

First Mama down on 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue has got her ears, as does Space Woman in San Diego. They, along with 13 million other Americans, are participants in the craze that has boosted Citizens Band from a workaday system for truckers to the hub of a community which offers the anonymity of a radio show and the camaraderie of a barn-raising

# CB

## AMERICA'S NEW PARTY LINE

BY RALPH KEYES

Coming home late from a party one night, I stopped at 7-Eleven for the paper. Seated on his motorcycle in the parking lot was my neighbor Honda Boy. "Look what I got for Christmas," said Honda Boy, pointing to the back of his bike. I bent down to see. Strapped to the back was a small metal box with several dials set off by glowing green and red lights. From this box, sizzling and popping noises muffled a voice. I leaned closer. "Up yours, buddy," said the voice.

"Yeah," said another. "Why don't you go sit on a cold carrot?"

"Clean it up!" shouted a third.

"Welcome to channel 2," a final voice said wearily.

This was my introduction to Citizens Band radio, America's hottest electronic merchandise since calculators went discount. Until recently, stores literally could not keep this item in stock. Total sales of CB equipment have doubled annually for the past few years: an estimated \$400 million in 1974 sales became nearly \$1 billion in 1975. According to figures compiled by the Electronic Industries Association, 4½ million CB transceivers were shipped last year — over a third of the 12½ million units the EIA estimates have been sold in this country since CB's birth in 1958.

The Federal Communications Commission thinks the total may be even higher: up to 15 million units—sometimes several to a license. It took the FCC 16 years to license its first million CB users, eight months for the second million

and three months for the third. License applications now average 500,000 a month, over ten times the figure of a year ago, and the total number of licenses exceeds 6 million.

What's happened is this: truckers in recent years took to CB as a way to fight boredom. Over the medium's 23 channels they could normally talk in a 20-mile range with other CB-equipped 18-wheelers, with 4-wheelers if they so deigned and with the odd base unit set up in homes along the way. Then, during the energy crisis, truckers began to find their livelihood depending on two-way radio for locating gas and avoiding smokey (bear, the highway patrol) to beat the double-nickel (55 mph). In the subsequent truckers' strike, CB was used as a tool of coordination. Publicity given this fact on television stirred interest in CB among civilians, who were finding truckers pretty interesting anyway. Going to their local Radio Shack, 4-wheelers found that the price of CB units had dropped to just over \$100. Throw in 20 bucks for an antenna and you could join the airwaves, a CBer for sure. Just like Sonny and Will on *Movin' On*. For the price of a unit you not only got to listen and broadcast but you also got to make up your own handle or nickname, learn a new lingo, say 10-4 a lot (police code for "OK") like Broderick Crawford used to, join the lookout for smokeys and with luck maybe even get in on a convoy. When C.W. McCall sang his pop-country hit on this topic, he was singing about

you. So was Cledus Maggard, the former Shakespearean actor, with his satirical hit "White Knight," about a CB-equipped smokey. And Dave Dudley's country song "Me and Old CB," and Johnny Cash's new single, "One Piece at a Time," in which CB lingo makes an extended guest appearance. There's even an entire album of CB songs called *Talkin' Smokey*, and the Mitchell Brothers have just released a movie called *CB Mamas* ("Citizens Band radios in the hands of rampaging housewives leads to power-packed eroticism and high frequency action"), getting a beat on United Artists' projected movie of *Convoy*.

CB looked exciting. People wanted in. Me for instance. I also wanted to eavesdrop. To do this, I bought a transceiver for \$99, an antenna for my house in San Diego and another for my car (the radio moved back and forth).

A CB antenna turns out not only to send and receive radio signals. Longer than the usual kind, and usually fatter at the base, a two-way antenna on your roof or trunk verily screams: CBer at the wheel.

Even as my antenna was being installed, a Chevy El Camino with twin whips drove up. Its occupant looked me over. "10-4," he finally said with a tight nod. "Whadda ya go by?"

