

Hamvention 2018 Report Win Grant - WA4SSG

This was my eighth consecutive year of attending Hamvention, formerly in Dayton, but now held at the Greene County Fairgrounds in Xenia, Ohio. It seemed like Hamvention was destined to stay at the crumbling HARA arena in Dayton until the walls fell down, and they were getting pretty close to that for years. HARA was the epitome of "deferred maintenance." The fairgrounds are a refreshing upgrade. The only criticism of the new venue is that the flea market area is unpaved, and thus can be muddy if it rains, and somewhat less indoor space than HARA. The offsite parking issues that caused some delays last year were non-existent this year. The Dayton Amateur Radio Association (DARA) made major improvements on all fronts this year over last year. As time goes on, it will only get better.

One of the draws of Hamvention is that manufacturers tend to announce new products at the event, and oftentimes prototypes of coming gear can be viewed, if not touched. This year Kenwood had the TS 890S under plexiglass. While other manufacturers are moving to SDR technology, the 890S is still a conventional down conversation radio, but with a built in antenna tuner. Sadly, the Kenwood booth seemed to have much less traffic than the other big manufacturers. Yaesu had a lot more traffic in their booth. Maybe it was the free baseball caps or the also under glass FTDX 101D. This "SDR with knobs" shares some similarities with the Icom 7610 in that both radios are direct sampling SDR radios, but with built in color displays that feature a waterfall panadapter, with no reduction in the number of knobs and buttons that you would find on a traditional HF desktop transceiver. No pricing data was available, but I'm guessing the Kenwood will be around \$2,000, with the Yaesu probably close to \$3,000, comparable to its competition, the Icom 7610.

Icom knows how to attract crowds. Both days they held drawings for significant prizes at 3:00 pm with the requirement that you must be present to win. There were long lines in advance to register for the prize drawings and then huge crowds each day when the winners were announced. The Icom 7610 was announced last year, but they did not become available for sale until a few months ago, so that was probably the newest Icom product on display.

Elecraft and Flex are now building high end HF radios in the United States and competing quite well against the Japanese big three mentioned above. With the demise of manufacturers like Collins, Hallicrafters, Hammarlund, Heath and National, I wondered if we would ever again see HF radios designed and built in the U.S. Both of these companies had large booths with many people appearing to be placing orders. Last year Flex had prototypes of the Flex 6400 and 6600 series radios. It was that demo that prompted me to order a 6600M which arrived in March. Elecraft seemed to be doing a lot of business in their KPA 1500 solid state amplifier that was shown as a prototype last year and is now being offered for sale with deliveries starting in about 90 days.

In terms of trends, there were more vendors selling SDR products than I have ever seen. The independent brands such as Apache Labs and Elad had a large presence. SDR Play introduced a new two tuner receiver that HRO is selling. There were some new companies with relatively inexpensive SDR products that I had never heard of. I think that is only going to continue.

I attended two D Star events. The first was a forum at the hamfest moderated by Robin Cutshaw, developer of the DVAP line of products and author of the D Plus software that most U.S. D Star repeaters run for linking. Robin has a product in development that we saw previously at this seminar which looks like a DVAP on steroids. If it comes to market, it will be an upgrade to the DVAP and DV Dongle products that allow people to experience D Star when not in the RF coverage of a D Star repeater. Other speakers at this forum confirmed that small companies will continue to innovate on D Star and other digital mode products, thus reaffirming that D Star is not an Icom proprietary product. The fact that Icom did not announce any new D Star product reinforced the notion that D Star has matured and is truly an open platform. Kudos to Icom for sponsoring an offsite D Star forum on Friday night with major prizes and enough free food to make a meal. Although Icom supplied the venue, food and prizes, none of the speakers were Icom employees. Most of the presenters represented ancillary services and products such as the developer of the ZUMspot, a \$129 hotspot which works with a Raspberry Pi that supports D Star, DMR and other protocols. Comments from the attendees confirm that many people are still buying their first D Star radios. DMR was certainly present in a bigger way than any previous Hamvention, but without a single major corporation taking the lead.

On Thursday night my Hamvention partner, Wray, AB4SF, and I attended a banquet sponsored by Flex Radio, mostly because we had both recently purchased our first Flex and wanted to see if we could learn something. Compared to some of the other banquets we have attended over the years where the focus was on contesting or DX, I thought the Flex dinner was first class. For starters, they held it in a brand new hotel that had very good food, something I cannot say about the "official" Hamvention hotel in downtown Dayton. Perhaps the best part of the Flex dinner was that Flex employees were seated at most of the tables. When we learned that our tablemate was the primary author of the Smart SDR software that drives the current generation of Flex radios, we seized the opportunity ask all the questions we had been saving up. They also gave away some nice prizes, but fortunately for me, Wray did not win anything comparable to the 11 element HF tribander that he won two years ago which we had to transport home in my car. We both only came away with Flex baseball caps.

In addition to Flex having many of their top personnel present to chat with customers, attendees could talk to the owner of SPE Expert Linear Amps and to Pietro Begali whose company makes some of the finest key paddles. Both companies are headquartered in Italy. Bob Heil was also there selling microphones and offering free advice.

As an owner of an Alpha linear amplifier, I was saddened to see no new products from this once great company. I had put my name on the list for a high end tuner that Alpha had displayed seven years ago when the brand was owned by RF Concepts, but despite the current owner telling me there has been progress in developing that product, I have given up on it. Likewise, TenTec, which is part of the Alpha - TenTec - Dishtronix company had very little on display. As I noted two years ago, the decline of these once great American brands continues.

If you have never been to Dayton, I highly recommend it. RARC members were well represented.



Kenwood TS 890S



Gerald Youngblood, K5SDR, President of Flex Radio Systems



Pietro Begali, I2RTF, of Begali Keys



Dave, WD30, operating the Hamvention Special Event station, W8BI



Wray, AB4SF, checking into the Coast Guard net from W8BI



The famous Luso tower from Japan. If you have to ask how much it costs, you can't afford it.