supposedly HAM was an acronym derived from the initials of a "very popular" magazine which covered radio extensively. But there is no evidence that there ever was a magazine by this name.

Hertz-Armstrong-Marconi

It is sometimes claimed that HAM came from the first letter from the last names of three radio pioneers: [Heinrich Rudolf Hertz](#), [Edwin Armstrong](#), and [Guglielmo Marconi](#). However, this cannot be the source of the term as Armstrong was an unknown college student when the term first appeared.

Hammarlund legend

Likely an example of corporate wishful thinking, [Hammarlund](#) products were supposedly so preeminent in the pioneering era of radio that they became a part of the language of radio. As the story goes, early radio enthusiasts affectionately referred to Hammarlund products as "Ham" products, and called themselves "Ham" operators.[10] In truth, Hammarlund was a minor and barely known company at the time "ham" started to be used.



WHY ARE THEY CALLED "HAM" RADIO OPERATORS ?

The true reason why amateur radio operators came to be called "HAMS" is no longer known.

More specifically, the truth has been lost to time over the many years. Various speculations do exist, however, each with their own degree of believability. Presented below are some of the more common theories, **presented in no particular order of importance or preference**. The theories presented have been gleaned from internet searches, printed works, and word of mouth from some of our more experienced... (Older) hams!

Theory One:

The three letters (H.A.M.) are **initials**, which pay homage to the last names of three of the great radio experimenters of bygone years. George **HERTZ**, who demonstrated the existence of electromagnetic waves in 1888, Edwin **ARMSTRONG**, who developed a resonant oscillator circuit for radio frequency work, and finally, Guglielmo **MARCONI**, the 1909 Nobel laureate in Physics, who in the year 1901 established the first transatlantic radio contact. Similar to this name / initials honorarium of the past great minds of radio, comes one based on slightly lesser minds, but nonetheless most heroic in their own right. Let's look at:

Theory Two:

This theory suggests that "HAM" is the combination of initials of the last names of three college students at Harvard, who supposedly had their own amateur radio station in the early nineteen hundred teen something. This was at a time when experimenters had free reign of the radio spectrum, and any legal administration, red tape or federally assigned callsigns were in their infancy or altogether non-existent. Their last names were (supposedly) **HYMAN**, **ALMAY**, and **MURRAY**, and they operated their little amateur radio station with a (self-assigned) call sign of "H.A.M." The three young men were merely identifying their station as "theirs" by using their names. ("H.A.M.") Shortly after this fledgling station emerged, the government **DID** start proceedings to license, administrate,

and "control" all radio operators, amateurs included. Amateur radio stations, Commercial broadcast stations, and rogue radio operators were springing up all across the nation. Some of these transmissions were causing interference, and thus the government was attempting to gain control and administration of the entire radio spectrum. Early amateur radio operators had quite a fight to maintain any radio spectrum whatsoever for their use in their experiments. This fight for government control threatened to eliminate all amateur radio stations entirely by placing all radio transmissions under the control of the Department of the Navy. The Navy's official position on this issue was, "the ONLY radio transmissions that should be authorized should be those of a military nature." Now, with that brief history concerning the control of radio spectrum in mind, let's get back to our college students and their "H.A.M." station. "Supposedly", an impassioned speech was made on the floor of the US Congress in behalf and support of amateur radio operators and their commercial broadcast counterpart stations as well. The Harvard boys, which operated "H.A.M", became the poster child, so to speak, of ALL of amateur and commercial radio's experimental advancements and endeavors nationwide. They became known as "the little HAM station that could". This congressional speech, citing the station "H.A.M.", supposedly turned the tide and defeated the bill that would eliminate commercial and amateur radio entirely, and turn the airwaves completely over to the navy. The problem with this theory is that an exhaustive search of the Congressional Record turns up no such speech, and the Harvard School histories have no record of the Amateur Radio station called "HAM". However, that having been said, it is also a very well known fact there were inaccuracies in the Congressional Record in the early part of this century, yielding it a dubious tool for proof or disproof of any topic. Before Congressional reforms were enacted later on in the 1900's, the rules of Congress were very lax indeed. Enough so, that just about any member of congress could have just about anything posted as having been read into the congressional record, whether it was actually SPOKEN on the floor of Congress or not. Likewise, members of Congress who knew the "right people" and had enough "pull", could have certain "non-essential" items REMOVED from the Congressional record, under the guise of shortening an already impossibly large document. The potential here for misuse and abuse is obvious. Back then, many members of Congress could appease their constituents and special interests by claiming to have made an impassioned plea for their cause on the floor, and pointed to the "Congressional Record" as proof. This led to many obviously ridiculous paradoxes on "matters of record," such as speeches made by members days or weeks AFTER they boarded a plane or boat which crashed or sank, killing them. These paradoxes and inaccuracies have been documented, so the fact that no (congressional) record exists of the HAM debate remains suspect and subject to conjecture.