"Go by?" I answered.

"Yeah. What's your handle?"

I had read about handles. Catfish Hunter over CB is The Silver Bullet; Claude Akins, Sundance; Muhammad Ali, The Big Bopper. But who was I?

My mind raced. My dog's name is Captain Ahab. My car is white. . . .

"Mobile Dick?"

The guy laughed. "10-4. 10-4."

Driving with a CB antenna stuck on your car, you get intensely conscious of other people's. Like the one twice as long as yours on the yellow dune buggy that just cut you off. Deliberately?

Or the ones on pickups with gun racks whose drivers you fantasize are trying to get through to you with questions you don't feel like answering. Such as: "Breaker on 5; break 5. You in the Saab. Don't you know real CBers don't drive cars like that?"

Or: "Hey, guy with the beard. Look to your left. See that M-1 aimed at your head?"

My friend the Jungian therapist thought I might be a little paranoid, but

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she's never had a CB antenna on her car.

Not until reaching the safety of my home did I turn the set on. Its red and green lights glowed invitingly. Then the room filled with visitors. On channel 2, a young male voice said, "He-a-v-y duty!"

"I confess," said another.

"Shut up, you guys," broke in a girl's voice.

"Are you a les?" was the first boy's response.

"Are you?"

"Whatever you are, I'm not."

Up on 13 they were talking about how Uncle Charley (the FCC) monitored

channel 2 the other night and busted a lot of button pushers (people who by pushing the button on their mike interrupt conversations and who violate FCC regulations by failing to give their call numbers). On 18, Rock Candy and Green Velvet were discussing the fog on top of the world (Mount Soledad, San Diego's highest mountain and a major CBER hangout).

If CB is raunchy in urban California, it's partly because the setting is. But more important is the anonymity cloaking all city CBERs. Who's to know who you are?

Just a few miles east of here, in rural towns such as Alpine and Ramona, the talk is all of horses, pickups and who's going with whom to the show tonight. Out in the country CB resembles an old party line more than *Saturday Night Live*. Where voices hook up with faces, CB use is much more polite and practical.

Last fall in Caddo Mills, Texas, a CB-coordinated posse ran down a couple of fleeing bank robbers. The two never had a chance. After calling each other out, 25 armed CBERs stayed carefully out of their quarry's pistol range and pulled their noose of cars tighter according to

## Ratchet jawing with Betty

A convoy was heading east on Interstate 10, toward Beaumont, Texas, and Hammerhead and First Mama were modulating with each other.

"How are you enjoying your stay in Texas, First Mama?"

"Oh boy, its been a ball all the way."

"Well, that's a big 10-4, First Mama, we thank you for that. Where did you learn that ol' radio lingo, First Mama? Come back."

"Well, First Mama had to get a CB slang dictionary. . . ."

The conversation went on, when First Mama warned:

"OK, good buddy, there are a couple smokeys up ahead."

Only thing was, the smokeys (or police) referred to were part of the convoy. And First Mama, better known in Washington circles as Betty Ford, was being whisked in a blue Mark IV to yet another stop on the campaign trail.

In what has turned out to be one of the most innovative steps in an otherwise dull Republican campaign, Betty—with the help of a Hy-Gain Citizens Band radio—has tickled the "ears" of thousands of CBERs across the country.

Take Texas, for instance: a week before First Mama started sayin' hey and exchanging pleasantries with her good buddy Hammerhead, Ford primary adviser Norman Skip Watts was talking about his man being "substantially behind" Reagan. After Betty's foray into Texas, estimates—at least in the Ford camp—have been much more optimistic. The President himself expressed high hopes for the Texas primary, saying that he had talked to Betty, who told him, "Dear, I've got the truck driver vote for you."

Can campaigning really be so simple? Can it be that one inexpensive

CB radio can bring in the vote where all the expensive mailings and pollings have failed?

