

ORIGIN OF "HAM "; the word.

dated: Jan 2007

Subject: Re: Why the term ---HAM---  
From: Gary Coffman- KE4ZV wrote:

Where did the term HAM come from? When did it come to popular use? The *\*real\** explanation appears to be lost in the mists of time. There are a number of theories. *Some more plausible than others.* The one you'll likely hear the most is about "little station HAM". It goes like this. In the early days of radio, the government didn't assign call letters to amateurs. They just made up their own. Supposedly, three students at Harvard named Hyman, Almay, and Murray set up a station. They decided to use their initials as the call. Thus we have the little station HAM.

When the Navy tried to grab control of all radio frequencies, these guys are supposed to have testified before Congress, and the story of little station HAM supposedly didn't leave a dry eye in the house. The press is supposed to have picked up this story of little station HAM, and amateurs have been known as hams ever since. Unfortunately for this story, none of it checks out. A past president of the ARRL did extensive research in an attempt to confirm this story.

There is nothing in the Congressional record about little station HAM. There is nothing in contemporary press records. And there is no record of a Hyman, Almay, or Murray at Harvard at the time this supposedly happened. This story first surfaced in an amateur publication in 1948, and doesn't seem likely to die. But it appears to have no factual basis.

Another story you may hear is that ham is the result of a Cockney pronunciation of (h)amateur. But that is unlikely for two reasons. First, the term was in use in America before there was substantial amateur activity in Britain. And second, voice transmission wasn't used by amateurs of the era, so how did a pronunciation get propagated by Morse?

Another story you may hear is that it comes from a landline telegrapher's insult. Many operators of the day came from a landline background, and on the landlines a common insult was that someone was "ham fisted" in his sending. It is possible that commercial operators used this slang to refer to amateurs and it caught on.

Certainly, the term LID came from landline telegrapher slang. (LID was a reference to use of a tobacco can lid on the sounder to aid a poor operator in copying Morse.) This one may be true. It wouldn't be the first time that a group adopted a term originally meant as an insult to serve as a slang term for themselves.

But the one I like best goes like this. This era was filled with pulp magazines catering to the experimenter. (Everyone at the end of the Victorian age apparently viewed himself as a closet inventor or tinkerer.) One of these magazines was called Home Amateur Mechanic, and it featured many simple radio sets a person could build. It is likely that when asked what kind of radio an operator was using, he might send back RIG HR ES HAM, meaning that it was one of the circuits shown in Home Amateur Mechanic magazine.

Since telegraphers tend to abbreviate everything, due to the low throughput of Morse, this is plausible, and Home Amateur Mechanic magazine certainly did exist in the correct era. So it was those HAM radios which started the use of ham in amateur radio. Gary Coffman KE4ZV

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Another Version Of Ham is from the telegraph days where a poor operator was said to be "Ham-Fisted". Then there is this one. It is a corruption of "AM", which was a truncation of the word "amateur".

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And Still another version -- possible connection with the acting profession. The term "Hamming it up" is often used to describe amateur acting performances.

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And Still another version. Electric Radio" magazine has been reprinting the columns that W. J. Halligan, the founder of Hallicrafters, wrote for the Boston Telegram in 1923 - 1924. In an item dated 4/16/23, Mr. Halligan wrote: We have been asked for a definition of the "ham". A ham is a code enthusiast. The word is probably a corrupted contraction of the word amateur and is used by all non-professional radio telegraphers in describing themselves. -- Electric Radio #181, June 2004, p 38

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## ARRL VERSION OF ORIGIN OF HAM

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

Date 1900

That's the definition of the word given in **G. M. Dodge's** *The Telegraph Instructor* even before radio. The definition has never changed in wire telegraphy. The first wireless operators were landline telegraphers who left their offices to go to sea or to man the coastal stations. They brought with them their language and much of the tradition of their older profession.

In those early days, spark was king and every station occupied the same wavelength--or, more accurately perhaps, every station occupied the whole spectrum with its broad spark signal. Government stations, ships, coastal stations and the increasingly numerous amateur operators all competed for time and signal supremacy in each other's receivers. Many of the amateur stations were very powerful. Two amateurs, working across town, could effectively jam all the other operators in the area. When this happened, frustrated commercial operators would call the ship whose weaker signals had been blotted out by the amateurs and say "SRI OM THOSE #&\$!@ HAMS ARE JAMMING YOU."

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.

### **BOTTOM LINE**

### **ORIGIN OF THE TERM HAM HAS BEEN LOST IN THE MISTS OF TIME**

Other HAM info links:

<http://www.ac6v.com/history.htm> .... more ham & radio history

<http://ac6v.com/73.htm#SSBH> ....origins

prepared by; W9IH Jan2007