Theory Three:

Drawing from the congressional "control" theory above, and in an attempt to explain "technical, radio, and electronic matters" to a non-technical congress and general public, here is yet another theory of why Amateur Radio operators are called HAMS: During the earlier days of radio communication, the commercial and Amateur Radio broadcasters had won their fight against the NAVY, (see above). The government (not the military) stepped in to organize and control frequency allocation of these new "short-wave" frequencies. When all was said and done, the government allowed radio amateurs to operate only on certain frequencies which were scattered in and amongst the other licensed (authorized) frequencies. This holds true to this day. The Amateur Radio frequencies were said to be sandwiched "**like the HAM in a sandwich**" between the other frequencies, and so Amateur Radio frequencies came to be known as the "HAM" segments of a particular band.

Theory Four:

Another theory attributes the term "HAM" to: Hugo Gernsback, publisher of a magazine called "**Home Amateur Mechanic**" which was very, very popular back in the early days of radio. It was so well known, it was a household word, just as the magazines "People", or "Reader's Digest" are today. Although it

was primarily more mechanical in content, it did contain fairly regularly, Amateur Radio construction projects. Thus, when asked what sort of radio a person had, the reply, more often than not, was he: "had one of those "H.A.M." (using just the initials of the well known magazine name.) This theory becomes a bit more believable when you consider the Amateur Radio practice of using just initials or letters for many commonly understood words in order to shorten transmissions and ease sending of messages, especially when using Morse Code. "Home Amateur Mechanic" was simply shortened to H.A.M.

Theory Five:

Some speculate the term "HAM" stands for "**Help All Mankind**" as reflected in the radio amateur's long history of service towards people in distress during natural calamities, disasters and civil emergencies. In fine S.O.S. tradition, this gives us H.A.M.

Theory Six:

Others believe the term "HAM" derives its origin from the British. From late in the nineteenth century forward, British sports writers used the "AM" to describe rank AMateurs in sports. It first came into the "electronics arena" from the "wire telegraphers" used by these sports writers. The telegraph operators originally applied it to the younger and inexperienced "cub" reporters. These young sports writers often provided illegibly written or poorly worded copy for the telegrapher to transmit. The professional news telegraphers had beginners in their own line of work, and they picked up the 'AM terminology from the sportswriters, and applied it to their own field. Often the inexperienced new telegraph operators were called "AMs", for the amateurish way they sent messages. That theory is further explained in the following account...

Theory Seven:

(or maybe theory: 6.5): This theory holds that the term "HAM" actually derives from what the seasoned commercial (professional) telegraph operators called the (hobby) amateur radio operators. When the inexperienced hobby radio enthusiasts began to venture on air with crude spark-gap transmitters, based on vehicle ignition coils, their code transmissions must have been pretty poor compared to the commercial telegraphs of the day. The commercial operators referred to the amateurs by using a modification of the old telegrapher's insult (from above) by saying the operator was "ham fisted", meaning that they weren't of professional skill. "Ham Fisted" referred to their style and proficiency of sending telegraph code which could have been done just as well by using a ham (the cut of pork) on the telegraph key to pound out their rudimentary code.