Perhaps. There are 200,000 CB licenses in Texas alone, and some 13 million CBERs throughout the nation. Thus far, most seem to be enchanted with the First Lady and her CB. It is, after all, the first time the general public has had direct access to a White House resident since citizens of Washington regularly dirtied Andrew Jackson's parlor floors: In fact, the response has been phenomenal: Before Betty settled on "First Mama," a handle given her by comedian Flip Wilson, hundreds of suggestions flooded the White House, ranging from DC Dancer to Apple Betty to Potomac Pussycat. A late-night



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID WOOD

deejay in Albany, Georgia, had so many suggestions from listeners that he wrote a letter to the First Lady, listing all but a couple names suggested by "Reagan fans . . . which would have resulted in the revocation of [Betty's] license had [she] used them." What Betty's handle was to be—whether Tipitoes, as the President suggested, or National Dancer, a name Betty favored—was talked up in the papers almost as much as the First Lady's comments on premarital sex.

Of course, everything hasn't been 3's and 4's (good luck and kisses): on her Texas trip, First Mama often had to be corrected in her use of CB lingo. And once in Austin, when she couldn't get any other CBERs to listen, she complained: "I can't get a rise out of

anyone!"

There have been other problems. Some people just aren't so pleased with Betty's new hobby. Mrs. Reagan, who visited Texas shortly after First Mama, had a firm no comment on Betty Ford and her CB. And there was the flap when First Mama got her temporary license in record-breaking time. (This was promptly smoothed over when the FCC announced it would make temporary licenses available to everyone.)

Also, there's the debate over Betty's use of the CB. Earl Stevens, editor of *National CB Trucker News*, claims he has received thousands of complaints stating that First Mama doesn't give her call sign (KUY 9532) and solicits votes for her husband over the air ("Keep on talking for the President Ford," First Mama is reported to have said to a group in Wisconsin). "This is a misuse of executive power, and we're going to show our displeasure at the ballot box," says Stevens. An FCC spokesman reports simply that a check has been made, no offenses have been found and virtually no complaints have been registered.

Back at home base, Betty is trying to get her son Jack to bring the CB radio down from his room into the solarium, and seems to be enjoying herself. "I think she's getting a big kick out of it," said Helen Thomas of UPI. "Some of the more conventional segments of the population took umbrage at some of her remarks earlier in the campaign, but now I think she's higher in popularity than ever before. . . . She's pretty much a people person, and CB brings that across. I think she's on to something."

Political reporter Richard Reeves agrees: "With all the people who like CB—who knows, for the Ford campaign, this could be as good as religion. Maybe even better."

—Suzanne Charlé

directions received on CB. The pair finally surrendered before a shot was fired.

City CBers have come up with their own imaginative wrinkles. In Cleveland, a CBER named Hollywood Swinger was busted for allegedly arranging parties from his pimpmobile. And a member of the Los Angeles sheriff's department tells me that an undercover masseuse has just reported the use of CB among her colleagues on outcalls. One advantage of this is that part-time ladies of the day who have husbands or boyfriends can make coded appointments over CB with their mates none the wiser.

Other creative CB applications include smuggling (the tactic calls for a clean scout car to clear the way and broadcast back to a second car carrying contraband) and coordinating demonstrations of the left and right. In both Boston and Louisville, violent anti-busing protests were orchestrated over two-way radio. With dubious constitutional authority, Louisville authorities for a time jammed and banned such use of CB. For their trouble they were subjected to an inquiry by the Federal Communications Commission.

Such use was not what the FCC had in mind when they first assigned 23 two-way channels to public use in 1958. What the commission had envisioned was something a little more mundane—the plumber calling back for a pipe-threader, say, or KYX3234 mobile calling KYX3234 base to say traffic had his stomach in an uproar and please have some bicarb waiting.

What they are getting is a people's *Show of Shows*. One must not lose sight of the fact that CB is a public medium. Conversation between two people is for everyone to hear. Theoretically, the whole world's listening. There are people like me hoping to be entertained. This audience must be kept in mind.

