

## Reflections from a first time Mobile Operator: The ACØW 2006 MNQP Mobile Experience

Operating the 2006 MNQP mobile turned out to be a great experience for me and gave me a great appreciation of the challenges the mobile operators have in making so many contacts successfully. Next time when I'm on the other side of the pile up I will have much more patience. Plus I picked up a few new tricks to help bust the pile-up the next time I'm on the other side of it.

As with all mobile efforts this story really starts weeks before the actual event. My dilemma of what to do for 2006 MNQP came about when the band my son plays in scheduled a gig the night before about 100 miles away from Austin. So the challenge, how do I see my son play while getting a good night sleep and participating semi-seriously in MNQP. Actually, the first thought was how do I get enough sleep so I can win the MN SO LP category again.

Then I realized I didn't need to win again, after winning 5 of the last 6 years. This coupled with some health issues I decided it was more important to have fun first while still having a respectable showing. This is when I thought, "Hmmm, maybe I can convince my Dad, AD0W, to join me in a mobile operation with his mobile equipment and vehicle. After all, he has talked about it several times."

So talked to my Dad and got him on board. The plan was to take two vehicles to Winona, (one for us and one for the wife's to drive home the next day) have a good supper (at my expense), see the son play, and then stay the night at a local hotel so we could get a reasonable night sleep before hitting the road. I would layout the route while he got the vehicle set-up and ready.

Tuesday night before the event was the first time everything was pieced together in the vehicle, i.e. antenna, rig, computer, etc. The first big problem was RF into everything. This resulted in the rig stayed keyed whenever I transmitted. Thank goodness for the many ferrite chokes I recently purchased. This and moving some of the cables around solved the RF problem.

With the RF problem solved I now noticed a constant S9 noise on the rig all the time. Started turning things off and disconnecting things. The noise finally went away after unplugging the inverter for the computer from the DC jack. After a little thinking developed Plan B: doing this the old fashion way, paper logs and manual sending. After all this is suppose to be for fun, who cares about the score.

The next check was to see how it transmitted on the bands. During this check we discovered that 20 meters had very high SWR. This was never resolved so we operated without the benefit of 20 meters during the event. This was not much of an issue as the steady stream of contacts on 40 kept us busy during the contest.

After all that, we discovered one other potential problem. From the ground to the top tip of the antenna was 15' - 2". A little research revealed maximum vehicle height permitted in Minnesota without special permit is 13' - 6" and that clear distance under bridges and overpasses is typically 14' - 0". Luckily, this was easy to solve, just tilt the antenna back to get the necessary clearance.

At the end of the night, we had everything working except the computer and 20 meters.

The next day after sleeping on Plan B, paper logging and manual sending, I decided to use this only as a last resort. I realized it would not be very fun to manually send CW for 10 hrs while mobile. Especially since my sending skills aren't that great anymore. In addition, adding logging at the same time really added complexity to take away from the fun.

After trying a couple of other ideas for powering a computer I finally went to the local Radio Shack and purchased a couple of different inverters to try. However, with other commitments we didn't have time to check them out until Saturday. Fortunately, they both worked great. So we were back in business with the computer for the whole event.

Finally Friday night came and off to Winona we went. The four of us had a nice supper and saw son play with his band at a local joint, Rascals. Luckily, they were not the last band to play so we were in bed by 12:30, which included loading his drums in our van to take home the next day.

Saturday morning, after a nice leisurely breakfast, we head out to the vehicle and got everything turned on with plenty of time to spare. Did a quick test on CW and found Murphy paid us a visit since Tuesday night. The CW sounded like machine gun fire. After trying several different solutions, with no luck, I decided to do this SSB only. At this point, it was now about 20 minutes into the contest and not an entry into the log. I finally told Dad to hit the road.

Tuned around the 40 and 80 meter phone bands and didn't hear anyone working the contest. My next difficulty was trying to find an open spot to call CQ. I would find what I thought was an open spot; call CQ, only to find someone else on frequency after going over the next hill.

As we headed SE along the Mississippi River in the river valley thoughts of hanging up the mobile effort enter my head as the log stayed empty. Then we came across the sign for I-90 West. I decided we needed to get out of the river valley and up on top of the river bluffs and into the plains if we were to make any contacts. This meant changing the planned route, dropping Houston and Fillmore Counties from the route in exchange for Olmstead. So if you missed me in those counties now you know why.

As we made our way up the big ravine out of the valley, I noticed the rig had a built-in electronic keyer that I didn't know about. I check the button; hey, it's pushed in. Turned it off, hook up the CW equipment again, try it, and it works, FANTASTIC! Back in business!

Found an open spot on 40 CW and made a call. Finally, the first QSO in the log at 14:48. Another call and another contact in the log. Third call and WOW, my ears were filled with CW stations calling me!

