



With the Sea-going Op's.

The Old Chief Speaks

The views of a veteran coastal marine operator as told to the author.

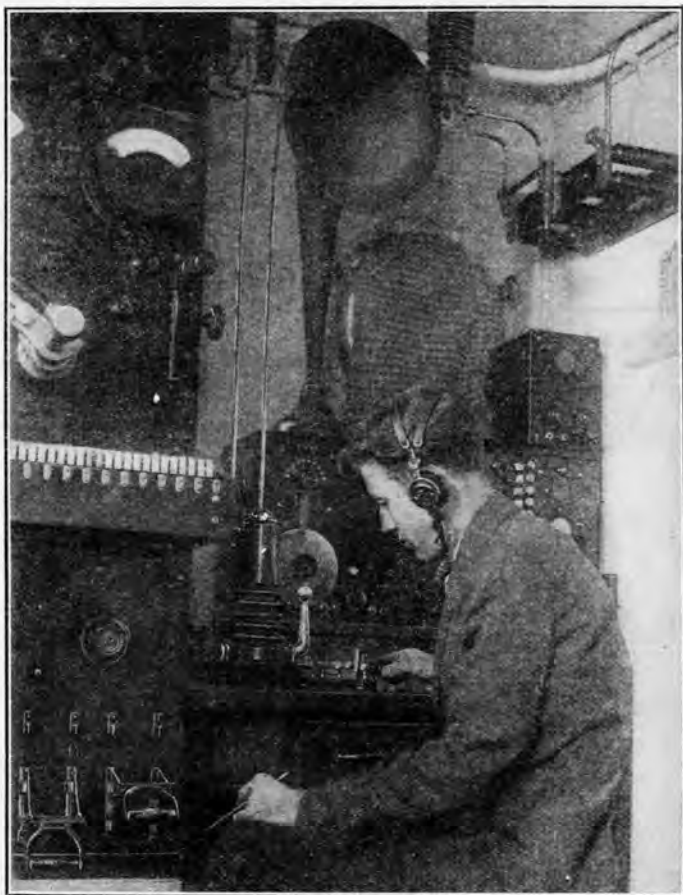
By **HOWARD S. PYLE**

Former Assistant U. S. Radio Supervisor

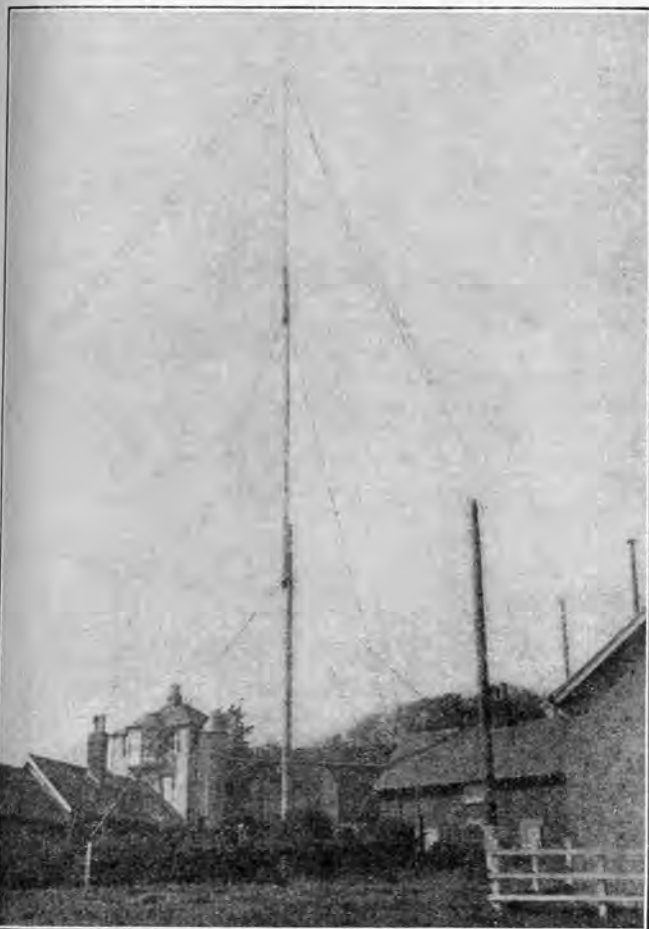
I stepped from out the storm into the station building of one of our modern, high powered coastal marine stations and stamped the clinging snow from my feet. It was several minutes before I could clear my vision sufficiently from the effects of the damp, heavy flakes to shake hands with the operator in charge and accept his cordial invitation to remove my overcoat and draw a chair up to the cheery wood-burner, glowing with a welcome ruddiness.