One night on 2, Hot Tar, Streaker and Mickey Mouse were telling a rookie named Twisted Socks how to find the van from which they were broadcasting. Finally she arrived. "I see the van," Twisted Socks finally said. "I'm lookin' right at it. Man, do I wanna twist your socks."

Hot Tar: "Well, come on in."

Twisted Socks: "How many people are in there?"

HT: "Three guys, two gals."

A female voice broke in: "Hey gal, you can have 'em all but Streaker."

HT: "Hey, we're just freakin' your mind out. We're not in a van at all. We're all squeezed into my Datsun pickup."

TS: "Well, whatever twists your socks."

HT: "We wanna twist yours."

TS: "I'm not wearing any. Or any shoes. Or pants. Or top. Or anything. Hey—would you like me to exit here and enter there?"

HT: "10-4."

TS: "O.K."

Then there was only silence.

For a time I kept my CB on constantly, like a police squawk box. I was worried something might happen without me. Having a CB and leaving it off is like wearing ear plugs to a party. By leaving it on, with just a flick of the wrist I could eavesdrop on up to 21 conversations (channel 9 is left open nationally for distress calls, and 11 is meant for making contact before moving to a new channel).

There are wide variations by channel and neighborhood in the way CB is used. Around the beach area where I live, 2 is for garbage. But south of here, 15 is even worse. Down around Chula Vista telling someone to "Go to 15!" is fighting talk. East of Chula Vista, in Logan Heights, channel 6 belongs to the brothers. White voices intruding on 6 risk

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### **One monitor explains CB's appeal this way: "Here's a guy who goes to work, comes home, fights with the kids. Then he gets a CB, and for the first time, he breaks out of his anonymity"**

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being ordered elsewhere. On 13, rapid-fire Spanish is common, punctuated with "traficos!" (break), "diez-cuatro" (10-4) and "negativo." On 18, voices are older and more polite. Truckers stick to 19.

Honda Boy came by to coach me. Ever since an antenna went up on my roof he'd become more friendly. My neighbor thought it important that I come up with a good handle. Vampire seemed like a good possibility, or else Count Dracula. Honda Boy says it's important that a handle be out of the usual.

Knowing how to talk over the air is also important. He says this is necessary for being accepted by other CBers. Like you should talk casual but fast, use a lot of "gonnas" and "kindas" and especially never sound hesitant—then everyone will know you're a rookie for sure. They won't even respond when you ask for a break.

Honda Boy keyed down on my mike to demonstrate.

"Break 2; break 2."

"Yeah, breaker, go ahead."

"Thank you much. This here's one Honda Boy. What's your handle, come on."

"This here's one Prairie Dog, on top of the world."

"Hey one Prairie Dog. Whacha been up to, go ahead."

"Oh, not much. Partyin' around, chasin' them two-legged bunnies for sure" (pronounced four shore).

Prairie Dog and Honda Boy now discussed how they sounded over the air, the party scene that weekend and the weather up on top of the world before Prairie Dog said, "Well, we gonna back 'em on out now. Good numbers to ya."

"Yeah, Prairie Dog. This here's one Honda Boy. 10-7. We gone."

With local dialects, CB talk the country around is a curious patois of police code, technical jargon, trucker slang and affectation as people modulate on the ole radidio before going 10-7 (out of service) to back 'em out and sip a few Colorado Kool-Aids, then hit the ole horizontal. More important than its vocabulary is the rhythm of CB talk, a determinedly casual sing-song drawl—sort of John Wayne meets Mao Tse-tung.