At first I thought it was great to have such a great pile-up. But as the contest wore on, it became very tiring having everyone call zero beat on the same frequency. I could usually get the first one or two letters of a call before everything blended in. Then I could get the last one or two letters of different call. In between it was just one solid tone. Some people were smart enough to wait and throw their call in at the end. A few stations had the technique on how to bust the pile up. I thought W0AIH was one, but in talking to him he said it was strictly by accident. K8MR and K8IR were a couple of other stations that had the right technique. Then as the contest wore on, and the call signs became familiar, there were several stations that all I needed was a couple of letters and I knew who they were (most of the time).

After the initial problems in the morning things went better until we hit the first rough section of I-90. We discovered the Olds Bravada SUV, with its short wheel base, is not very comfortable on rough roads. I also thought my driver had the idea he was getting paid by the number of pot holes he hit. I quickly learned to type much differently to minimize typing errors as I was tossed around the vehicle. Good thing for seat belts.

Many times my delay in coming back to stations was due to me fixing the inadvertent key strokes before sending. However, the worse problem was the bump and then I hit the F11 key. After a few choice words I would ask for a repeat since everything was now gone. This occurred a couple of times just as I was about to send QSL and then QRZ. End result was to ask for a full repeat. Luckily I usually remembered the call.

Other than rough road, the route turned out to be fairly good. Went through Austin and had the noise level increase, especially by the Hormel plant. However, most interesting was in western Minnesota the noise level started to slowly increase on me. When the noise got to where stations were almost impossible to copy I noticed a wind generator farm on the north side of the road. Then as we headed away the noise level dropped.

We passed a few other wind generator farms with similar experience. There also was power line noise almost every time we went through a commercial or industrial district. Fortunately with the route selected this didn't happen very often. Now I know for next time to take this into account when planning the route. There were also a few sections of road where the overhead power lines created problems for us. The worse was along US 75 in western MN (I believe I read someone having this same problem before).

I also found going through towns was very distracting. Every time Dad started or stopped the vehicle I looked up to see what was going on. Another distraction was the driver looking at the map trying to figure out where we were and when we would cross the next county line. This caused some weaving on the road. Decided next time we need a GPS unit.

Another issue was crossing county lines and dealing with the software. I found changing the software file between counties became too time consuming and difficult. At each county line 2 to 4 minutes would be lost changing the files. This usually left stations wondering what happen to me. I could hear them calling with no response. By the time I got back on most had left, leaving me to start generating a pile-up all over again.

Not too often did I have time to try a different band or mode. I was usually pretty busy with stations from county line to line. The few times I did have time I found 80 meters was open, even early in the day. So I kept busy between 80 and 40 CW. I did try 10 and 15 meters a couple of times with no luck. Never messed with SSB, just never had the time. Like others, late in the day the RTTY contest started to make things difficult on 40. I finally gave up and moved to strictly 80 right near the end.

After all that fun and excitement the vehicle finally made it into Nicollet County. Looking at the time I realized we would not make it to Le Seur Count with enough time left to do anything. When I planned the route, I knew it would be close on time. Turns out we took to much time off for lunch. So one final route change to finish in Nicollet and someplace near restaurants. At this point, I was getting pretty tired. Being tossed around all day took its toll, along with trying to pull stations out of the pile-up.

Despite all the difficulties and challenges I had a great time. The activity was great throughout the day except the last 10 minutes as Sprint approached. I have several things to change for the next time we do this and I am looking forward to the next opportunity. Now that I have experienced this from the mobile perspective, the 10 hour duration for this contest is just perfect. By 6 PM both the driver and myself needed to get out of the vehicle for awhile. So we stopped in Mankato for gas and dinner.

I have one final story to share. At dinner on Friday night, the XYL's asked what time the contest got done. Being the good engineer I am (but terrible mind reader) I answered the question that was asked and responded 6 PM. Shortly after 6 my wife called the cell phone to find out what I wanted to do for supper. The bad thing for me was I forgot the cell phone in the vehicle while we were inside eating. We get rolling again and I see a new message on the cell phone. I check the message to find it's my wife and call her back promptly. She took the news pretty good about being 100 miles from home still. She said her and the son had ordered pizza.

After that my Dad decided he better call his wife. Well turns out he was in the dog house big time. She thought when the contest ended at 6 PM we should be pulling in the drive at 6 PM, not be 100 miles away. We both knew that it would be fruitless to explain to her that her question was what time the contest would be done, NOT what time we would be home. From past experience we knew we would be wrong no matter what and it would much better to end the discussion with her only a little mad rather than a lot mad. One of the few times we both had our wits about us.

Finally, thank you to everyone for calling and putting up with my sending and requests for repeats. Considering the difficulties I am pleased with the outcome and think I could easily move up several spots by getting ALL the bugs worked out for next time. And also thank you to Mark, WA0MHJ, for asking me to do this write-up.

73

Bill & Phil

AC0W/mobile & AD0W chauffeur