

# Chapter 8 Humor

By J. SCOTT BOVITZ

## Travels and Adventures in Ham Radio with Hon. John T. Laney III



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Prologue (the author explains ABI and Chapter 8 Humor to a German tourist): The Atacama Desert is a 600-mile strip of land in southern Peru and northern Chile, west of the towering Andes mountain range. Except for Antarctica, the “*Desierto de Atacama*” is the driest desert in the world. Reputable sources report that the Atacama Desert did not receive any rain whatsoever for about 400 years (from 1570 to 1971).<sup>1</sup>

Because of the cloudless skies and absence of light pollution, astronomers have built world-class observatories in northern Chile. These include the classic Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory and the up-to-date Cerro Paranal Observatory.<sup>2</sup>

The road from Los Angeles to Las Vegas crosses the huge Mojave Desert, which is a forest compared to the barren Atacama Desert (but you probably already knew that). I’m sure you remember James Bond blowing up the modern residence hotel at the Cerro Paranal Observatory. The hotel and its Martian-like desert landscape served as a stand-in for Bolivia in the 2008 film, *Quantum of Solace*.<sup>3</sup> The members of the “Monday Night Lawyer Movie Club Unless It’s on Tuesday” enjoyed *Quantum of Solace*, so be sure to watch it again when you get the chance.<sup>4</sup>

During a dusty bus ride from Antofagasta to the observatory at Cerro Paranal, I chatted with a traveler from Germany named Michael. The conversation naturally turned to our respective trades. Michael thought it was very “American” to build a large professional organization (ABI) based on business and consumer failures.<sup>5</sup>

I told Michael about ABI’s many publications, including the scholarly *ABI Journal*. Naturally, I expressed my pride about the Chapter 8 Humor column.<sup>6</sup> Have you ever tried to explain “bankruptcy humor” to a serious businessman from another country? This is not an easy task.

I said, “Bankruptcy law is not inherently funny, like national politics, but we often find wit and irony in our small procedural battles.” I continued, “For example, I always chuckle when I cite to *N. Natural Gas Co. v. Approximately 9117.53 Acres*, 289 F.R.D. 644 (D. Kan. 2013), regarding Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 26 (disclosure of documents used by experts in preparation for testimony) and Federal Rule of Evidence 612 (disclosure of writings used to refresh a witness). How can any attorney stand up in federal court and proudly say (with a straight face) that she is appearing today on behalf of ‘Approximately 9117.53 Acres’?” Michael’s face was blank. I don’t think my European friend fully understood the subtle humor in this example.

I explained the metamorphosis of Chapter 8 Humor: “The editors of the *ABI Journal* have allowed me to slowly expand the Chapter 8 column from ‘humor’ to ‘amusements.’ Recently, I have been focusing on the odd things that bankruptcy lawyers and judges do in their spare time.” Michael perked up. “Like hobbies? What is the topic of your next column?”

I smiled and said, “I have interviewed Hon. **John T. Laney, III** [of the] U.S. Bankruptcy Court [for the] Middle District of Georgia. The judge is a rock star in the ham radio world. However, every time I have submitted a draft Chapter 8 article with the phrase ‘ham radio,’ the editors of the *ABI Journal* have buried those articles. So, I don’t really know if the Judge Laney article will be published.” Michael said, “Then make it a good article — this time.”

OK, Michael, here you go.

### Hon. John T. Laney, III, K4BAI

Amateur radio (also called ham radio) is a little over 100 years old. It led the way for radio broadcasting, television, cellphones and the internet. Ham radio operators played a critical role in World Wars I and II.<sup>7</sup>

No, ham radio is not dead. As of 2017, there are about 3 million amateur radio operators in the world. Many younger “hams” are actively involved in the maker movement at the intersection of the hacking and robotic worlds.<sup>8</sup> You might be surprised to learn that there are 801,424 amateur radio operators in the U.S. There are also 435,581 hams in Japan, 38,000 in Russia, 68,692 in China and 75,262 in Germany (way to go, Michael!).<sup>9</sup>