There's a lot of trucker envy involved in CBing. Although actual 18-wheelers are the smallest part of CBing, 4-wheelers are always trying to sound like they're transmitting from high in a Kenworth cab. "Everybody on CB gets to talk redneck," says John Sodolski of the Electronic Industries Association, who thinks it's part of the appeal. Sodolski has watched CB evolve into a broader, middle-class interest in recent years. Fifty out of 80 yachts in his club are now CB-equipped, he points out, and more cars than pickups around his rural Maryland home have sprouted antennas. Sodolski says that when he first got a unit ten years ago people would ask, "What's that? A telephone?" Now they say, "Hey, you've got a CB!" As with TVs and air-conditioning before, he thinks a critical mass has been reached where CB sales are self-generating. By 1980, predicts Sodolski, two-way radio will be standard equipment on passenger cars.

This would only exacerbate extraordinary regulation problems already confronting the FCC. As users of CB mushroom, the commission's resources remain static. Even after reducing processing time to 26 seconds per application, there is still an eight- to ten-week backlog on license granting. (The FCC recently created a temporary licensing procedure through CB dealers. This came on the heels of complaints about Betty Ford being bumped to the head of the line for a temporary license so she could campaign over CB for her husband in Wisconsin.)



A sense of belonging is an important aspect of CBing. Space Woman, a well-known San Diego CBer, claims she often directs rescue missions via CB.

Calling for congressional hearings on "the CB phenomenon," Missouri Senator Thomas Eagleton has suggested that a supplementary appropriation may be necessary to help the FCC cope.

The commission constantly monitors CB, issuing reprimands, imposing fines and occasionally revoking licenses for serious abuse of the airwaves. Special CB task forces have been created to blanket high-complaint areas for two weeks at a time. In an effort to encourage compliance by making compliance easier, the FCC last fall reduced the need to give call letters during CB conversations in addition to eliminating restrictions on chitchat and use of handles over the air. The commission is expected soon to more than double the number of channels available for CB use.

But the FCC is faced with a problem. Its mandate is to regulate electronic communication. Ostensibly this is what is going on over Citizens Band. But not really. CBing is about communication only at the most superficial level. CB really has to do with grittier needs, such as the need for identity and for power. With mike in hand, we're all the Wizard of Oz. It's a startling experience to see meek and mild CBers key down on a mike and from some reserve deep within boom: "Breaker, break! Breaker, break!

Can I get a radio check, come on?"

After years of monitoring CB conversation, FCC engineer Clarence Spillman says he's finally caught a glimmer of what the commission is up against. What this medium has done, Spillman thinks, is invigorate a neglected stratum of society—men in particular. "I mean here's a guy," he explains, "who goes to work, comes home, fights with the kids, yells at his old lady, drinks his beer and watches the ball game on TV before going to sleep. Nothing in his life makes him feel important. Then he gets a CB, and for the first time he breaks out of his anonymity. Over the air he can express himself. He can impress others with his personality. I hear guys on the air all the time who you'd think are the roughest, toughest men in the world. The funny thing is, you meet them and they're just the opposite."

San Diego's CB airwaves are filled with posturing and strutting, the constant observation that "he's walking all over you" (with excess broadcasting power) and threats to dust each other's britches. In extreme cases disturbed CBers use the medium to broadcast dementia. My favorite of this breed (many of whom just make frog noises or talk to themselves or blow bugles) is The Controller. For minutes at a time The Controller would seize

the airwaves north of here to proclaim: "I am the goddamn Controller and I control e-v-e-r-y-thing. I control the amount of piss you piss. . . ." His diatribe degenerates from there before concluding, "I control everything."

Such talk over the air is a federal offense. In six years of monitoring CB for the FBI south of Orange County, former agent Harry Whidbee heard more such crimes committed than he cares to remember. He contributed successfully to three convictions. The problem is that to collect evidence that will stand up in court one must first catch a foul-mouther with mike to lips. This requires extensive scanning and considerable luck. By staying on the move, never broadcasting for long and switching channels constantly, a mobile bucket mouth can make himself hard to find. Once evidence of a crime is in hand, a U.S. Attorney must then be convinced that CB profanity is worth his time. He in turn must persuade a judge to convict. "But," explains Whidbee, today a private investigator, "a judge might consider, what's so bad about that—compared with this bank robber here who's murdered three tellers?" As a result, it's the rare foul mouth who gets busted.

