



TALES OF THE WIRELESS PIONEERS

By Henry W. Dickow - SSGP-3 (D - 4/17/71)

The First Full-Time Wireless Operator

The world's first assignment to full-time duty as a shipboard wireless operator went to F.S. Stacey, a British Marconi man. He served aboard the S.S. Princess Clementina during the winter of 1900-1901. Then he worked in the Lake Champlain, another of the first vessels to be equipped with Marconi apparatus. The ship was engaged in the run from England to Canada.

Her wireless room was an afterthought, said Karl Baarslag, to whom Stacey related the tale. The "shack" was hurriedly constructed on the boat deck to house the newly arrived wireless apparatus. The wireless operator's term for radio cabin "shack" must have originated in this ship. For a shack it was, made of matchwood, a lean-to housing 4-ft. 6-in. by 3-ft. 6-in., built against an iron bulkhead. There were no windows. Light was supplied by a bank of electric light bulbs used as a charging resistance for the storage batteries. If the weather permitted, the door could be kept open. The entire cost of erecting this structure was 5 pounds sterling, the equivalent of \$25 at the time.

The Lake Champlain's wireless set consisted of a 10-inch spark coil, a straight "earthed" spark gap, a telegraph key, and two tuning coils, or oscillation transformers. Two sets of six-volt batteries were installed under the table. The receiving equipment consisted of two coherers (detectors) and a Morse "inker" which recorded the incoming signals on a paper tape, in the manner of a stock-market ticker. The transmitting key was a long-handled lever; the operator needed a good right arm and not a supple wrist, as is the case today.

When the Lake Champlain sailed from Liverpool on May 21, 1901, her wireless operator Stacey was kept busy with traffic sent to Holyhead and later to a station at Rosslare. But once out of range, there remained no work for him. There were no wireless stations in America and no wireless-equipped ships at sea.

He was kept busy answering questions asked by the 1,200 passengers and crewmen aboard, most of whom were frankly skeptical of Stacey's explanations, while to others the mystery of communication across space without wires passed the bounds of comprehension or belief.

When the ship arrived at Halifax, a swarm of newspapermen came aboard. Stacey was honored by a visit from the Canadian

General Inspector of Telegraphs, who, unlike the ship's passengers, was quick to see the possibilities of the new invention.

Said Karl Baarslag*: "The return passage to England was as silent as the one to Canada. As the ship neared the Irish Coast, Stacey was greatly surprised to hear another ship equipped with wireless, the Cunarder Lucania, on her first radio-equipped voyage to America. A number of messages were exchanged, and the Lake Champlain received the latest news from England.

"Stacey made several more trips on her, and then the apparatus was removed and installed in another vessel. His palatial wireless cabin became a vegetable locker, which perhaps was more in keeping with its architectural pretensions."

*SOS to the Rescue