FIELD DAY
A Mirror of Amateur Radio History

Steeped in tradition and mystery, today’s Field Day evolved from humble beginnings in the Golden Age of Radio. Anything but stable, Field Day rules and practices have changed radically since the 1930s.

Be careful when you start to search QST archives for the answer to a simple question—it can become an obsession! That’s the lesson I learned when, following my participation in Field Day this year with the Potomac Valley Radio Club (W3AO—7A MDC), I was asked whether I thought we had set a new Field Day record. Because I volunteer at the Historical Electronics Museum in Linthicum, Maryland, which happens to have a nearly complete set of QSTs in its library, I figured I would spend a lunch hour at the museum and dig up the 7A and overall Field Day records. In pursuing this goal I quickly learned that: (1) this is not a simple question; (2) the history of Field Day reflects the history of communications technology in general and ham radio in particular; and (3) old QSTs are fascinating!

Here is a chronology of Field Day starting from the first outing in 1933. In the process of piecing this together, I learned (or relearned) much about what has happened to ham radio in the past 66 years.

1933: Field Day #1
QSO Leader Uses 1x4 Call Sign to Save Time

Great ideas often have humble beginnings, and Field Day is no exception. A one-column announcement in the June 1933 QST states that, for 27 hours starting the second Saturday in June at 4 PM local time (no daylight savings yet!), there would be an opportunity for “portables” to go into the field to contact as many stations as possible. Says F. E. Handy, W1BDI, in the announcement, “The real object of this contest is to test ‘portables’ wherever they may be available…. If successful, we want to make it an annual affair.” To score the event, each QSO with fixed stations will count 1 point, contacts with other portables count 2 points, and DX contacts count 3 points. Multiply QSO points by the total number of ARRL sections, plus countries worked. No mention is made of a required exchange, which clearly must include an ARRL section!

The September 1933 QST announces that the winner of the First Annual Field Day is a non-club group signing W4PAW. Club members made 62 QSOs and had a multiplier of 28 sections/countries for a grand total of 1876 points. The Central Illinois Radio Club, W9ZZAL, tops the QSO totals with 98! What’s the “ZZ” all about? Until 1933 it had been necessary to get a special license to operate portable, and these licenses all had suffixes starting with ZZ. In 1933 the FCC allowed portable operation under a home call sign. Why did the CIRC use their old call sign? Well, operating portable under the new rule called for an even longer station ID—your call sign followed by the break sign (double dash) three times, followed by the call area (1 through 9)!

1934: 60 W is QRO!

It looks like Handy’s wish is coming true—there will be a Field Day number 2! The Field Day period remains the same, although the chosen weekend in June will range from the first to the third for a long time to come, eventually settling on the fourth full weekend of the month.

The characteristics of today’s competition are beginning to be established. Emphasis is shifted to the total number of stations contacted—the multiplier for sections and countries has been removed. At this point, multi-band contacts are not permitted. DX contacts, while still allowed, receive no special point advantage. The scoring system begins to resemble Field Day as we now know it.
The first Field Day was announced in the June 1933 QST by F. Edward Handy, W1BDI.

1936: The Year with Two Field Days!

The June 1936 Field Day is so popular a second one is held on August 22-23 with identical rules. Participation in both Field Days is about the same, as winning contact totals in June and August are 143 and 136, respectively.

1937: The "Field Day Message" is Born

The special Field Day of August 1936 apparently becomes Field Day number 4, as the Fifth Annual Field Day is announced for June 19-20. In a battle that continues to the present between creative rules interpretation and the "spirit of the law," the League outlaws "manufactured contacts with stations of the same field group." The Field Day message bonus, another venerable Field Day tradition, is born as 10 points (before multiplier) are awarded for a single properly formed and serviced message to League Headquarters stating the number of ops, location, "conditions," and power. Multipliers and QSO points are unchanged. For the first time, the winning QSO total exceeds 200 (204), with a breathtaking average rate of 7.5 QSOs per hour.

1938: I'm Not Ready to QRT!

The contest period is extended to 26 hours—from 4 PM Saturday to 6 PM Sunday.

1939: Everyone Form a Circle

For the first time, the area within which all equipment must be located is defined as a restrictive 100-foot radius. Do they mean this to include your 160-meter dipole?

1940: Modern Field Day Rules Emerge

Significant changes are afoot. For the first time, a station can be contacted on multiple bands. Results are grouped by the number of simultaneous transmitters used. The 100-foot circle expands to 500 feet, giving those multi-transmitter teams a little breathing room. Home stations are encouraged to work Field Day stations, and their scores will be listed, but no multipliers are allowed (a rule that never changed). The Field Day message to ARRL HQ now earns 25 points, and points are given for Field Day handling of other teams' messages, and both home and portable stations get one point for each message copied and one point for a message passed on. From 1933 to 1980 message points will be changed no less than 12 times!

