

# Personal Communications at the Joint Arctic Weather Stations in the 1950s

By

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Except for major family emergencies, people who went to work on the Joint Arctic Weather Stations (JAWS) were reliant on the mail brought in during the Spring and Fall Airlift and the occasional mail-drop. There were no telephones and radio teletype was only introduced in the late 50s. The first domestic communications satellite, allowing wide-spread use of telephone service in the North, was not launched until the early 70s.



This serious gap was filled by volunteer radio amateurs. They provided messaging service as well as “phone patches” when radio conditions permitted. Many people on the JAWS arranged phone patches with people close to their homes. I recall making an arrangement with Rowland Beardow (left), VE3AML in Sarnia and both Dick Etherington and I used the services of Fred Bissett (right), VE3AIU in Goderich.



While these local *ad hoc* arrangements worked fine there were at least three radio amateurs who played a much larger and continuing role handling

literally hundreds of messages and phone patches each month. The following, (Brit Fader, Charlie Harris and Stan Surber) were the leaders as seen from Eureka in 1956-58.

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## LeBriton John William Fader, VE1FQ

1914 – 1990



Brit Fader, VE1FQ  
(Tnx VE3GRO)

Brit Fader VE1FQ completed his schooling in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1935. He then worked for Manning Equipment Ltd in Halifax where he dispensed radio components. In 1940 he joined Canada Post and remained with them until his retirement in 1973 except for the years 1942-46 when he served in the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals. He was issued his amateur radio call-sign VE1FQ in 1934 and was active in various areas of amateur radio throughout his life.

In 1946 Brit began to handle messages for personnel in the Canadian Department of Transport, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Department of National Defence and others serving in the Arctic. He held regular “skeds” on 20 meter phone. At first people would travel to Brit’s “ham shack” to talk to their relatives and friends in the North. Later he became the first to use a phone patch in the Maritimes and became known as “The Northern Messenger”. His early equipment

comprised a home-built transmitter with an 810 in the final, a home-built three-element beam and a RME 9D receiver. Much later he replaced the RME receiver with a Collins 75A3.

Brit was already handling traffic for the North when the first of the JAWS stations was established at Eureka in 1947. During Christmas 1949 he ran phone patches from the North and handled large numbers of messages throughout the 1950s. In 1952 he handled an “all-time high” of 290 messages during one month, a most impressive accomplishment considering that these were voice contacts.

Brit won many awards and expressions of appreciation for his efforts. In 1970 the Department of National Defence invited him on a cruise on a Canadian Forces vessel. He was honoured in 1976 as the Canadian Radio Relay League’s “Amateur of the Year” and in 1990 he received the Award of Honour and was welcomed into the Canadian Amateur Radio Hall of Fame. His community efforts extended beyond amateur radio. In 1984 he was named as Citizen of the Year in Sackville, Nova Scotia for his efforts as a parent

volunteer and school trustee.

In June 1990, Brit was accepted as a Life Member of the Halifax Amateur Radio Club in recognition of his contributions and years of service to the Club. Brit passed away on August 16, 1990.

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**Charles H. Harris VE6HM**  
**1886 – 1975**

Charlie Harris was born in England in 1886 and immigrated to Canada when very young. He served with the armed forces overseas in the First World War and then returned to Edmonton, Alberta. His first amateur radio contact was in 1926. His wife, Hilda, was also a radio amateur. Charlie was active in various aspects of amateur radio from that time.

Charlie was one of the leading amateurs handling messages for those in the North before the days of reliable commercial communications. He probably started in the late 1940s along with Brit Fader and Stan Surber. Statistics from the time are sketchy, but by March 1952 he was reporting 123 messages a month. Traffic in those days would have been largely c.w. (Morse code) with some voice traffic and the occasional “phone patch”. The handling of the message could take up considerable time. A phone patch might take around thirty minutes while a c.w. message would have to be transcribed, put in the mail or phoned to the recipient. Charlie’s dedication was highlighted in April 1952 QST which reported that “VE6HM received the news of the arrival of a new grandson by amateur radio but in the most round-about way – via VE1FQ, VE8SQ, W8CAB and VE8MC”.