In his years of monitoring CB, Whidbee got a broad overview of who's talking. He divides Southern California's CBers into three categories. The largest group are hobbyists, harmless, generally constructive, commonly found organized into CB clubs. Next are truckers. Last are what Whidbee calls "CB gangs," small groups of six to eight CBers, generally young, who use the medium to arrange their social calendar.

Members of such gangs, Whidbee says, are the source of most foul-mouthing and the object of an increasing amount of direct action taken by other CBers. In its mildest form this involves tracking a bucket mouth with loop antennas, then announcing over the air that he's been found, his license plate recorded and home address traceable if necessary. It's also technically feasible to run close alongside another CBer and shoot enough power down his antenna to burn out his unit. I've heard this discussed but know of no one who has tried it. I have heard, from Whidbee and others, of vigilantes who run down button pushers to smash their radio, mouth or hands or—in the ultimate indignity—whip them with their own antennas. In an action monitored by various CBers here four years ago, several carloads of vigilantes ran down a particularly offensive bucket mouth who was telling them to take their radios and take their mothers and stick their radios in their

mothers, and who, when surrounded in a parking lot, came out of his pickup with a high-powered rifle before finally being subdued.

Incidents of pitched warfare between CBers have been reported across this country and Canada. In White Plains, New York, the leader of a Citizens Band Cleanup Campaign had his home and car vandalized. In Riverview, Michigan, a group of CBers organized last fall to track down an area CBER who went by the handle Tokyo Joe and who, in a phony Japanese accent, threatened other CBers by name and said he'd blow up their houses. Following news reports of his activity, Tokyo Joe went off the airwaves.

CBers are not uniformly nice. Some tie up rescue teams with phony distress calls. Others refuse to break for an emergency. And many boost their power to such an extent that they can walk on anyone else's attempt to get through. In cities especially, the hallowed CB custom of waiting politely for a break before getting on the air has grown as rare as the doff of a gentleman's hat.

"The last six months have been terrible," says a San Diego CBER named Space Woman. "Now you can't have a conversation without someone saying, 'Break! Break!' The only time you really can talk now is late at night."

Pale, frail, but with a mischievous smile, Space Woman's heart condition and chronic bronchitis have made her a shut-in for the past several years. During that time, CB has been her means of contact with the outside world. "It keeps me from feeling sorry for myself," Space Woman explains. "That radio means an awful lot to me. A lot of company."

Her radio is a large wooden console with a stand-up mike on top. Over this unit Space Woman gets into "round tables" with other CBers still up at one or two in the morning. One night they discussed psychic phenomenon. Another night it was their outrageous gas and electric bills. Space Woman says that growing out of that conversation she helped lead a campaign over the air to have people pay their bills to the Public Utilities Commission rather than the gas and electric company.

Space Woman is well-known among her CB colleagues and generally well-liked. From her broadcast vantage point on a hill, Space Woman says she sometimes coordinates CB rescue activities. At times she tries calling herself the Ding Dong Lady from Duma and rings a little bell. But Space Woman's throaty voice is difficult to disguise, and whenever she tries this some colleague is bound to get on and say, "Oh, Space

Woman. Who you trying to kid?"

Space Woman is not popular with everyone. In recent years a bunch of young button pushers has taken to harassing her over the air. Once one of them asked if she was 11-44 yet. (11-44 means "Coroner's Report.") Space Woman said no way, she was gonna stick around for a while to plague him.

Here's a story Space Woman tells. One night after a button pusher had given Space Woman's address over the air, a rock flew through her picture window as she was broadcasting. She was showered with glass. "It just covered my whole body," she recalls. "I was a solid mass of glass. A piece went in my eye. I thought I'd lost it. I got hysterical and keyed my mike and said, 'Oh my God—I'm a mass of glass. Somebody threw a rock through my window.'"

