



The World Wireless Beacon

A Quarterly Newsletter of the
Society of Wireless Pioneers, Inc.,
146 Coleen Street, Livermore, CA 94550 - USA

Vol. 4 No. 1

March 1992

The Life and Times of Your Founder

By William A. Breniman

I appreciate this opportunity to once again address my friends of many years. I wish I could answer the many calls and letters I have received, but I regret to say the years of writing and publishing have taken their toll, as my eyesight, hearing and finger dexterity in typing make it difficult to work with speed at over 90. Many have asked about my experiences and association with early day wireless, so I will try to type up this short summary. I still enjoy hearing from my old friends and enjoy their letters - so please keep them coming even if I am unable to respond in kind.

I guess I have been gifted with a life of action and have been fortunate to be in the "right place at the right time" and endowed with good health, knowledge and drive to contribute in carrying the flag, especially in the field of WIRELESS. It was Jack Phillips, Chief Operator aboard the TITANIC, and Harold Cottam, wireless operator on the rescue ship SS CARPATHIA who first sparked my imagination and interest in this mode of communication with the first SOS call on that night in April, 1912. They began a heritage of which all wireless/radio operators can be very proud. There are many "heroes of the key" who have followed them,



becoming casualties along the way. We in the Society of Wireless Pioneers have vowed to remember them.

During my early years, my family lived on a small farm just outside the small northern Colorado town of Fort Collins. I was very fortunate in having a very wonderful Mother and Dad who gave us great encouragement in preparing for the future. For example, they gave me the responsibility of farming two acres of land at the age of 12. I was given carte blanche

freedom, the only caveat being that it was my ONLY source of spending money. I did all the work, planting, weeding, irrigating, harvesting and selling my garden vegetables of all kinds. I did very well in my truck garden and even ventured into other fields such as being a youthful entrepreneur in the fur business with much success.

The sinking of the TITANIC had a profound impact on my young life. I decided someday to become a "Marconi-man" and sail the seven seas. I had earned enough money to buy some equipment from a New York mail order house at 233 Fulton Street. (Later in life I was to meet the owner, Syd Gernsback, and his brother Hugo.)

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The receiving set I bought was a complete unit, advertised to have a range of 2,000 miles or more. I also bought an early day model of the Omnigraph, a code-sending machine which would send at a rate of 5 to 25 words per minute, depending on how fast the crank was turned. Both items cost less than \$40, which in those days was a 'bundle' of money.

Along came World War I. A very persuasive U.S. Navy recruiter gave us a talk at our high school which ignited my latent patriotism to the flash point. The Navy had me "hooked"!

A couple of months later, after a lengthy talk with my parents who thought I was too young, I joined the Navy. I was promptly assigned to send code to my classmates at the Bremerton, Washington/NPC signal school. In addition to the American Morse and International Codes which I knew, I also was to teach semaphore and 'wig-wag' to recruits assigned to the "Dickens" school.

I enjoyed my Navy days during WW-1: Active duty at two land stations, NPC and NAT, plus seagoing duty on the USS GWIN/NACX, supply ship USS W. HOSOKIE/WFEI and sub-chaser, NOCV. The GWIN was a 4-stacker in the war zone and on transport duty most of the time. Old-timers will know these 'tin-cans' were no place to be in rough weather. Anyway, shortly after we returned to NAT, New Orleans, LA., the Navy offered furlough subject to recall (which we knew would probably never happen.) I chose furlough as I did not feel the Navy offered much opportunity to "see the world". Hence I went to San Francisco and entered the Marconi Wireless School. I received a commercial license from Major Dillon and began a new life on commercial ships - everything from oil barges (Standard Oil # 91) to passenger ships (the SS City of Los Angeles/KOZC, at that time the largest and heaviest traffic

ship on the Pacific.

My first commercial job was aboard an old Pacific Mail boat, SS GEORGE W. ELDER/WRT. Equipment was "Halcon", for Haller-Cunningham. I was elated to have a job on short notice. George Haller, Chief Operator and part owner, gave me \$50 per month, a very good salary for those days. Regretfully, I knew little about the ship. I found out after sailing that the ship's generator did not provide enough current to run my set without dimming the lights on the whole ship. The Chief Engineer pulled the switch on the wireless room and the only time I could get 'juice' to run the set was to request it through the Captain. Secondly, the shaft on the motor-generator did not work. I had quite a job fixing it as I had little experience with motors. To top the experience off, when I returned to San Francisco and went for my pay, I found that Mr. Haller had died. I did eventually get my pay, but I also learned a good lesson the hard way. I was a 'one-tripper' on WRT, but I was still resolved to see the world. A shipboard R/O at that time could almost pick the country or route he wanted, even if the pay wasn't all that great.