I glanced cautiously around the two small rooms open to my view. One, the manager's office, contained the conventional office fittings, plus a buzzer and sounder outfit with keys, but the other held my gaze, for within its small confines was seemingly everything known to marine communication. The powerful vacuum tube transmitter at one end—the spark emergency set at the other and in between, a table heavily loaded with shining receivers, keys, control boards and telegraph instruments. Directly in the center of this awe-inspiring collection of

equipment sat the operator, at the time busily engaged in copying a radiogram from a vessel far out at sea, while both sounders frantically chattered and the telephone insistently clamored for attention. I expressed my surprise to the Chief, that one man could handle such a myriad of communication systems at the same time and laughingly he replied, "Oh yes. It is not infrequent that our men must copy from a ship; tell each wire to 'wait a minute' and take the telephone receiver from the hook,



Stanley Rodman Shumway, operator aboard the lightship "Five Fathom," stationed off Cape May. "Five Fathom" is the newest Radio Beacon of the Lighthouse Service. © United.



View of the new radio compass station at Niton on the Isle of Wight which works in conjunction with the coast guards and lighthouses along the Channel.

calling a quick 'Just a moment' into the mouthpiece, all at about the same instant. But it is all in the day's work for them—just a matter of experience."

After a short exchange of pleasantries, I came to the subject of my visit. "Chief," I said, "there is considerable controversy going on among the marine operators, as you doubtless know, as to just what is wrong with the commercial game. Many of them have expressed their opinions through the columns of RADIO NEWS, and we'd now like to hear

the views of the coastal service men. Surely the shore stations must exert a definite influence on the marine situation."

His face sobered, and for a moment I was afraid I had touched a subject distasteful to this grizzled veteran of the key, but taking a few slow pulls at his stubby corn-cob, he slowly turned to me and said, "Pyle, I'm going to tell you a bit of our troubles with the sea-going boys; perhaps you can find a possible reason why there IS something wrong with the commercial game today." And taking a hitch closer to the fire, and refilling his pipe, he began:

"I've been in this game about 16 years now. I started way back in the old United days, when the proper wave was the one with which you could raise your man and the call letters a matter of company choice. I broke in aboard ship—a South American passenger vessel, and at that time, we were accepted as steady, sensible ships' officers. Our duties were strictly wireless—beyond that we were required to do nothing. Our place was

(Continued on page 1216)



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The Old Chief Speaks

(Continued from page 1187)

the wireless cabin, our quarters and the mess hall. We were permitted the same liberties as the other officers—a discreet mingling with the passengers in off time, but upholding the dignity of the ship at all times.

"There were no youngsters among us then—that is, we were all between 22 or 23 and 30, with a few older men. Those of the younger men were carefully chosen and were boys who were capable of conducting themselves in a dignified, manly fashion. They were easier to find at that age then, than among our present day modern 'sheik' class.

"Well, I stayed with the old ship for two years, and never once did I overstep the bounds of ship discipline—had I done so, I would probably be selling boots and shoes today. At the end of that period, I was assigned to a berth at one of the few shore stations then existing.

