

# QST Profiles

Conducted By Carol Colvin,\* AJ2I

## Jean Shepherd, K2ORS: Ham, Humorist

With his distinctive, deep laugh, K2ORS affirms that ham radio is "in my blood. It's a calling, like the priesthood. I've been a ham since I was 12, and Amateur Radio still hasn't lost its fascination for me." That's saying a lot for this busy actor, author and entertainer. Jean has had his own television and radio shows, and has appeared on most of the big TV talk shows and at hundreds of universities across the country in his role as humorist. (Amateurs may have seen him at the Dayton Hamvention and at League gatherings in Tarrytown, New York, and Great Gorge, New Jersey.) As an author, Shepherd has amassed a faithful following in his over-20 years of writing regularly for publication, and his short stories have appeared in many major magazines. Two screenplays and six books are also to Jean's credit, the latest of which is *A Fistful of Fig Newtons* (Doubleday).

Shepherd grew up in Gary, Indiana (which he describes as "about as small-town and bucolic as Newark, New Jersey"), where he became obsessed with Amateur Radio, and cw in particular. At age 13, Jean had earned a 45-wpm code cer-

tificate, and his ham radio activities have been nonstop since then. As W9QWN, his first call, Shepherd enjoyed handling traffic and served as an Assistant SCM. He later went to Indiana University and was in the Army Signal Corps. There, he learned that "anyone of average in-

telligence, with motivation, could learn to send and receive code at 30 wpm in weeks — especially if you knew that if you didn't, you were going to go out and be a dog-faced rifleman."

Today, K2ORS especially enjoys DX — the feeling of uncertainty about it — and talking to new, interesting people. "To be able to sit down in your own room and talk anywhere in the world is quixotic. It's a romantic concept, and I can tell right away when I'm talking to someone who isn't philosophically a ham. There's a big difference between an amateur and a license holder."

With typical ebullience, Jean tells of his visions of Amateur Radio as an art and technique, of an amateur license as a privilege, and of operating as a joyous pastime. "Americans tend to think of a license as a right. Eventually, getting one will be about as hard as clipping out a coupon for 40¢ off Folger's coffee. There should be standards. Amateur Radio is a principle; it's almost like a religion itself." In listening to him, it's obvious that Jean Shepherd, K2ORS, is one of the dedicated disciples.



The man behind the wit, K2ORS, proves that Amateur Radio can be a "laughing matter."

**QST:** Your reputation as a comic storyteller and a ham dispels the belief that "hams have no sense of humor." Had any Amateur Radio experiences to quiet that myth once and for all?

Shepherd: Sure. I've always felt that life is like a gigantic play, and if you don't enjoy the show, you've missed the point of coming to the theater. Amateur Radio is the same, only it can be funnier in all kinds of ways. One time I participated in the 75-meter on-the-air wedding of two really crazy hams. They were married, each in their own shacks, 70 miles apart. The minister, also a ham, performed the ceremony from his shack in the rectory, 200 miles away. We, the congregation, all came on in unison at the end, amid the QRM. The groom faded out a couple of times, but when it was done, it was "official." I don't know whether they ever moved in with each other, since after all, they both had beautiful towers that neither was willing to give up.

Recently one night on 20 meters, I was talking to a guy in Christchurch, New Zealand; it was a great night for DX — 20 over, armchair copy. I was sitting there talking (we were both on VOX), and my little dog was asleep in the corner of the shack. All of a sudden I heard this hoopla, this uproar at his QTH. His dog had come into the room and started to bark about something. Immediately, my dog starts running around the room and barking. For about three minutes these dogs were barking at each other, having a conversation across 12,000 miles. We humans didn't say anything — just laughed like crazy. Since then I've appreciated my dog more because she's the only dog I know who's had a QSO on 20 meters.

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**QST:** You've been an amateur for most of your life. What other unique encounters have you had that were related to radio?

Shepherd: Well, I got hit by lightning once — a truly unique encounter! I was on the air on 20 one day in the middle of August, talking to a guy in Denver. All of a sudden there was a gigantic blue-like explosion. I was knocked across the room and didn't know what had happened. My rig was absolutely ionized. It was gone — a smoking blue hole.

Then there was the time I had a run-in with Elmer the Shark. Five of us, all 16 years old and all hams, bought a huge, shoulder-high barrel full of millions of "surplus" parts from a joint on Chicago's "Radio Row," presided over by a guy named Elmer. We paid \$10 (two bucks apiece) for the monster, and it must have weighed half a ton. We finally got it into our Ford V-8 after wrestling with the barrel for about two hours, and promptly broke the two back springs in the car. When we finally got it into our basement and began to parcel out the loot of millions of resistors, condensers and so on, we found that half of the barrel had been filled with concrete. Elmer the Shark had struck again! Instantly, five idealistic young hams were turned into mean, slit-eyed cynics, a condition that remains with some of us today!

**QST:** Everyone's first on-the-air contact is special. What was yours like?

Shepherd: My first contact, I remember it even now, was on 40-meter cw. It was roughly 10 at night. I was running a 6L6 oscillator, which I had gotten out of QST. It was called the "QSL

40" because it was the size of a QSL card. At that time you could buy a chassis exactly QSL-card size, 3 × 5 or whatever. It really worked! I even remember the frequency — it was right in the middle of the band because I figured it was a safe place to be. (I didn't want to have problems with harmonics and stuff.) So I bought that crystal, but I didn't realize that there were about five gigantic 5-kW stations right on that frequency. They blew me off every time I came on the air. I had an antenna called an extended double Zepp, and I was only running 9 or 12 watts. All of a sudden (this was the second night) a guy in Brooklyn came back to me. I was in south Chicago, and I went totally bananas. I don't remember his call, but I do remember one thing about it that really hurt me — he never sent me a QSL card!

**QST:** Where do you think the tide of Amateur Radio is taking us?

Shepherd: I can't even seriously remember when I wasn't a ham, so I've seen a lot of changes. I am a little disturbed by the proliferating dehumanization of Amateur Radio by the spread of computerized equipment that is capable of holding QSOs between machines, without human aid. It's spooky. Also, I have noticed a distinct trend among many amateurs who show no interest whatsoever in theory, construction and even operating procedures. That's sad. Another major movement is the worldwide interest in contests, which seem to be almost continuous, with an endless repetition of numbers. There are many days when an actual QSO seems to be an intrusion amid the uproar.

Nevertheless, I'm a totally dedicated ham, and would never willingly give up my license. It's one of my cherished possessions.