

Houghton man shares thoughts, prayers and updates via his ham radio

Story and photo by Jaynee Van Wormer

HOUGHTON—Houghton residents may recognize Alan and Esther Smith's car by the vanity license plate - number K2CAC with a picture of a radio tower. Yet it is not only locals who are familiar with this series of letters and a number. Since 1966, when Alan Smith first received his amateur radio license, numerous ham radio operators throughout the nation and world have contacted Mr. Smith at this call sign.

Alan Smith was born in Houghton and has lived in the town for all of his 86 years. After serving as a communication officer in the United States Navy during World War II, Smith worked for 40 years as the manager of the Houghton College Print Department. He had always been interested in radio, and he and a group of friends became involved in helping missionaries communicate with their families. They joined an organization called the Amateur Radio Missionary Service, or ARMS, and even constructed a radio building in Houghton.

Smith set up phone patches, which allowed missionaries to connect ham radios to their families' telephones in the United States. In addition to facilitating numerous routine conversations between missionaries and their loved ones, he enabled an ailing mother to give her maternal blessing to her missionary son in Liberia and helped a male missionary in Africa make wedding plans with his fiancé in the United States. He has also connected mis-



Alan Smith, of Houghton, with his ham radio

sionaries in jungle hospitals to their American doctors for medical advice.

Now that the internet has taken away much of the need for missionary phone patches, Alan Smith uses his ham radio mostly for social purposes. He took down the large antenna that was previously behind his home and is now only able to connect at shorter distances. Every Monday and Saturday morning, Smith converses from his basement with other ARMS members who live as close as Rushford and as far as Virginia. The 12 to 15 men who check in each week share prayer requests and updates, scripture

verses, and information about the missionaries that they support.

Every few years, the men of this group meet at ARMS conventions or at one another's houses. In Mr. Smith's words, this is "where you actually get to meet the voices." Though he and his fellow ARMS members greatly enjoy their ham hobby, Alan Smith is not hopeful that amateur radio will continue for long in the future. The younger generation simply is not interested, and with the internet, Smith believes that there is really no reason for them to become involved with radio. He himself uses the internet to send e-mails and carries a Trac

Phone in his car for emergencies. Before cell phones, the Smiths had used a ham radio for directions and emergencies when traveling in their RV.

Despite the changing interests and technology of the younger generations, Alan Smith will continue to enjoy the relationships and camaraderie that he has formed as K2CAC. "As a hobby, it's a nice hobby," he said. Speaking with wonder of his radio connections with missionaries in faraway places and of his friendships with his radio group friends, it was clear just how rich an experience amateur radio has been in Alan Smith's life.