



Henry Joe Poy

"HANK" - A China Boy's Experience



I was R/O on the SS Jefferson/WAJ of the ALASKA line, in 1919. Only 16 at the time, and born of Cantonese parents, who were converted to Christianity in Portland, Oregon. I finished the YMCA radio school and Mr. Twogood was happy to know I was headed for Seattle to take the FCC examination from Insp. Wolfe which was atop the LC Smith building. I had studied "wireless" very earnestly and was the first one in high school to have a crystal receiving "loose coupler" of the "rolled oats" genre that could bring navrad NPE (100 miles away) in R-5 on a Baldwin receiver.

Insp. Wolfe passed me on a grade of 85, and their office told all persons around I was the first Chinese wireless operator (PY) to ship out from Seattle. With a telegraph First in my pocket, and heart full of thankfulness, I left the FCC office and reported to the SORS at dockside. To my surprise, they wanted me and they didn't want me. Looking questionably and surprisedly at me, they put me through a strict question and answer test. My work qualifications were being challenged. I wrenched the documents from the inside coat pocket and the YMCA wireless diploma. Both were legally signed by authorized agents of the U.S. government and the YMCA authorities. Confronted with these documents was enough to belay their efforts to further questionability. In Washington high school I carried five subjects which included Latin and math. I proceeded to a two-hour class in Cantonese at a Chinese mission school. Clarence and Bill, my two brothers, followed the same routine each day. One eventually became a mining engineer from Golden, Colorado, and Bill became an M.D. from Northwestern.

Jue Poy, my beloved father, a Presbyterian layman, was of the ancient order of Toishan's village heirarchy. He was many times addressed as Reverend Poy. He preached very often from the mission pulpit in his "Sze-Yup" dialect, which was difficult to render as educational to the younger aspirants. Only the elders were his peers.

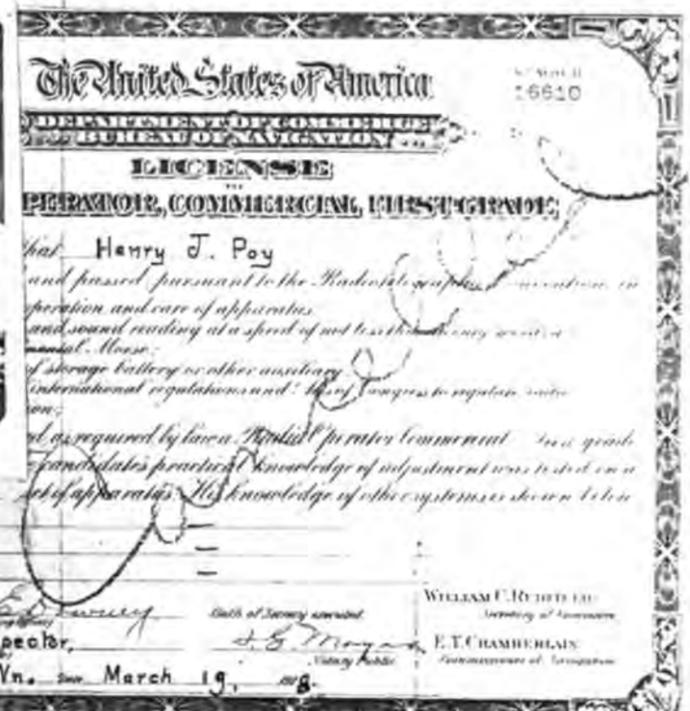


The SORS (ship owners radio service) had a large vacancy list for the rest of the traveling season to Alaska. Their need was great. How could they turn me down? Peace between the two World War belligerents was not signed as yet, and many former ships' operators were not discharged from the armed services. Then, the normal pay was very seldom over ninety dollars. I was very anxious to get assigned to my first career job as a wireless operator. So I told SORS in rebuff. I was getting "hot under the collar." "I can speak Cantonese and become the steamship's Chinese interpreter. The SS JEFFERSON, the SS ALASKA, the SS YUKON, the SS MARIPOSA, they all carry two to three hundred Chinese cannery workers to and from Alaska salmon packing plants." It was something going for me, even though there was no need for an interpreter. However, it was just an impromptu remark. My only amateurish attempt at translating was at an American-learning class for Chinese immigrants at the mission school in Portland where father was a layman-superintendent.