1 See “10 Facts About the Atacama Desert,” Quasar Expeditions, available at [quasarex.com/blog/10-facts-atacama-desert](http://quasarex.com/blog/10-facts-atacama-desert). Yes, “Antarctica is a desert.” See “What Is Antarctica?,” NASA (Dec. 8, 2010), available at [nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/k-4/stories/nasa-knows/what-is-antarctica-k4.html](http://nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/k-4/stories/nasa-knows/what-is-antarctica-k4.html) (unless otherwise indicated, all links in this article were last visited on Feb. 23, 2017).

2 Govert Schilling, “An Astronomer’s Paradise, Chile May Be the Best Place on Earth to Enjoy a Starry Sky,” *Smithsonian Journeys Quarterly* (July 22, 2015), available at [smithsonianmag.com/travel/star-trekking-chile-astronomy-180955798](http://smithsonianmag.com/travel/star-trekking-chile-astronomy-180955798).

3 See [imdb.com/title/tt0830515/trivia?tab=gf&ref\\_=tt\\_trv\\_gf](http://imdb.com/title/tt0830515/trivia?tab=gf&ref_=tt_trv_gf).

4 When you are in Los Angeles, please join us for dinner and a movie. We generally select films with guns, loud soundtracks and debtor/creditor themes (like the 2016 film *Hell or High Water*). Visit [bankruptcydog.com](http://bankruptcydog.com) for details.

5 For a slick history of ABI’s early years, watch the 25th Anniversary videos at [abi.org/about-us](http://abi.org/about-us).

6 Here is something that you won’t find in the *New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*. Title 11 does not use capital “C” when referring to chapters 7, 9, 11, 12, 13 or 15. However, the editors of the *ABI Journal* use a capital “C” for this column.

7 See “History of Amateur Radio,” Wikipedia, available at [wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_amateur\\_radio](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_amateur_radio).

8 You can visit Maker Faire (note the extra “e”) around the world. See [makerfaire.com](http://makerfaire.com).



*Bankruptcy Judge John Laney has been an amateur radio operator for nearly 60 years.*

The Amateur Radio Relay League (ARRL) defines ham radio as a “popular hobby and service that brings people, electronics and communication together.” ARRL notes that “People use ham radio to talk across town,

around the world, or even into space, all without the internet or cellphones. It’s fun, social, educational, and can be a lifeline during times of need.”<sup>9</sup> Amateur radio operators still serve as the front line on propagation research. Hams laid the foundation for cellphone engineers to build a small microwave transceiver into your iPhone 7. That research permits you to make calls in an law office elevator without frying your right ear into bacon.

I have been a ham radio operator since 1969 (when I was 13 years old). I asked my dad if I should become an electrical engineer, like him. Dad looked at me a long time, then said, “Son, I love you. You are good at soldering. You are fearless when troubleshooting problems with electronics and such. You did a good job repairing that lady’s television set down the street. These are fine skills. But I also remember the time you almost burned down the house when you shorted a screwdriver across the electric panel outside because the circuit breaker was giving you trouble. It might be safer to pursue another career.”

Dad paused and lit a cigarette. We did not speak for a moment, then he said, “Have you considered the law, son?”<sup>11</sup> I speculate that Judge Laney must have had a similar conversation with his father.

About 60 years ago, a teenage Judge Laney took and passed his written amateur radio test (electrical and radio theory), Morse Code receiving test and Morse Code sending test. The Federal Communications Commission issued call sign KN4BAI to Judge Laney. Now, Judge Laney has the top license for a U.S. ham (the Extra Class). His present call sign is simply K4BAI.

