

JAMESBURG

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Cone about the pending sale caught the attention of a group of technology buffs, who had other ideas about the antenna's future.

Two weeks ago, they celebrated getting the giant dish back online and bouncing a series of radio signals off the moon.

"After I saw the news story, I contacted the new owner, curious to see what they had in mind," said Rocklin resident Pat Barthelow. "And while they were trying to get their ducks in a row to use the land, I asked if they would let some people use the dish for moon communications."

At first, Bullis wasn't too keen on the idea, said Barthelow, who has spent a career working in the avionics industry. "But then he realized, if we were successful, it would generate a lot of publicity."

So last fall, Barthelow and a group of people he recruited because of their interest in satellite communications began an intensive effort to get the earth station working again. It had sat silent and unused since 2002. But AT&T had left everything intact.

"The whole complex was in surprisingly good shape," Barthelow said. "We demothalbed it over a period of four or five months."

But moving a gigantic antenna isn't something you do by hand, especially if you want to track a moving object in space.

"In February we finally had it under com-

puter control, and we were able to keep it pointed at the moon," he said.

His group's goal: to bounce a signal off the moon so it could be received by ham radio operators in many parts of the globe. In other words, they would use the moon as something like a very tall antenna.

"Two weeks ago, we did our first successful moonbounce," Barthelow told The Pine Cone. "Particularly from people in Europe, we got a very good response."

(The group publicizes its efforts — and planned broadcasts — on a website: www.jamesburgdish.org.)

Seen it all

The successful rejuvenation of the Jamesburg earth station was particularly satisfying for a 35-year employee of the facility, Jack Ramey, who lives in Prunedale and helped the amateur group get the station up and running again.

"I helped put the station in and was there until one month before it shut down," Ramey said. Because of its importance to national communications networks for so many years, he thinks Jamesburg qualifies as an historic building.

"A lot of history has gone through there," Ramey said.

In particular, he recalled the Mexico City Olympics in 1968, which was the first live TV broadcast brought into American homes via Jamesburg.

"We weren't even open yet, when another earth station couldn't be kept pointed at the satellite because of high winds, and we were

told to get into operation," Ramey said. "We cut padlocks off storage lockers to get at the equipment we needed."

The next year, live pictures from the moon came into American living rooms via Jamesburg and other earth stations. Ramey and his fellow technicians, who could hear communications between NASA officials on the ground and astronauts in space, were privy to some things that were kept secret — including an incident during Apollo 10 which, according to Ramey, almost ended in disaster.

"When they were testing the lunar lander, the explosive bolts caused it to go into some very severe oscillations," Ramey said, recalling NASA communications he overheard. "When they finally got it stabilized, they almost ran out of fuel trying to get back to the mother ship. They were praying to God for the engines to run another five seconds."

The mission ended successfully, paving the way for Apollo 11's lunar landing, and nothing was ever said about the incident with Apollo 10.

"It was never in the newspapers," Ramey said.

He also overheard a TV news producer and a reporter, talking over a private line routed through Jamesburg, agreeing to fabri-

cate a news story from Vietnam.

"The reporter was telling about three people killed in a village," Ramey recalled. "And the producer said, 'I've never heard of that village, so let's make it such-and-such.' And then the producer said, 'Three deaths isn't very many, so let's make it 10.' And the reporter said what he was told to say, and that's what went on the evening news, and it was done to make the United State look bad," according to Ramey, who said he doesn't remember which network it was.

Barthelow also remembers an historic event involving Jamesburg.

"An engineer I know was working for a Sacramento TV station during the Tianamen Square unrest in 1984," Barthelow said. "He figured out that if Jamesburg was pointed in the right direction, it could pick up a Chinese government satellite, and that's how the video of the protester staring down a tank ended up on American television."

With all that history, Barthelow also hopes Jamesburg will be protected from demolition.

And he's hoping it will be used for more than a ham radio outlet.

"We're hoping for a guardian angel to buy it and use it for radio astronomy or a space camp," Barthelow said.



PHOTO/COURTESY PAT BARTHELOW

Ham radio expert Pat Barthelow (left) and the rest of his group on an access platform below the Jamesburg satellite dish. This photo shows the enormous size of the antenna.

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