1941: Field Starts Simultaneously Across the Country (by Accident?)

The Field Day period now starts at 4 PM EST across the country. Strangely, this change may have come about by accident. To smooth the FCC approval every portable station needs for Field Day operation, the League informs the FCC of the Field Day period. In aptly numbered announcement 73-D, the FCC refers to a single operating period for all stations. My guess is that the League’s communication to the FCC lists the period from 4 PM EST June 7, to 6 PM EST June 8, inadvertently establishing a single starting time. Last year’s change to allow contacts on multiple bands was apparently unclear, so this year’s rules make a point to state that phone and CW are separate “bands” for the purposes of Field Day contacts. Also, even in these early days stations must be complaining about being in “black holes” as far as Contesting is concerned. In response, an overall 1.5X mul-
1942-1945: “Closed for the Duration”

As is the case with so many activities, Field Day posts a “Closed for the Duration” sign during WW II. In fact, so does all ham operating.

1946: The Post-War Era—A VHF-Only Category Debuts

Field Day returns after the war with virtually no changes. Starting time is back to local time (more evidence that the 1941 change was inadvertent). For the next three Field Days there is a VHF-only score listing designed “to lend point to the participation of VHF Emergency Corps networks that may wish to arrange special activities or simulated tests on these dates.”

1948: CQ Field Day on 11 Meters?

Eleven meters is now available to hams (for a while) and it counts as a Field Day band. There are no CW/phone subbands on 11 meters, but phone and CW count separately here, too. The period is shortened to 24 hours, starting at 4 PM local time. Each station worked is now worth one point (regardless of whether fixed or portable). The 2X multiplier for transmitters that are independent of commercial mains is dropped. Battery operation now is recognized with a 1.5X multiplier.

1949: Field Day Mobile Operation Comes of Age

The growing interest in mobile operation results in some significant rules changes. This year, four categories are recognized: (1) Club and group (no battery multiplier); (2) One or two operators; (3) Mobile; and (4) Home stations. Also, the Club Aggregate Mobile listings are established whereby clubs can compete with teams of mobile stations. This special listing will last until it’s quietly dropped in 1978. In other changes, a specific exchange of signal report and ARRL origination after a trial of only two years.

1950: Modern Field Day Classes are Established

The four classes offered last year are modified and labeled with letters for the first time: A—Club or non-club portable; B—Unit or individual portables (1 or 2 ops); C—Mobile; and D—Home. The Field Day “circle” is increased to 1000 feet. The wording last year said “25 points for each such [Field Day] message.” What was meant, we learn, was 25 points for each team’s single Field Day message (some stations, not unexpectedly, had cranked out a pile of Field Day messages looking for 25 points each).

1951: Duck, Cover and Turn on Your CONELRAD Monitor

Says June 1951 QST: “At a time when civil defense is organizing, the Field Day provides an unparalleled opportunity for mass testing of our emergency facilities.” To encourage emergency preparedness, home stations on emergency power will be listed separately as Class D, while home stations on commercial power will be listed as Class E.

1952: “Having a Wonderful Time, Wish You Were Here”

The 1950 rule that allowed one point for any message originated during Field Day has resulted in some groups cranking out meaningless “rubber stamped” messages during Field Day to generate points. Because the emphasis is on contact totals and not message generation, the League responds by eliminating the bonus points for message origination after a trial of only two years.

1957: Simultaneous Start Returns

Field Day starts at 4 PM EST and ends at 4 PM PST, as usual, but now everyone can operate any 24 consecutive hours of the 27-hour period. The purpose of the change is to “encourage long-distance QSOs.” For the first time, more than 10,000 hams participate, a 430% increase over the first postwar event in ‘46.

1963: Will “Manufactured” Contacts Ever Be Eliminated?

Although contacts with other members of a Field Day group were outlawed way back in 1937, some creative types have determined that the rules don’t ban those who are not “Field Day operators” from using the Field Day transmitters to work the group for points. The League counters by allowing a Field Day transmitter to be used only under one call sign.

1966: The Modern “Bonus Era” Begins

The simple Field Day message bonus concept, around since nearly the first Field Day, is expanded, bringing the beginnings of a wonderful aspect that one wag, who shall remain nameless (KE3Q), has characterized as “part radio contest, part scavenger hunt.” Publicity is emphasized and 100% freedom from commercial power is stressed by a 500-point post-multiplier bonus for achieving at least two of the following three: (1) Use of no commercial power anywhere; (2) Publicity; or (3) Originating a message to the SCM or SEC.

