

Word Origins - HAM

Ham. Amateur radio operators are often referred to as "hams" -- a term with a complicated history. At the start of the 1900s, "ham" was sometimes used to refer to someone as "unskilled" -- "Ham actor" being the most common example. Wire-line telegraphy employees at this time had a rich vocabulary of insults for describing less-than-capable operators, and in [The Slang of the Wire](#) section of "Telegraph Talk and Talkers", from the January, 1902 issue of *McClure's Magazine*, author L. C. Hall noted "It is an every-day thing to hear senders characterized as Miss Nancys, rattle-brains, swell-heads, or cranks, or 'jays,' simply because the sound of their dots and dashes suggests the epithets." Hall's review further noted that "senders of hog-Morse, called technically 'hams' " were known for their propensity for transmitting garbled Morse code. So it was natural, in light of wire-telegraph practice, for commercial stations to dismiss amateur radio operators as "hams"--and in [Floods and Wireless](#) by Hanby Carver from the August, 1915 *Technical World Magazine* the author noted "Then someone thought of the 'hams'. This is the name that the commercial wireless service has given to amateur operators..."

But, interestingly, "ham" would eventually lose its negative meaning and become a general nickname for all amateurs. This evolution was spotty and not very well documented. As early as the [May, 1909 Wireless Registry](#) list in *Modern Electrics*, Earl C. Hawkins of Minneapolis, Minnesota was listed with the callsign of "H.A.M." This callsign was likely assigned by the magazine -- this was before the U.S. government began licencing stations and issuing callsigns -- but was this an inside joke or just a coincidence? In two articles by Robert A. Morton, [Wireless Interference](#), in the April, 1909 *Electrician and Mechanic*, and [The Amateur Wireless Operator](#), in the January 15, 1910 *The Outlook*, the author included an overheard transmission between amateur stations asking "Say, do you know the fellow who is putting up a new station out your way? I think he is a ham." However, "ham" took a while to completely lose its negative connotations. A letter from Western Union employee W. L. Matteson in the December, 1919 issue of *QST*, [Why is an Amateur?](#), complained that amateurs, now regulated by the government, were not getting the respect they deserved, noting that "Many unknowing land wire telegraphers, hearing the word 'amateur' applied to men connected with wireless, regard him as a 'ham' or 'lid'." But in the next month's issue, Thomas Hunter's exuberant "pome", [I am the Wandering Ham](#), showed that other amateurs had already embraced "ham" as a friendly description for their fellow hobbyists.