"Is this your right age, 16?" he asked. "Yes, I will be 17 in October." I added, "I have lived and worked the Alaska salmon canneries for three of my summer years. My father's cousin, Mr. Lock, was cannery foreman for Alaska packers. Sitka, Taku and Bristol bay canneries are not new to me. I am husky at 140 pounds and used to do the 48-pound cases by piling them "eight high." I was fighting for my legal rights and felt that I was being unreasonably questioned. This SORS man probably possessed a bit of superiority complex, knowing I was of Chinese heritage. He apparently wasn't going to as-



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sign me to an official sea-going ship of the U.S. maritime company. "If you are hesitant in signing me, I will report back to the FCC. They will give me a letter of recommendation to the United States Shipping Board (USSB) to an assignment on newly constructed ships of the Standifer Shipbuilding Company." At the "Y" school, the bulletin board was pasted with notices of vacancies for "ops" to take the new ships on trial trips down the coast. They paid \$135 per month, room and board plus wireless uniform. They're rock 'n' roll trips.

I should have mentioned before that my father's family lived in a KwangTung village and came over on a three-masted schooner from Hong Kong. It took the barkentine three months to cross the Pacific. He knew no words in English, but was armed only in youthful courage and a strong body with willingness to work.

After a stint working on the Pacific railroads, he became a true Christian through his friendship with the Reverend Mr. and Mrs. W. S. Holt of the Presbytery in Portland. With hope and a great determination, he was made and assigned as head chef of a large boarding hostelry with 8 or 9 Chinese kitchen aides. He married my beautiful mother, who was trained in Christian living and a devout member of the mission.

I really don't know how they did it. Father was 55 when I went to Washington High. I was 13 after graduation from Stevens school, and third oldest in a family of seven kids. Father was making \$150 per month in 1917, bought himself a seven-room house on a lot 50 x 100. He had no days off. His only transportation from home on the east side of the Willamette River to his job was by no coaster-brake bicycle with wooden rims and solid rubber tires. For night riding, he had to light up a carbide lamp. The streets were rough and unpaved. In the early years before the 1911 revolution in China, he sported a long pigtail with a silken skull cap with a red button. His only English utterance during his teen-age was: "Hoh-la-mah? Come-look-see-me," etc. After ten years of mission school, he then escalated to: "How are you, sir, and do come and visit me sometime," with a sparkle in his eyes. Mrs. Murphy, his boss and owner of the boarding house was proud of her chef.

Everything that a 16-year old highschool boy wanted or wished he could do. Mother would always nearly agree but at the end, she would say, "Ask your father." I had a Portland paper route on the east side which brought in a measly stipend. It was enough for carfare to and from Cantonese school and a weekly band practice on Stark street's Chinese chamber of commerce building. We had a Chinese student band of 35 pieces called the New Era band. Mr. Herman Lowe, the Chinese immigration interpreter was the owner and manager. He was wonderful and always successful in booking New Era in the yearly Rose Carnival parades. We wore a dressy blue uniform and caps. The boys struck up a rhythmic tune and marched proudly down Broadway under "Stars & Stripes." The first Chinese band of 35 pieces ever to gallantly play before tens of thousands of applauding spectators. We brought great respect to the Chinese people of the city.

I was to receive with honor a diploma from the "Y" radio school and business college. At the end I was able to receive and copy the Continental Morse code on a typewriter at 20 words per minute. I also was accomplished at "touch typing" at 50 w.p.m. This touch typing put me in good standing with Federal Telegraph Company of San Francisco when visual tape telegraphy became standard procedure in 1927. HB/SF is still the office call for Mackay/ITT's office on Mission Street. "Fifteen words for the price of ten" was Mackay's gimmick that brought the company to national prominence. West coast officials were A. Y. Tuel, Capt. E. H. Dodd, H. L. Rodman, E. V. Baldwin and J. T. Chatterton.

Henry Poy Story Continued

Well, after much hemming and hawing, they assigned me as 2nd operator aboard the SORS (Kilbourne & Clarke) passenger ship, the S.S. Jefferson leaving Puget Sound for Southeastern Alaska via Juneau and many cannery ports. As I predicted, the ship provided first class passage for 100 passengers and 200 steerage passengers.

The crimp-looking wireless room not much over a crib-size stall. The one-half kilowatt quenched-spark transmitter with its loose-inductance coils and the ancient carborundum crystal sliding tuner was crammed against the forward bulkhead. The senior operator, whose name I've forgotten, was a crispy old "vet" of unknown repute. Much older than myself...had a slight slump on his back...red pimply face...and carried a domineering visage. WAJ was my "beginner's" job, and my position was not promising. The only words the man would say: "Take over the watch, China boy." I began fidgeting with the delicate "catwhisker"...and loudly came the station "VAE"...the sending operator had a "Mary Pickford" swing. Our ship was rounding Juan de Fuca Straits. My associate frightened me much. He was a man of the WORLD. I was just a kid.