When Judge Laney is not holding court in Columbus and Valdosta, Ga., he operates in ham radio competitions (contests) from his modest ham radio station in Columbus. Judge Laney also has a long history of portable contest operations, from 1987 to the present, around the Caribbean (including scuba diver paradises in the Bahamas, Bonaire, Barbados, Curacao, Haiti and Dominica) and Central America (including Guatemala). He also operates mobile (in vehicles) during “county hunter” contests.<sup>12</sup>

Judge Laney has first-hand knowledge of how difficult it is to build and maintain a ham radio station (with antennas) in salty air and jungles. However, his gargantuan efforts are

rewarded by more contacts (bigger “pileups”) during ham radio events. Today, Judge Laney is at the very top of ham radio gladiators. But he began modestly.

Judge Laney entered his first competitive ham radio event (the Novice Roundup) in 1955. This was an all-Morse Code event. As a rookie, he finished second in Georgia — a wonderful start. While hams can transmit voice, written words, digital information, images, video and telemetry, Judge Laney still loves the sound of Morse Code and proudly calls himself a “code man.” Over the years, he has placed highly or won multiple Morse Code competitions over the airwaves and at ham radio conventions (also referred to as “hamfests”).<sup>13</sup>

In 1965, Judge Laney was admitted to the Georgia Bar, which was about six months before his graduation from Mercer University Walter F. George School of Law in 1966.<sup>14</sup> The concept of early Bar admission is always controversial, but Judge Laney shows that it can work in the right situation. (I suspect most students would be unable to focus on a last semester at law school after their admission to the bar.)

After graduation, Judge Laney served four years in the Army in the Judge Advocate General’s Corp. He was attached to the Second Infantry Division in Korea in 1968 and 1969. The primary mission of the Second Infantry Division was — and is — the defense of South Korea in case of invasion by North Korea.<sup>15</sup> When Judge Laney was in South Korea in 1968 and 1969, he operated on the ham bands (including a memorable contest with borrowed gear in October 1968). In the late 1960s, there were very few active ham radio operators in South Korea, so Laney was very popular with the country chasers (ham radio “DXers”). As a side note, the Army awarded Judge Laney its Meritorious Service Award and Army Commendation Medal.<sup>16</sup>

After Judge Laney retired from the Army, he conducted an active jury trial practice for about 16 years. He was a perfectionist and found his practice to be stressful, but since his appointment as a bankruptcy judge, Judge Laney is rarely stressed because he “does not schedule myself to be in more than one courtroom at a time.” Ah!

An ABI member since 1988, Judge Laney has served on the bench since 1986, and from 2008-14 he was the chief judge. His opinions are rarely overturned on appeal. In addition to issuing well-written bankruptcy opinions each year,<sup>17</sup> Judge Laney still competes head-to-head with hams throughout the world in 12-, 24- and 48-hour competitions. In the more popular contests, there can be up to 35,000 other participants.<sup>18</sup>

During one- or two-day weekend competitions, Judge Laney will sit in his chair, put on soundproof headphones, constantly adjust and tune his radio gear, carefully listen to the cacophony of signals, and exchange information with

<sup>13</sup> In 2005, Jay Leno demonstrated that Morse Code was still faster than texting for passing a message. See “Morse Code vs. Texting,” available at [youtube.com/watch?v=9t70YUv2YXM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9t70YUv2YXM).

<sup>14</sup> See [martindale.com/Hon-John-T-Laney-III/875607-lawyer.htm](https://martindale.com/Hon-John-T-Laney-III/875607-lawyer.htm).

<sup>15</sup> See “2nd Infantry Division (United States),” Wikipedia, available at [wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd\\_Infantry\\_Division\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd_Infantry_Division_(United_States)). These soldiers have always had to keep on their toes.

<sup>16</sup> See [bloomberg.com/profiles/people/4020408-john-t-laney](https://bloomberg.com/profiles/people/4020408-john-t-laney).

<sup>17</sup> For opinions from Judge Laney, visit [www.gamb.uscourts.gov/USCourts/judges-info/opinions](https://www.gamb.uscourts.gov/USCourts/judges-info/opinions) and select his name from the drop-down menu.

<sup>18</sup> In the U.S., the most popular contest is called “Field Day.” Hams build their stations in the field (with emergency antennas, power, food and shelter) to prepare for their role in emergencies. Judge Laney has participated in almost every Field Day since 1955.