During the years from 1920 to 1929, with some interludes, I sailed on many ships: freighters, tankers, barges and passenger liners. These berths included ships of Standard Oil, the U.S. Shipping Board, Matson, Grace Line, Pacific Mail, Admiral Line and numerous steam schooners of different house flags.

During my shoreside interludes, I became very active as a youthful entrepreneur in the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas. In 1922 I opened the fourth retail radio store in downtown L.A. at 624 West 6th Street under the name of Radio Concert Equipment Co. I had a good contract and source for vacuum tubes with the Atlantic - Pacific Tube Co. Many dealers in all of California were building sets to sell and needed tubes to complete

their sets; hence I was a good, reliable source for this very vital element. My retail trade grew so large I decided to enter the wholesale field, which I did at 922 S. Flower Street. I sold my retail store to one of my employees who had connections in the movie field. The name of my wholesale business was the Radio Wholesale Electric Co. I soon outgrew my Flower Street store, so I built a building at 1111 Wall Street. An old friend of mine, R.B. Yale, later took over this business when I established a chain of three retail stores, one each in Glendale, Long Beach and Hollywood. The latter was named after my first store, Radio Concert Equipment Co. of Hollywood. I had quite a good following with movie folks and sold their first sets to people like William S. Hart, Harold Lloyd, Douglas Fairbanks and several others.

During my sojourn in L.A., I also established the Los Angeles Radio Institute on South Hope Street in the Schools/College building. I leased some RMCA and Federal equipment and place settings for 80 operator-training positions. George Knudson, an old friend who had sailed on the S.S. ROSE CITY, came to work for me as Supervisor. I recall one of the men who came to us on a weekly basis was Jennings B. Dow who was conducting experiments for the U.S. Navy on the ultra-high frequencies.

As a supplement to my school, I was also appointed by Fred Mangelsdorf (who had supervision of the West Coast) as Director of Ship Owners Radio Supply Co. (SORS) for Southern California. I was able to staff ships with Radio Officers from our school when needed. It worked out very well.

Another involvement I had during these years was a partnership with Jay Peters, who ran a radio store on South Main Street. We started a company named the "On Location Wireless Communications Co". We built two transceivers at the time (Continued, Page 3)

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and offered the movie industry the service of providing "on location" contact with their main office. Our first experience was with Fox Studios which I recall was near the crossroads of Hollywood Blvd. and Vine St. in Los Angeles. The "on location" in this instance was a desert scene being filmed in the sand hills and mesa east of El Centro. Jay was at the field site and had some trouble on the Planked Road which could only be negotiated single file, with turnouts about every quarter mile. Conditions were not the best, but we did handle several messages from Camp Lejone to Fox Film HQ. Later, these transceivers were used for the first links when KOA - Denver and KOB - Albuquerque were being established.

During my time in the Los Angeles area, I ran a weekly column in "Radio Doings" which carried broadcast program listings. I also appeared on radio station KHJ, Los Angeles Times, then supervised by John Dagget. On one of our weekly programs we ran a contest on the number of programs that could be picked up if listeners alternated between KHJ and WOR, the Bamberger Department Stores station in Newark, NJ. We gave prizes for the longest distance received and the largest number of our KHJ broadcasts heard and verified.

In 1926, in Los Angeles, I received amateur operator and station licenses with call sign 6BE, later W6BE. I had a vacuum tube rig with 150 watts input to a single-wire vertical antenna.

Longing for the marine life in the late 1920s, I went back to San Francisco and started working for Richard "Dick" Johnstone who was Chief Operator for Radiomarine Corporation of America (RMCA), a division of RCA. As Marine Radio Inspector (MRI), I helped install many radio stations aboard ships sold to the Japanese. By then the law

required a radio installation aboard all ships prior to their departure. Some of us thought later that most of the metal on these ships was converted for use in Japan's war machine and perhaps shot back at us.

