

CW Part 1
by Mardy Eedson, VE3QEE

Since the Covid Lockdown started, which for me began at the end of February 2020, HARC education classes became a thing of the past. Rooms we rented at Westdale Secondary School were unavailable, and face-to-face meetings were taboo. Attempts to hold classes on Zoom or Skype did not really get off the ground.

My Basic Licence, obtained in 1993, included a 5 wpm CW endorsement so I knew a little CW. Later in 1996, my Advanced Licence included a 12 wpm CW endorsement. However, except for a few occasional contacts, I avoided using CW. The reasons were obvious. High speed operators made it difficult for a beginner to participate in QSOs. Also there was a "double code" deterrent involving the use of many short forms and weird spellings that made it difficult for a beginner to understand the conversation.

About the time the lockdown began I heard on 7.055 (the old Trans Provincial Net frequency) some American CW operators sending `s l o w C W`. Despite being rusty, I could actually copy their call signs and some of what they were sending. Parties contacting one-another followed a simple pattern. Basically, they were exchanging five pieces of information in a given order: [1] callsign, [2] signal report, [3] location, [4] first name, [5] SKCC number. I later learned from a fellow ham that those Americans were part of a group called the Straight Key Century Club. The group hosted a well organized web site at: <https://www.skccgroup.com> explaining everything, who they were, their purpose, their activities, their program, their member services, software resources and blogs. Since the moment I discovered this group, I have come to learn three major things set this group apart from other groups. Firstly, they are highly active, (you might say "radio" "active", hi hi) with over 25,000 members worldwide with someone on the air almost any time you tune to their suggested frequencies. Secondly, they use only mechanical keys, no iambic style paddles with electronic keyers. This feature means they allow only straight keys (up and down style keying) or bugs (Vibroplex style side to side keying with mechanically created dits) or sideswipers also known as cooties (side to side action with the operator making dits and dahs manually. This feature turns off a lot of would-be participants who are used to and who prefer using iambic paddles. However the mechanical key requirement means that participants naturally send CW at a slower rate and can easily adjust their sending style to match the person responding to their call. That also means they can respond at your speed. Thirdly, the group has a program of events and incentives that keep members involved. The program is really great for rank beginners and that appealed to me.

Reading the web site I learned that getting an SKCC number was FREE and the number was good for life with no strings attached; so, I got one.

Since then I have been enjoying a number of casual SKCC activities and earning awards in the process. Because using CW naturally improves your ability, I am starting to really enjoy the mode and feeling much more comfortable using a key.

There will be more to this story in another issue, but until then, do check out the SKCC web site. It is a good one. Also, listen on the 40 meter band between 7.050 and 7.060 to hear SKCC guys making contacts. They are having fun and learning CW in the process.