"It was not long after this that shore stations began to sprout up at numerous points along the coasts. The Navy became very active in this way, and numerous naval vessels were rapidly being equipped. The commercial interests were slower, but soon afterward came the *Republic-Florida* disaster, which opened the eyes of the steamship men to the possibilities of wireless and it was not long before a mad scramble commenced for equipment and operators. Apparatus could be turned out readily enough by merely increasing production at the factories, but operators were far from plentiful. The operator situation became acute directly afterward, when the radio communication laws went into effect, introducing Continental code and requiring a license. Many of the older men dropped out—they did not propose to go through a course of study to prepare them for jobs that they had already held satisfactorily for several years. Then the influx began. Young fellows diligently devoted themselves to code practice, hung around the coastal stations and in devious ways managed to gain a sufficient knowledge to pass the Government examination. Armed with an impressive appearing certificate and full of confidence, they applied for employment and were immediately assigned—a number to large first class liners. Until then, we older men had maintained our reputation for conscientious and industrious application to our business, but the younger element, typically 'Young America,' were determined to miss nothing, and immediately took over rights that were not theirs. Craving company, the radio cabin, formerly maintained as a telegraph office for the transaction of bona fide commercial communication business, became a gathering place for the socially inclined young people and their more curious elders. Frequently the Captain would come to the cabin to hand in a message, and was annoyed to find frivolity the rule and his message accepted with an airy nonchalance that seemed to say, 'Yes, yes. This will receive attention at some later time. I am occupied now.'

"It was only natural that such a condition should embitter the Captains, for years accustomed to the strict discipline of the sea, and a dignified conduct of all the departments of the vessel under their control. Captains grumbled among themselves and to the owners. Operators on shore leave painted highly colored pictures of the wondrous life they were leading aboard ship; how the Captain was 'working for them' so to speak, and in general inflaming the youth of the

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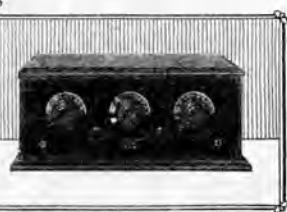
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tors. The natural result was that hordes of young fellows got into the game, and soon each employing company had long waiting lists. There was another effect that was even more damaging than the over-riding or discipline by the operators. With such a number to choose from, and the majority craving an assignment for the 'glory' of the job—pay was secondary; it was only natural that the wages, after a short upward rise, should naturally decline. This received a feeble protest, but in view of the eager desire of the numerous applicants for ships, the action was not of sufficient strength to have an appreciable effect, and it was not long before the real old-timers quit in disgust, leaving the field to the newer element.

"Then came the World War. Thousands of the boys enlisted in one branch of the service or another; hundreds of new ships were built and again a serious shortage of operators was found to exist. The wage scale rose in leaps and bounds until finally a goodly number of the old hands returned to the game. Meanwhile numerous commercial and government schools were turning radio operators out by the thousands, but so hurriedly were they put through their courses that they were barely able to handle a light trick. The bars were down and the slightest knowledge of the code secured a man an excellent berth. Many of the operators then employed had not yet reached the shaving age, and a goodly number were in knickerbockers!

"At the close of hostilities, we were left with a large merchant fleet and thousands of operators—some good, more bad, and the great majority just mediocre. It was essential that the radio cabins be manned at once, for with the close of the war, many of the older operators returned to other lines of endeavor. But this only served to leave an enormous number of new operators—boys who had left school to enter the fighting forces and consequently had picked up wireless as their first job. They had no other to return to, and, therefore, our post-war supply of operators was largely drawn from the ranks of these boys.

"Many had rubbed elbows with some of the newer pre-war men, and had listened to their glowing tales of life aboard a passenger vessel. The word passed, and as these boys were assigned, they immediately attempted to take possession of the social activities of the ship. For several years thereafter, and even at the present time, the turn-over in operators has been terrific. Where, in the old days, we often remained on one vessel for a year or more, the modern Romeo of the sea makes one trip, resigns either on his own volition or by request of a greatly harassed skipper, and goes blithely on his way to conquer new fields.

"Just how this affects us of the coastal stations, may be a bit hazy to you. Let me explain: A coastal marine station is dependent upon the traffic tolls accruing from the messages handled for its existence. At best, it is a gambling game, as we never know just how much the traffic tolls will total each 24 hours. Consequently, we must keep expenses at a minimum to justify our existence. This means, that where we might possibly need two men on watch at a time—one on the radio circuit and one on the land wires—we must endeavor to reduce the number by picking good men who can handle the whole job. Again, to make a paying proposition of a station, they must work fast and accurately. This means that when a vessel has a message for us we want it snappy, with no 'dilly-dallying' around, useless signals, much testing, etc. We want the message and want to be through with that ship so that we can turn and get rid of the business to the land line as expeditiously as possible. Similarly, when we have business for the ship, we expect our calls