Within minutes, by her account, the street in front of Space Woman's house was filled with CBers wanting to help. They couldn't find the rock throwers (nor could the police), but their

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### **For the price of a CB unit, you get to make up your own handle, learn a new lingo, say 10-4 a lot, join the lookout for smokeys and maybe even join a convoy**

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concern meant a lot to her. "It's just amazing what CBers will do when you need them," says Space Woman "Ninety-nine percent of CBers are wonderful. They restore your faith in human nature."

At a Saturday afternoon "break" of the 50/50 CBers Club in National City, it seemed everyone had a story to tell of CB Samaritanism: the days they spent on the air organizing relief for Tijuana residents after mud slides, or the time many of them worked all night to dig a car out of the mud by the bay before the tide could come in and swamp it. Last Christmas, club members collected 26 baskets for the needy. "It's something you don't find anymore," explains a 50/50er named The Hook. "People sticking together to help each other."

One of an endless number of CB clubs both local and national, 50/50 packs the VIP Room of the Plaza Bowl every Saturday with its break. Holding coffee or Coors in one hand, their units in the other (CBs being a prime rip-off item), the members howdy and exchange handles. This really isn't necessary, since

most wear plastic handle badges pinned to long vests. These vests usually bear a collage of supplementary information such as "U.S.A. Drinking Team" and "You Bet Your Sweet [picture of a donkey's behind] I'm a CBER."

The back of a purple vest worn by one rather large, balding man was taken up with a rectangular patch reading "Big Jack" and "KMA." KMA, the vest's wearer explained, stands for "Kiss My Antenna," a club started by a guy in Washington after he was refused membership in existing clubs. Like many 50/50 members, Big Jack belongs to other CB clubs. He got his first unit just eight months before—saw it in a store and bought it on a whim. Today, it's the focus of his social life. Big Jack said that in eight months over CB he'd met more people than in 16 years in the Navy. Even before getting to work in the morning, he figures he talks to maybe 50 CBers.

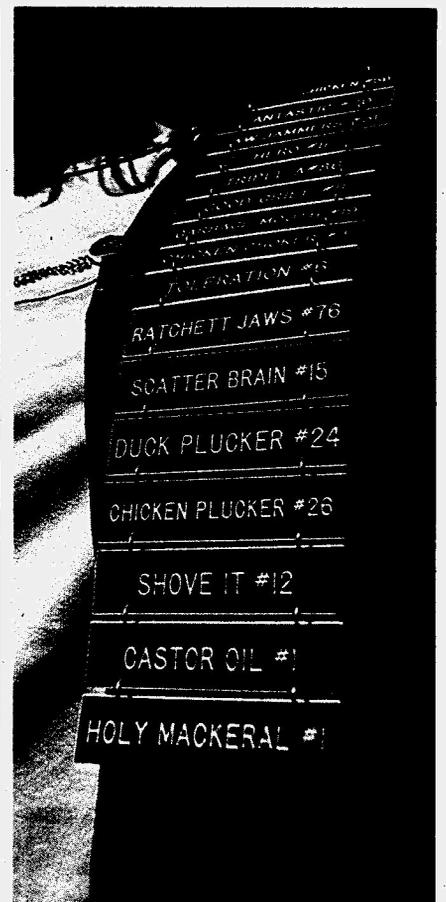
Jack was one of several 50/50 members who checked in on The Stripper when she was sick recently. Rambler Man, Stripper's husband, was in Washington on business. Knowing that CBers were calling in to his wife hourly made Rambler Man feel better about leaving. She felt better too. The Stripper, an earthy blonde who says she really used to be one and carries a stage picture in her wallet as proof, also says that more than once she's had to get on the air with a 10-33 (emergency) when she's about to pass out or something. Never, Stripper says, have CBers failed to respond.