Theory Eight:

Along those same lines of thought, came this theory linked to the stage and theater, where the term "HAM" is used to denote an actor of indifferent ability, or one who shows off his skill (or lack thereof), by performing in spite of and mostly oblivious to his own ineptitude.

Theory Nine:

This following theory seems to combine the "ham fisted" and the "unprofessional operator" theories from above, but also adds a bit more insight as to why amateur radio operators might be called "HAMS": Definition of HAM: "A poor performer. [in this case:] "An operator of poor performance and courtesy". Even before wireless radio, that's the gist of a definition of the word "Ham" given in the G. M. Dodge book: "The Telegraph Instructor." The definition never changed throughout wire telegraphy history. The first WIRELESS operators were, of course, originally land based (wire) telegraphers, who left their offices to go to sea or to man the coastal stations. They brought with them to their new jobs their old habits, both good and bad. Along with them came also slang terms, operating practices, and much of the tradition of their older profession. In those early days, spark-gap radio transmissions were king, in fact it was the only type of transmission readily available, and every

station occupied the same wavelength - or, more accurately perhaps, every station occupied a very large portion of the bandwidth with its broad spark signal. Government stations, ships, coastal stations and the increasingly numerous Amateur Radio operators all competed for signal supremacy, causing quite a cacophony noise and interference in each other's radio receivers. Many of the amateur stations were very powerful indeed. Two amateurs, who were just talking to each other across town or in neighboring cities, could effectively "jam" all the other operators in a very large area with their strong signals. When this happened, the frustrated commercial operators would telegraph the ship whose weaker signals had been blotted out by the amateurs and send: "SRI OM THOSE HAMS ARE JAMMING YOU." ("Sorry old man, those "HAMS, (meaning poor and discourteous performers), are jamming you'). Amateur radio operators, who may have been unaware of the real meaning of that derogatory term "HAM", picked it up and applied it to themselves and wore it with pride. Much as the term "Yankee Doodle" started out as a derogatory term from the British, and then came full circle to be worn with pride to those it was once intended to ridicule. As the years advanced, the telegrapher's original meaning of inept and poor performing completely disappeared. These past few derogatory theories may well be close to the true origin of the term, but it seems unlikely that amateurs would willingly adopt a term meant to be insulting to them as their name. However, consider this: There was an English professor at University of MD who pointed out that "bad" or "insulting" words sometimes fall into a period of disuse, which causes the meaning to become obscure, setting the stage for them to be (ironically) resurrected with more polite, or merely self-deprecating, meanings. Consider, for example, the word "naughty." In Shakespeare's time, it directly translated as "evil" or "demonic," and therefore fell out of polite usage in most social circles of the time. In current usage, however, it's much more benign, and often used to good-naturedly scold friends or even children. It would not be implausible then, for what started out as an insult, to later become adopted by the very group it was intended to ridicule. Today, to be "branded" a "good Ham", is one of the highest compliments an Amateur Radio operator can receive.

"I am often asked how radio works. Well, you see, wire telegraphy is like a very long cat. You yank his tail in New York and he meows in Los Angeles. Do you understand this?-

Now, radio is exactly the same, except that there is no cat."

Attributed to Albert Einstein

Will we see you at the Hamfest?

It is well and truly Spring. My hopes of outside work on the yard and antennas were hampered by rain. The weather forecast for today is calling for the 'possibility' of thundershowers. We all know that the only way we'll actually have thundershowers is if someone somewhere ventures up their tower or on to their roof. One is reminded of the old question, "What comes after 2 days of rain?". The answer is of course, Monday.

Should we start a pool on when it will rain on Hamfest day?

Your humble scribe

Ken

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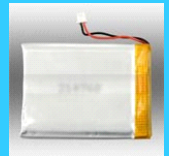
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