



A Brief History of Amateur Radio Emergency Communications

By Roy Rabey, AD5KZ

(Sources: Microsoft Encarta, FCC and ARRL Archives)



1894 – The Birth of Amateur Radio. Amateur radio operators begin experimenting with the emerging technology of radio. Emergency communications are provided spontaneously by individual operators. As time progressed, the need for and value of organization became evident, resulting in the establishment of organized lines of communications and net systems. The sinking of the RMS Titanic in 1912 proved the importance of radio in emergencies at sea.

1912 – Amateur Radio Licensing Begins. The Radio Act of 1912 enacted as a U.S. federal law required all seafaring vessels to maintain 24-hour radio watch and to keep in contact with nearby ships and coastal radio stations. This act recognized amateur radio operators and established regulations requiring those operators to be licensed and prevented them from transmitting over the main commercial and military wavelengths. Licenses were issued by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

1914 – ARRL. The American Radio Relay League was created to observe and promote a self-imposed responsibility for the welfare and conduct of amateur radio operators. Organizing public service radio communications was an important part of the League's charter.

1927 – FRC. The Radio Act of 1927 enacted as a U.S. federal law creating the Federal Radio Commission which was tasked with bringing order to the chaotic state of wireless communications at the time. The FRC had the power to allocate radio frequencies, regulate their use and grant/withhold radio licenses.

1934 – FCC. The Radio Act of 1934 enacted as a U.S. federal law which created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC; replacement for FRC) to, among other things, promote the safety of life and property through the use of wired and radio communications; and to employ communications facilities for strengthening national defense. The Amateur Radio Service is created and regulated by Part 97 of the FCC Rules and Regulations.

1935 – ARES. The ARRL creates the Amateur Radio Emergency Corps (AREC) and administers the formal organizational structure that is known today as ARES, the Amateur Radio Emergency Service.

1942 – WERS. The War Emergency Radio Service (WERS) was created by the FCC at the insistence of the ARRL in response to the suspension of the Amateur Radio Service during WWII. WERS licenses were issued to communities and not individuals with participation limited to AR operators. WERS was the precursor to RACES.

1949 – NTS. The ARRL creates the National Traffic System (NTS) and administers the formal organizational structure which uses radio to relay messages through nets that are established around the country.

1952 – RACES. Based on lessons learned during WWII and as a result of input by the ARRL and the Department of the Army's Office of Civil Defense, the FCC creates the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES) as a stand-by service to replace the Amateur Radio Service when it is silenced during wartime. The RACES service was designed to provide a smoother transition in the event the President ever needed to silence the regular Amateur Radio Service when invoking the War Powers Act. Despite four wars involving the United States since 1952, this has never happened. The FCC originally issued RACES licenses to Civil Defense officials as well as licensed Amateurs. To prevent abuse of RACES station licenses by officials who weren't licensed Amateur Radio operators, limitations on the duration of non-emergency operation and stations that might be contacted were incorporated into part 97.407. The FCC no longer issues or renews RACES licenses.

Today – ARES vs. RACES. ARES and RACES are two flavors of amateur radio emergency operations. ARES is the ARRL arm of emergency services using licensed amateur radio volunteers and is administered by elected and appointed officials within the ARRL Field Organization. ARES groups provide services to government and not-for-profit public and private entities. RACES is the government arm of amateur radio emergency operations which uses licensed amateur radio volunteers. RACES groups are sponsored by state and local government entities and are administered by appointed officials (Radio Officers) who take direction from government emergency management personnel. RACES groups provide services to their respective sponsoring government entity.