Stripper and Rambler Man, a hearty, bearded locksmith, have been involved in CB for five months. She says it's the first joint interest they've found. Their four-year-old daughter is also a CBER. "We ordered her a vest," Stripper told me, "and on the bottom it's gonna have her handle, 'Ms. Popeye,' the KMA patch—and matching slacks. Because she thinks she's really tough."

Stripper's own vest and that of Rambler Man were on order. She hoped they'd arrive by Tuesday. In July they were moving to Santa Barbara. Stripper was thankful they had a CB radio with which to make friends. "CBers all stick together," she explained, "which is actually what the whole world ought to do."

Belonging is the real point of CBERing. Owning a CB unit is less important than being a CBER. Some people just buy the antenna and skip the radio. The medium has less to do with communication than community.

This is the real reason behind the lingo. Like a verbal uniform, CB talk distinguishes insiders from outsiders. As an



There are two types of handles: one you pick yourself (left, center) and other joke handles given by fellow CBers (right).

ad for the "First CB Slangage Language Dictionary and Cross Reference" explains: "CB enthusiasts belong to the largest club in the world. It's like an enormous nationwide 'Grapevine,' which uses a secret code understood only by those 'in the know.' Owning a new CB radio does not automatically make one part of the 'In' crowd. Talking like a CBer does!"

The "CB Slangage Language Dictionary" is just part of a rich variety of merchandise offered to the CB community: CB bumper stickers, CB license plate holders, CB record albums; CB jacket patches, CB lighters and CB jewelry—rings, tie tacks and cuff links for "letting others know that you are a CBer." There also are competing handle registries, several monthlies and a newsy tabloid called *CB Today* and about a dozen books on CB, covering everything from how to select your gear to what channels truckers use in various parts of the country.

The CB community is a community of interest that substitutes for a geographic one. This community is uniquely suited to a people on the move. It offers maximum identity with minimum commitment. Like gas stations by the freeway, the CB brotherhood is ez-on, ez-off. To get in, you turn your unit on. To

get out, you turn it off.

An important bonus is that the medium protects your anonymity. CBers observe a careful protocol of never asking for more than a handle or first name without being invited. This community combines the virtues of an old barn-raising with the discretion of a radio talk show.

But how durable will the CB community prove? Even in my short period of monitoring I could hear handles turning over constantly—new ones appearing, old ones disappearing. More than once someone would come on the air after being off for a few weeks and say he didn't recognize the current voices or handles.

Calling "instant friendship" its main appeal, the head of an FCC CB task force told me that in his experience this appeal rarely lasts longer than a year. It's interesting to speculate whether this might happen to the craze as a whole. Perhaps in six months the airwaves will clear just as suddenly as they jammed.

For me the novelty of monitoring CB wore off in about a week. The periods of silence grew longer and longer. After a month it became a real effort to turn my CB on at all. I no longer cared that I might be missing something; I also grew sure that I wasn't. You can hear just so

many "10-4's," "good modulatin' with ya's" and "guess I'll hit the old horizontal's" before you start praying for a blackout.

I never did come up with a handle. Nor did I ever transmit. Some nights I'd stare at the microphone, thinking of the power it contained. Just push down the button, hold it to your lips. . . .

But I could never think of anything to say. Which is exactly the wrong attitude. As Honda Boy says, you just say anything. Whatever comes to mind. It doesn't matter whether information is conveyed. That's not the point. The point, as HY-Gain advertises of its CB units, is that "you've got a friend."

Late one night on 14 I heard two young guys share heartfelt stories about how their dogs had died. "Sorry to end on such an unhappy note," one concluded, "but that's all in the past. Our whole future's ahead of us."

His friend said he'd been feeling weird that night, like something was about to happen. Knobs were jiggling around the house. Baseboards were creaking. It sure made him glad to have a CB. "Like if I were to die," he explained, "you'd know because I'd stop transmitting."

"Four shore." ●