<sup>9</sup> See “Amateur Radio Operator,” Wikipedia, available at [wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur\\_radio\\_operator](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur_radio_operator).

<sup>10</sup> “What Is Ham Radio?,” ARRL, available at [arrl.org/what-is-ham-radio](https://arrl.org/what-is-ham-radio).

<sup>11</sup> ABI is aware that smoking is bad for you. But everyone smoked back then.

<sup>12</sup> Some hams have worked another ham in all 3,077 counties in the U.S. See [countyhunter.com](https://countyhunter.com).

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hundreds or thousands of hams by voice, written words or Morse Code. While Judge Laney is famous for his photographic memory, he types each contact into a computer spreadsheet (called a “log”). He operates by himself or, in certain contests, with a team of other operators.

At the end of a contest, Judge Laney uploads his log to a contest sponsor. Logs of all competitors are compared, checked and vetted. The winner(s) of each contest are identified in magazines or on websites, along with amusing short stories (soapbox comments) from the participants. The winners get bragging rights and a certificate or a small wooden plaque. No money is involved.

In some cases, Judge Laney will exchange a QSL card (a colorful postcard) with the ham on the other end of a successful contact.<sup>19</sup> More commonly, he will simply upload his entire log to the ARRL for processing and automatic confirmation.

Judge Laney has confirmed contacts with hams in every country of the world, except North Korea. As a result, he is near the top of ham radio’s honor roll.

Even though Laney’s current home station is modest, K4BAI is often the strongest signal coming from the southern part of the U.S., as confirmed by the electronic Reverse Beacon Network. Judge Laney does very well in domestic and international competitions.<sup>20</sup>

Because of his consistently high contest scores, Judge Laney was selected to compete in the second, third,

fourth and fifth World Radiosport Team Championships (WRTC), which are the all-star games in the ham radio world. In these competitions, about 50 international teams come to one location to compete against one another. Judge Laney’s team achieved a second-place finish in San Francisco (July 1996), and placed well in other WRTC competitions from Slovenia (July 2000), Finland (July 2002) and Brazil (July 2006).

Based on his scores and experience as a competitor in four events, Judge Laney was asked to be a referee in the 2014 WRTC in Massachusetts. He was assigned to monitor a team of Lithuanians, and the team operated in a tent, with emergency power and antennas.<sup>21</sup>

Despite a catastrophic computer failure during the contest, Judge Laney’s team finished sixth in the competition. The 2014 WRTC event is documented by author J.K. George in his amusing book, *Contact Sport*. Judge Laney complimented the members of his 2014 team as great Morse Code operators (often operating at an amazing 46 words per minute).<sup>22</sup>

Judge Laney is now in his mid-70s, but he has no interest in dropping his ABI membership, retiring from the bench or giving up ham radio. “Don’t ever retire,” he warns. “Stay sharp.” I will see you on the bands, Judge Laney! 73 K4BAI de N6MI SK.<sup>23</sup> **abi**

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<sup>21</sup> You read this correctly. Bankruptcy Judge Laney was asked to serve as a referee. I don’t think my German friend would appreciate this irony of bankruptcy jurisprudence. See “Referee in Bankruptcy,” Wikipedia, available at [wikipedia.org/wiki/Referee\\_in\\_Bankruptcy](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Referee_in_Bankruptcy).

<sup>22</sup> J.K. George, *Contact Sport: A Story of Champions, Airwaves and a One-Day Race Around the World* (Greenleaf Book Group 2016), available at [greenleafbookgroup.com/titles/contact-sport](http://greenleafbookgroup.com/titles/contact-sport).

<sup>23</sup> For non-ham operators, this is Mr. Bovitz saying goodbye to Judge Laney.

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<sup>19</sup> “QSL Card,” Wikipedia, available at [wikipedia.org/wiki/QSL\\_card](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/QSL_card).  
<sup>20</sup> Visit [reversebeacon.net](http://reversebeacon.net).

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