1968: The Field Day Period is the Field Day, Period

A major change is adopted that makes set-up within the 27-hour period mandatory, and the starting time is advanced two hours to 1900Z to accommodate the change. All home stations, emergency powered or on commercial mains, now compete in a single D category. The 1.5X multiplier for battery power now applies to categories A, B and C. Bonuses provide for 200 points each for publicity, 100% emergency power and/or message origination. Lastly, and largely ignored, the exchange is now section only—but in practice many can’t resist sending a signal report anyway!

1969: An Idea Whose Time Has Not Come

Last year’s mandatory setup within the 27-hour event period was not popular, so it is now optional (that is, ops can use the entire 27 hours if they start setup within that period). (Personal note: This was the year of my first Field Day victory—1A with WA3EPT/3, Johns Hopkins University Students and Alumni.)

1970: Increasing Novice Participation

To further encourage beginners, a “free” Novice station (set up and run by Novices) is allowed for groups running three or more transmitters. The League continues to battle with creative rules interpretation (or, depending on your viewpoint, technology advancements) by outlawing “octopus” hardware for interleaving transmissions to avoid moving to a higher transmitter category. (We had made great use of that technique in our ‘69 1A win.) On another note, I guess we are getting better at setting up, because the starting time is advanced yet another hour to 1800Z.

1971: Why Old-Timers Can’t Remember Whether Home Emergency Power is Class D or E

After three years of being combined, Classes D and E are separate once again. The designators, however, are reversed. Class D is for home stations on commercial power,
while Class E encompasses home stations on emergency power. (I guess the feeling is that E for Emergency makes more sense.)

Major changes in the scoring system reduce points across the board. The 3X multiplier for 100% emergency power is eliminated and replaced by a requirement that all A and B transmitters now must be on emergency power. The 1.5X multiplier for battery operation is eliminated and replaced with limiting the QRP multiplier to battery operation only. The power multiplier now applies to the maximum power used at any time during the period. The four-QSO multiplier categories are reduced to three with a maximum of 3X for QRP/battery. Bonus points are now as follows: 100 points per transmitter for 100% emergency power; 50 points for publicty; 50 points for message origination; and 5 points per message relayed. Last, in a surrender to habit, the signal report is returned to the exchange!

1972: Batteries are on Their Own

Ops using battery power no longer compete with ops using non-battery sources. Scores are listed separately.

1973: The Space Age Comes to FD

The repeater rule is waived for OSCAR 6 contacts and a 50-point satellite bonus is instituted.

1974: The Energy Crisis Strikes FD

A 100-point bonus is added for making natural power QSOs. The 15-minute rule for band changes further discourages tricky techniques for counting two transmitters as one.

1975: Is SSB Taking Over?

SSB is demonstrating its superiority to “conventional” AM, and phone QSO rates are so high that the mode threatens to dominate Field Day. To compensate, the 2X rule for CW QSOs is instituted on a trial basis (personal note: Hooray!).

1976: The 10,000 QSO Mark is Broken

Field Day results show the many unusual prefixes permitted by US amateurs celebrating the Bicentennial. W1VV/1 celebrates with 10,010 contacts! In doing so, the group surpasses the 1933 QSO record in its first 15 minutes of operation.

1977: Bring on the Techs!

Technician amateurs are now permitted to set up and operate the Novice station. Also, we have apparently solved the energy crisis because the natural power bonus is gone! The 2X rule for CW is “permanent.”

1980: 1A CT

RST is replaced with category and class in the exchange. FCC and Field Day rules no longer require portable call sign designators. Set-up time is tightened—nothing can be installed prior to 24 hours before the start of the Field Day period. Natural power was judged to be politically correct and too much fun to be eliminated—so it’s back as a 100-point bonus. The satellite and Field Day message bonuses advance to 100 points. Copying the W1AW message is worth 100 points for the first time.

1981: 1001001

Computers are becoming ubiquitous and, as a result, packet radio is soaring in popularity. Field Day enters the digital era by providing a 100-point bonus for a single packet QSO, permitting one “free” packet station and waiving the repeater rule for packet to allow digipeaters and nodes to be used. The 15-minute rule is eliminated at VHF and above. The Yankee Clipper Contest Club and The Wireless Institute of the Northeast combine using call sign W2RQ to turn in a QSO total of 11,201—unbeaten 18 years later!

1984: We Finally Get It Right

Over the years we’ve had a heck of a time settling on the best way to score battery, low, medium and high power categories. Here’s another try: The power breakpoints are adjusted so that the 5X multiplier applies to 5 W instead of 10 W (for battery or equivalent), and 2X applies to <150 W rather than <200 W. (These definitions will stick for at least the next 16 years! In particular, the 5X multiplier for QRP/battery turns out to be a good equalizer—the change will result in overall first place finishes by the entrants in this category in eight of the next 16 Field Days.)

1993: VHF Becomes a Major Field Day Factor

The growing influx of Technician licensees changes Field Day in a big way—