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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 crummy-looking wireless room not much over a crib-size stall. The one-half KIlotwatt quenched-spark transmitter with its loose-inductance coils and the ancient carbondrum crystal sliding tuner was cramped against the forward bulkhead. The senior operator, whose name I’ve forgotten, was a crisp 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 “YW” wireless operator, I was a greenhorn amateur on my first commercial adventure. Twisting the big tuning 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 salina crystal, I grabbed a pencil and nervously translated this “mushy” signal. Lo and behold! I never heard such a hairy word. WAJ WAl de WAJ WAJ (QSK) 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. Whee! I saw liquid leaking from the rim of the quench gap. The high-frequency was arcing all over the place. The incoming signal was so loud, I thought the dampness would disappear. My hands were all tied...between the ugly catwhisker and the damping gap, I was all butterflies. 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. WAJ WAl de WAJ ga K...The 600 meter distance 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” Pos at Paying High. Headed for Skagway, Alaska. The “China boy” operator slanting with glee.

The Romance of Radio Telegraph

The radio shack was located on the top boat deck midshipств, 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, he asked, “What is that big onion for?” I quickly answered, “Oh, that; that is to make the signals stronger.”

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 on a small vessel. 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 to the transmitter. I was soon to find out the purpose of the onion.

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. Our instructor had never learned this for he had not learned how to make the signals strong. He, too, 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?” I 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 foolishly tied an onion to the antenna lead-in.