During this period, I stayed with many other operators at "The Dog House" at 480 Pine Street. Its official name was the Alpine Hotel and nearly all ops who were 'on the beach' waiting for their next assignment stayed there. At that time I had an arrangement with Dick Johnstone that if I got a call on with little advance notice to make a short trip, I would be available. The law required operators aboard all passenger ships. If the assigned op failed to show at sailing time, Dick would call me at the ship where I was working or at the hotel so I could make a "pierhead jump" to join the ship needing an operator and about to depart, sometimes with several hundred passengers aboard. Often it was an Admiral Line boat to Los Angeles or Portland, Oregon.

My last sea assignment was a 1928 "around South America" cruise on the SS CITY OF LOS ANGELES/KOZC on her maiden voyage. The trip was sponsored by the Chambers of Commerce of Honolulu and San Francisco. Reportedly we had nearly a hundred millionaires on board. The passengers brought us letters to send by wireless to the folks back home telling about beautiful sunsets, the antics of dolphins and such. We were glad to get the traffic, but it gave us operators headaches. The problem was that many South and Central American coast stations kept very poor watches. We did have a 5kW Federal Arc transmitter and when conditions were right we could clear traffic. But we always had some messages "on the hook". On this voyage we monitored station KUP in San Francisco on HF. Ron Martin, one of SOWP's early members, was Chief of the facility.

My U.S. Government employment began in 1928 with the Aeronautical

Division, Bureau of Lighthouses. This later became the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA). I had qualified as an aircraft pilot in 1924 and did considerable flying during a 35-year career with CAA, which is now the FAA. My many assignments included Chief of field stations at Big Springs, Texas, (which I built and commissioned) San Diego (relief), Burbank (relief), Pasco WA., Reno NV and Denver which I commissioned. Then I served as Deputy Chief in the newly established Fifth Region at Kansas City, Regional Chief of Communications Division, Chicago and Deputy Chief, Communications Division, Washington, DC.

My final CAA assignments included that of Chief of the Operations Branch in the Seattle Region and after consolidation of all the western states by President Eisenhower, I was chosen as Chief of Technical Services and Planning, with headquarters in the Los Angeles Regional office. I felt I left a legacy of achievement in closing my service with the CAA that benefited the flying public and the CAA itself. Two of my pet projects were well on the road to achievement which included the adoption of direction-finding service on VHF and UHF throughout the system and the indoctrination of "Flight Assistance Service" to the flying public at all field stations. Several other services I promoted are still in use and are a source of great satisfaction to me in retirement.

I retired in 1958 and we moved to Santa Barbara so that daughter Mary Jane could attend the University of California there. Having been extremely active during my government career, I promptly involved myself with several activities. As a 'throwback' to my seagoing days, I became Vice President of the Freighter Travel Club of America. During the late 1950's and 1960's, many people enjoyed ocean travel on cargo ships that carried accommodations for 12 or more passengers. (Continued, Page 4)

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We had meetings and picnics that were well attended. One meeting I held at the Jack Tar hotel in San Francisco was attended by nearly 200 members. It took four buses to tour members along the waterfront. We went aboard several large ships in the harbor.

It was about this time (1958) that I started the Society of Airway Pioneers. My proposal was enthusiastically supported by many of my old colleagues and associates and membership began to skyrocket. On top of this, my wife and I started a travel agency called Key Travel Service. We suddenly found that nearly every moment of our time was scheduled and it was difficult to preempt time even for family living. We sold the agency. All this activity should probably have been a lesson, but in 1968 I started the Society Of Wireless Pioneers. I received the active support of many members who helped carry the work load.

One of my close friends, Nelson Barritt and his wife took over the Society of Airway Pioneers about 1972. "Nels" has taken his last flight some time ago. The mantle of running SOAP was accepted by Leon Daugherty when he retired as Director of FAA's Western Region. Subsequently he moved to Friday Harbor, WA in Puget Sound. But due to health problems last year, he had to be relieved. The Airways Society is in good hands, however, and membership remains at a substantial level.

When our daughter finished college, we moved to Santa Rosa, CA., where I found many old friends of my seagoing days had thrown out their anchors. Ruth and I had made a four-month sweep of the West Coast, from Vancouver Island to Tucson, AZ., spending a bit of time in each place surveying areas we thought would provide the "best living". We chose Santa Rosa as it was a very firendly little city of 25,000. I found I

had been preceded by our Treasurer, Lorin De Merritt and our Society's second Secretary-Treasurer, Jerry Whittaker, who has since become a Silent Key. In addition to these fine friends, I began to locate former shipmates living in the area. This gave me the idea that we should start an organization of these old "Jack-Tars", most of them still "Knights of the Key" via their amateur stations.

