



TALES OF THE WIRELESS PIONEERS

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Early Wireless License

From 1910 until 1912, and before the wireless stations and their operators came under the jurisdiction of the Federal Radio Commission, later called Federal Communications Commission, the licenses issued by the government were labeled Certificates of Skill. It is interesting to note that the expression Radiocommunication had already been adopted officially at this time, and that the Oath of Secrecy had also been made an essential requirement.

Certificates were issued in the following form:

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
Department of Commerce and Labor
Navigation Service

OPERATOR'S CERTIFICATE OF SKILL IN RADIOCOMMUNICATION

This is to certify that, under provisions of the Act of June 24, 1910, JOHN B. DOE has been examined in radiocommunication and has passed in:

- (a) The adjustment of apparatus, correction of faults, and change from one wavelength to another;
- (b) Transmission and sound-reading at a speed of not less than fifteen words a minute American Morse, twelve words Continental, five letters counting as one word.

The candidate's practical knowledge of adjustment was tested on a _____ set of apparatus. His knowledge of other systems and of international radiotelegraph regulations and American naval wireless regulations is shown below: . . .

The certificate was then duly signed by the examining officer either at one of the various Navy Yards or at the offices of the Radio Inspector.

From 1910 to 1912, the American Morse code was more widely used by wireless telegraphers than the newer Continental code because of the large number of land-wire telegraphers who deserted their Morse keys in search of newer opportunities.

The First Commercial Wireless License

License No. 1, a Certificate of Skill, the first official U.S. document ever issued for the operation of a commercial wireless station, went to James M. Baskerville on May 25, 1911. The prized license was awarded him at the Brooklyn, N.Y., Navy Yard, and carries the signature of examining officer W.H. Shulter.

Two days later, on May 27, 1911, a similar certificate was issued to Thomas Appleby by W.L. Howard, Commander, USN, at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. It was Philadelphia certificate No. 1.

Baskerville's test required that he prove himself capable of "(a) the adjustment of apparatus, correction of faults, and change from one wavelength to another; (b) transmission and sound-reading at a speed of not less than 15 words a minute American Morse, 12 words Continental, five letters counting as one word."

Authorities for the foregoing include Henry E. Church in Popular Electronics, January 1966, Art Trauffer, of the Lee de Forest Memorial Room, Council Bluffs, Iowa, and Ed. G. Raser, historian for the Antique Wireless Association.

Thomas Appleby of Washington, D.C. had long considered himself the holder of Certificate No. 1, but the recent disclosure that James M. Baskerville was licensed two days earlier than Appleby at long last resolves this controversy.

The First Amateur Wireless License

In Electronics Illustrated, March 1962, Robert Hertzberg, W2DJJ, and Eli Flam, relate the details of how the first amateur wireless license in the United States was issued:

"On December 12 of that memorable year of 1912 representatives of the Department of Commerce and Labor, which had been chosen to administer the communication law, began giving examinations for wireless experimenters at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. At 7 o'clock in the morning a 22-year-old chap named Irving Vermilya showed up to take the test with shaking hands and a butterfly stomach, like every ham since then, and won the first Certificate of Proficiency, thus becoming the No. 1 radio amateur in the country."

Irving Vermilya's career as an amateur began in 1901.

The Wireless Man's Code

"Early wireless men by staying at their keys as long as their equipment could be of help to their shipmates, had laid down the foundation of an inspiring rule of conduct for their fellow operators," said historian Karl Baarslag. "It must be remembered that the first wireless men were not seamen but land telegraphers afloat and ignorant of the ways and traditions of the sea. These poorly paid, obscure servants of a radio company, most of them boys under twenty-one, without esprit-de-corps or precedent to bind or guide them, laid down in the hour of distress and disaster, the fine and inspiring tradition that a wireless man's duty to his ship, his master and his apparatus. As long as his efforts can be of the slightest use, his place is at his key, regardless of the condition of the ship. When disaster silences his apparatus he may properly look out for himself. In various disasters in the past, operators have ignored their captain's orders to abandon ship and have continued transmitting, and by so doing several have lost their lives. To stay on, when his services are not needed, provided he can be of no assistance as a mariner, is merely foolhardy histrionics."