

KX9X/8 and NM9H/8

By Sean Kutzko, KX9X

Well, the trip to EN57 was a big success. Matt (NM9H) & I left last Thursday at 3AM (ugh). Stopped for a coffee north of Bloomington around 4:30AM and discovered that, in my sleep-deprived state, I forgot to put the coax feed to the 2m FM vertical in the car...it had been dragging down the highway since we left! the PL-259 was ground down to nothing. I'll be visiting Radio Shack really soon. Until then, you won't hear me mobile on .195 for a while.

We arrived at FJ McLain State Park in the "Youpee" around 2:30pm Eastern time. The cabin we rented was 200 feet from Lake Superior and overlooked the lake; beautiful scenery. The cabin itself was about 15'x15' or so. It had electricity, a table, a tiny refrigerator, a 2-burner hot plate, and bunk beds. It was clean, dry, and cheap; more than adequate for what we needed. We unloaded the car, threw everything into the cabin temporarily, and drove back to town for supplies and provisions. Once we got the groceries, Matt went looking for a fishing license. We were turned away by two places before we found a 7-11 that sold them. However, there was a problem since Matt was not a Michigan resident. After much waiting, the girls behind the counter got it figured out and Matt got his fishing license. Back to camp we go.

We unloaded the truck, put the food away, popped open some beers and proceeded immediately to getting the antennas up in the air. We had a 3-element Cushcraft 6m yagi that went up about 25' and an 11-element 2m beam up about 25'. Each antenna on separate masts. Thanks to proper labeling and pre-measuring of all antenna parts long in advance, the antennas were assembled very quickly. The masts were a bit troublesome, but we eventually got that figured out, too. Ran back in the cabin, got the radio gear hooked up, and we were QRV on 6 and 2 by 6pm. However, no propagation at all. We ended up eating a big dinner by the campfire and remarked how odd it was that the sun was still in the sky until 11pm. Man, we were NORTH.

Friday morning we got up late and turned on the rigs. No propagation. Putzed around camp and saw some of the local sites. Still no propagation. Drank a beer or 3 and decided to put up the long wire for HF. Matt used his fishing pole and shot the thing about 45'-50' off the ground, in some of the (many) trees we had. So, we had a 110' dipole fed with open wire at 50' or so. We were playing well on HF, too.

Friday was spent listening intently to 6m and 2m, working DX on 15m SSB and drinking. No propagation on 6m or 2m all day.

Saturday: woke up late, got on 6m and 2m. Nothing...no prop at all. We started to get worried. Double-checked the antennas and feedline; all was well. We wondered if the band would open for the contest. To kill time before the contest, we did what you're supposed to do when you're on vacation; we drank, ate, dozed a bit, and drank a lot more. The contest was going to start at 2pm Eastern. We left the 6m rig on the whole time, but hadn't read a peep on the calling frequency. About 20 minutes before the contest started, 6m opens up to Oklahoma and north Texas! We worked several guys, and have faith the contest will go well. Matt jumps on 6m, I jump on 2m, and we wait for the contest to start

The Contest: Started off with a minor opening to TX/OK... Nothing too exciting to write home about. Hey, at least we were working guys. I kept trying 2m, but the only folks I'd worked were K9IZ, in EN67 next door.

About 90 minutes into the contest, Matt got an odd look on his face. He pulled the headphones out of the jack, and I heard a very watery, distorted signal coming out of the speaker.

AURORA!!

Immediately, we sprang out of our chairs and ran outside to point both antennas north. Matt & I changed places and he worked 2m CW while I ran stations on 6m SSB. We worked a TON of "regional" grids, including down to EN50 and EN60. We easily could have worked stations here in the K9CU area, but nobody was active at that point. Worked 27 stations on 2m, including EN18 (just south of Winnepeg) and FN13 (Syracuse, NY). Also worked as far south as EN70 (NE of Indianapolis) on the Aurora! It was a good opening. 6m Aurora grids were as far west as EN08 (north Dakota) and as far east as EN07 (WAY up in VE3-land) and as far south as EM79 (south of Indianapolis).

When the Aurora died, 2m died, too. 6m stayed open to New Mexico and Colorado. Eventually, that opening died, too. We ended up going to sleep around Midnight, as we had meteor scatter schedules to keep in the early morning. We ended up missing a 6m opening to the east coast that took place around 2AM, but such is life.

Got up at 6:15am to make the 5 meteor scatter skeds. None of them were successful. However, 6m opened up again around 8AM to GA, MS, and LA. Again, not a big opening, but we were working guys.

Most of Sunday was totally dead. We worked a few guys to the south early in the AM, and then got a decent opening to the East coast again around 5pm or so. After 7pm, we heard nothing but signals bouncing off meteors. Matt managed a couple of QSO's that way, but they took a lot of time. Ended the contest with 194 Q's and 109 grids on 6m, 29 Q's and 24 grids on 2m.

Monday, we got up late, went out and played golf. I took Matt for \$15. Came back to the cabin, drank a lot, ate a lot, and listened for any band openings. 6m opened up to Colorado around 6pm Eastern time. Worked a bunch of Rocky Mountain VHF Society guys (I run into them every time I go to CO in August), who spotted us in the hopes of getting a bunch of guys to work us.

I'm monitoring the 6m calling frequency when I get up from my chair to go do something. Suddenly, Matt says, "Hey! Did I just hear something about San Francisco?" Checked the band again, and sure enough, there was a station in San Fran in CM87. We had double-hop E-skip propagation to the West Coast!

Worked as many as we could, but it was still early on the west coast and folks were still at work. KB6NAN spotted us and kept calling in to let us know we were still making it out there. We were into San Fran and Los Angeles for over 2 hours, but we only worked 18 guys. It was a real happy moment for those who got in the log, but what a letdown for us. There are no active hams in EN57, and everybody who worked us from CA kept telling us how rare we were and to PLEASE stay on and keep working as many as we could.

Nobody was there to work, though. The band closed to CA and popped open to CO and WY. Worked that until around 9pm or so, when the band died for good. We drank and ate and drank by the campfire.

Tuesday: No propagation at all... none... not a bit. Spent all day using the CT contest software to send CQ on CW every 10 seconds. Nobody responded. It was a long day full of beer, food, fire, and no propagation.

Wednesday: Time to pack it up. Unfortunately, it was raining all morning. We got soaked as we took down the antenna and masts. Packed it up and we were on the road by Noon. Crashed south of Rockford, got up late and made it to town Thursday afternoon. I've been sleeping and being a bum ever since.

One thing I failed to mention earlier is that the cabin had a notebook kept in a drawer. This notebook was a journal, full of entries by all sorts of people that had stayed in the cabin over the years, going back to 1997. Mat & I made several entries to the notebook, trying to explain why we were there and how ham radio worked. Matt even made a stab at trying to explain aurora and meteor-scatter propagation. I'm sure we came off like a couple of geeks. We left a grid square map with all the grids colored in that we talked to while up there. Who knows... maybe somebody will think it's cool and get their license out of it.

Overall, a lot of fun and a big success. We ate well, we sure as heck drank well, and we got just over 300 QSO's in the log from a very rare grid square. I've already received about 20 QSL's for our operation up there. There will be photos up as soon as Matt gets them to me. I'll let you know when those photos are up at my web site.

Matt & I have decided we're going to keep doing these VHF operations on a regular basis. The antennas are small and it's a lot of fun to get out for a while and do VHF contests. I'd encourage everybody to check it out...you'll have a good time.