Thus, with about 40 names and addresses of former seagoing ops in the area, I sent an invitation to attend a luncheon at the Green Mill in Cotati, about eight miles south of Santa Rosa, more convenient for those from the San Francisco area. We had a very fine turnout and I proposed we start a local organization to help preserve the fine traditions of the many wireless men who had lost their lives on ships in distress and maintain for posterity a record of their deeds and bravery.

It seemed that after that first get-together and my first bulletin, the Society started to mushroom and it was difficult to keep up with its growing membership. We elected Richard "Dick" Johnstone our first President. He was perhaps one of the best known individuals in the wireless operating field on the West Coast. Almost every operator from the region had at one time or another called on him for an assignment. He was extremely active in the early SOWP, especially on the air from his amateur station. He was known as "RJ" which was his 'sine' back in 1907. His call later was K6FZ. He became a Silent Key October 9, 1972. He had become a Commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve and left a legacy of achievement and good will. We named our SOWP West Coast - Pacific CW net the Richard Johnstone net, which he had started in October, 1968, in his honor.

We have had many other "achievers" who have left their mark on the

Society. Many of their experiences and anecdotes have been recorded over the years by myself, "Ye Ed", who assumed the nomdeplume "The Ancient Mariner". He has no genealogical relationship with "Sinbad the Sallor", but there is a close bond of kinsmanship in his love of the world's oceans and seas and the lore of centuries associated with things nautical.

Early members of SOWP were fortunate to receive our original publications. We issued nearly 100 releases, bulletins and papers on many subjects. More recently, our newspaper *Sparks Journal* had a press run of 30 issues, each with 32 to 48 pages of historic material printed on book-stock. It was tabloid in form and was mailed worldwide at low expense using second class postal rates. I have hopes that its publication will be resumed, for we have an abundance of material ready for printing and release.

During 1985 I think I stretched my endurance to the breaking point. During that year I published four editions of *Sparks Journal*, a membership Directory and a separate Callbook listing our radio amateur members and nets. In producing the latter, I received important help from Charles Coleman, who worked on its pasteup and overall contents. However, the workload associated with meeting deadlines literally burned me out and I had to phase out most of my work and responsibilities.

Fortunately for the Society, Paul N. Dane agreed to take over the workload as Executive Secretary. Member Waldo T. Boyd agreed to issue an interim publication, *QTC - SOWP NEWSLETTER* which filled the gap and was very interesting. Since Mr. Boyd had some heavy commitments, he phased out publishing the newsletter. In 1989, our current newsletter, *The World Wireless Beacon*, began publication. Theodore K. "Ted" Phelps is its editor and publisher.

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Mr. Boyd has agreed to continue work on our growing membership list to keep it current. Also, he was re-sponsible for generating the computer programs for the 1992 Wireless Register. Without his major efforts, there would have been no Directory. He has also indicated that he might be able to resume the publication of SPARKS JOURNAL on an annual basis. This is being coordinated with Paul Dane, our Exec. Director and President.

On a personal note, this is a rather sad time. I observed my 91st birthday on February 6 and I am continuing on a day-by-day basis. Father Time or Mother Nature has indeed treated me very well over the years. But this cannot be expected to prevail forever. My eyes have been giving me considerable trouble. I can no longer sit here at my "mill" and bang out copy as I did several years ago. It was most enjoyable.

Nevertheless, in closing, I must express my sincere thanks to those who have extended such wonderful help and assistance over the years. While I can modestly claim a small bit of the appreciation and thanks members have sent, I think it is the magnificent team effort of our present staff that has kept the Society going. They are dedicated to the legacy and heritage of our organization. I am referring to Paul N. Dane, Lorin G. DeMerritt, Ted Phelps, Walt Boyd, our net managers and the members of our Board of Governors.

I would like to invite all my old friends to drop me a line now and then...that makes me feel wonderful! I will not guarantee to reply, as my days are now pretty well over and this typewriter talks back to me quite often - and the language isn't sweet and gentle any more.

So, - 73 from



William A. Breniman