Charlie Harris, VE6HM

Charlie’s use of phone patch in 1952 involved the use of a “new style phone patch”. He continued throughout the 1950s to report large traffic figures each month and was the key Western Canada phone patch link for the JAWS stations in the latter 50s. In September 1955 he was reported, along with VE6NX to have “...kept in touch with Isachsen and relayed traffic in connection with the mercy flight [exact date not known]”. By 1957 he had added radio teletype to his communications options.

In 1957 Charlie was presented with a gift from those he had helped in the Northwest Territories in recognition of his efforts in handling traffic over many years. Charlie was taken by complete surprise while being interviewed on the local TV station program “Talk of the Town”.

In 1958 Charlie reported logging his 18,000<sup>th</sup> QSO (radio contact) since his start in 1926, much of this total being traffic handled for people in the North.

He was a recipient of the Northern Alberta Radio Club honour life membership that recognized those radio amateurs who have made a significant contribution to amateur radio over a long period of time. Only two such awards had been made up to 1967.

Notice of his death was published in *QST* for July 1975. His call sign continues in public service as a registered repeater in Alberta.

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**John Stanley Surber, W9NZZ**  
**1907 – 1982**

Stan Surber came from Francesville, Indiana where his father had a hardware store. He married Louise right after High School and he and Louise had a son, Stanley Jr.

Stan started in radio about 1922. He became a telegrapher on the Monon Railroad (The Chicago, Indianapolis and Louisville) in 1938 converting from radio to Morse telegraphy. His first regular position with the



Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company (C & O) was around 1940 in Merrillville. He later became a train dispatcher in Peru, Indiana and was there with the C & O until his retirement.

Stan was diabetic and in 1922 he began using insulin. He felt that he had a particular debt to Canada. In his own words "...I am finishing fifty-seven years of using insulin; what would I have done without the good Canadian doctors, Dr. Banting and Dr. Best and their discovery of insulin?" When he was first diagnosed with diabetes his doctor suggested that his parents encourage him in a hobby. He took up amateur radio. His first call sign was 9EFZ, the licence being

signed by Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce and later President of the United States.

Stan started handling traffic for the Northern stations around 1950 and by late 1951 he kept a twice-daily schedule with VE8ML (Alert) and VE8MA (Eureka). His traffic built up significantly during the rest of the decade peaking in 1954 when he reported an incredible 2325 messages in one month. In 1953 he kept regular skeds with the Arctic stations (including T-3, Fletcher's Ice Island) for 353 days. His equipment was a Collins 32V3 transmitter and a Collins 75A4 receiver.

Stan would start each day with an early trip to the post office where he would pick up the mail for the "Arctic Weather Men". He averaged seven hours of operation a day, seven days a week. Stan and Louise worked the same hours at the C & O - the 4 PM to Midnight shift. Stan was a railroad dispatcher and Louise as a PBX operator.

In 1953 he was awarded the prestigious 1953 General Electric Edison Radio Amateur Award for outstanding public service. He had handled some 12,000 radiograms in 1953 for the "men of five isolated Arctic weather stations and their families at home" – estimated at over a million and a half words in Morse code. His wife, Louise, won a wrist watch from G.E. as a "Most Understanding Wife".

In 1957 Stan was given a trip to Thule, and T3, by the U.S. Airforce. He was in radio contact with the JAWS stations and contacted his own station back in Peru, Indiana while he was in the North. This story was written up at the time but no copy of the article has yet been found. There was also an article about him the *Readers Digest* entitled "Arctic Mailman".

Notification of Stan's death was published in March 1983 *QST* followed by a short obituary in June *QST* the same year. Mrs. Louise Surber moved to Wisconsin after Stan's death.