Undeniably, as a "Y" wireless operator, I was a greenhorn amateur on my first commercial adventure. Twisting the big tuner knob, a loud but mushy signal came down the flat-top antenna via the copper lead-in to my loose-coupler. I was a bit confused from the heavy static but full of anxiety. Jiggling the "catwhisker" to a more sensitive spot on the galena crystal, I grabbed a pencil and nervously translated this "mushy" signal. Lo and behold! I never heard such a hairy note. WAJ WAJ de WAW WAW WAW QRK? ar.. The Admiral Watson calling the Jefferson! Believe it or not...the "China boy's" first official call. But suddenly, the signals stopped abruptly. The static disappeared. The ship's stern was jumping and leaping with each turn of the props. Each bump was like riding the railroad ties. I threw the main switch to activate the M.G. which was quite noisy. The quenched spark gap was even more disturbing, but like all 60 cycle rigs, it had to heat up a bit. Whew! I saw liquid leaking from the rim of the quench gap. The hi-frequency was arcing all over the place. I depressed the key thinking the dampness would disappear. My hands were all tied up...between the ugly catwhisker and the damping gap, I was all butterfingers. The ship's prop slowed a bit...the call from the Watson came in louder than ever. I found a good spot on the crystal, so I managed to answer feebly. WAW WAW de WAJ ga K...The 600 meter was loud and clear. After all, he was on his way to Alaska so he was not too far distant. He quoted his name: Theron Bean, 2nd opr here...who you? Of all things, it was my old buddy at the YMCA Portland. He was a Jefferson High student and now officially established wireless operator on the Watson. What a joy it was! "This is 'Hank' Poy of Washington High. Headed for Skagway, Alaska." The reason for the "mushy" signal...the WAW had a mercury rectifier transmitter aboard. Our direct QSO was a thrill, both of us being out at sea. I was very proud of my accomplishment. I gaped at the black and white "spark" insignia on my shoulder with distinguished pride. The "China-boy operator" slantingly smiled with glee.



THE DAILY PRESS NEWS



The 'Penny' Pincher'

BY GEORGE BEATER SK

We old timers know how cheap some steamship companies were, and steamship agents were even more penny pinching. Back about 1936 a shipping agent, to save eight cents, caused the loss of a ship. I heard the message: MSG NR 1 CK 3 PHILADELPHIA -...- SS MOUNT OLYMPUS WSC -...- WILMINGTON -...- (No signature). Lots of ships used to start westward across the Atlantic :blind," receiving destination orders later by radio. The Greek's skipper, unfamiliar with our shores, apparently spotted Wilmington, North Carolina, on his chart and assumed that was it, and didn't notice Wilmington, Delaware, his intended destination, up the river. In trying to get into Wilmington, N.C., he hung up on a sand bar and had to abandon ship. It may still be there; I know it was there a long time.

Some skippers were just as penurious. On WMCT the captain, who always wrote out his messages and figured the check and cost, handed me one reading: MSG NR 2 CK 6 SS GLOUCESTER -...- MERMINTCO BALTIMORE -...- CHANGE ABANG TO ABAMO -...- (No signature). I told him the check should be 7 as plain words in a code message were charged for on the basis of five letters per word, and "change" had six letters. "You mean I have to pay eight cents just for a dit?" he asked. I said, "Yes, eight cents for one little dit." He took the message away from me and gave the matter deep thought. Twenty minutes later he brought the message back for transmittal with "change" changed to "alter."

—George Beater (224-P)

The 'Swinging' Onion

BY ERIC COLBURN

It was way back in about 1919, when the old passenger ships "HARVARD" and "YALE" were about to give up their regular Boston-New York run, I was on vacation from my job as radio operator. Like a postman's holiday, I accepted a one trip relief job on each ship.

After joining the HARVARD, the first thing I noticed was a big onion tied on a string to the freshly polished copper tubing running from the radio antenna lead-in insulator to the big spark transmitter. I was soon to find out the purpose of the onion.

The radio shack was located on the top boat deck midships, a popular area for passengers in good weather. A fresh breeze was blowing and the "onion" was swinging back and forth with the rolling of the ship. Pretty soon a passenger wondered by and as he peered into the radio shack door he asked, "What is that big onion for?" I quickly answered, "Oh, that; that is to make the signals strong."

The romance of radio telegraph still lingered in the minds of everyone in those days, and passengers were always sticking their noses in the door way of the radio shack. I guess our first inquirer sensed this for he did not leave. He was waiting for the next sucker. It wasn't for long. Pretty soon I had about 50 passengers hanging around the radio shack door, just waiting for the next sucker to ask, "Say, what is that onion for?" Such a gathering of passengers brought results. Although a short run, they just had to send a radiogram ashore. Without that onion they never would have thought about it. As I remember it, I collected about \$75.00 in message fees that first day, just because a previous radio operator had thoughtfully tied an onion to the antenna lead-in.

—Eric D. Colburn (704-P)