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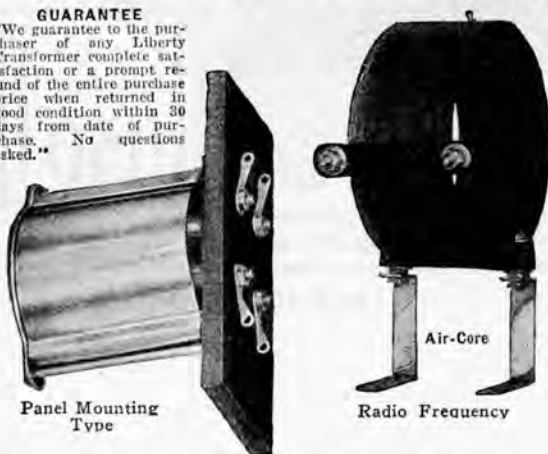


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of time and expect an operator to take our traffic at a decent rate of speed and with a minimum of repetition. Tell me, then, when an operator has a roomful of giggling, bright-eyed young ladies and witty (?) males, how is it possible for him to handle traffic in any kind of snappy shape? It can't be done; the shore station must lose precious minutes and meanwhile, 'Sparks' flashes meaning winks at some little mix while guessing at what the coastal station just said.

"We have a further reflection of this slipshod method of conducting a legitimate commercial message business in the lack of ability of great numbers of our sea-going operators to grasp the fundamentals of traffic handling. If you have listened to marine communication lately, you'll note that there is a deplorable lack of good senders today. Either they have not properly learned to form the characters of the code, or they have attempted to develop an individual style, or 'personal swing' as they are pleased to term it. This is a most despicable habit and stamps one as a 'ham operator' quicker than any other practice. It is the pride of our coastal stations that we use the Continental code just as it was written, and I'll risk bragging a bit to say that to listen to the clean cut, snappy characters that our coastal boys turn out is a pleasure.

"We suffer all around. The sea-going fellows are for the most part young single bucks who don't give a hang for anything save a place to eat, sleep and a little spending money. Their lack of co-operation means much to us of the shore stations, who are mostly all married and have families. If the sea-going operators are going to play around and make us lose valuable minutes that we might devote to taking traffic from other vessels, we aren't going to get as much business each day as we might, and if we can't show good profit returns, our salary suffers and that works a hardship on ourselves and families.

"Maybe the youngsters don't think. Probably they don't, but we certainly wish there was some way of waking them up, for it means the continued degradation of the former respected position of wireless operator aboard ship, and has even now resulted in classing them with deck hands and oilers, and even to assigning them deck duties in their off time in a number of instances! And they ask—"What is the matter with the game?" It's they themselves—not another thing! When the boys realize this and commence to conduct themselves in a manner that will be a credit to them—really learn 'operating' and not a conglomeration of stuff to just get them by—then their standing will rise—but not until then! It is going to take them a long while to get back where we started—to win the respect of the steamship men—and they'd best start now.

"There's a great deal of blame due the radio schools too, for conditions as they are. It is beyond me to understand why the schools, with few exceptions, do not include a course in traffic handling and conduct aboard ship as part of the curriculum. Doubtless it's because such knowledge is not necessary to acquire a license, and they are not over-anxious to expand their course to include any more than necessary for the tuition fee. A number of schools do not even have a practical commercial man in an executive capacity—merely promoters who hire a few former operators to carry on. What they need in each school is a man who has been through the mill—ship operator, coastal man and such."

Knocking out his pipe and throwing a huge pine log in the heater, he concluded: "There. That may not be what you want, but it's my sentiments and those of my men. If you can do any good by publishing them in a magazine, you're welcome to it."



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Chief?" I inquired. "You've dealt only with our own men." "Yes, and that's all I need to mention, too," the old timer shot back. "If our boys were as good as the Limys, the Frogs and the Spiks—well, we wouldn't have a word to say. Those foreigners are officers on their vessels, and they attend strictly to business. They may not be so much on the key, and a good fast sender can often put them 'under the table' but if we ask them for 'WA force' they GIVE us the word after force—not a bunch of question marks and 'QTA please.' We don't hear any useless stuff come out of their gaps and they get the stuff through. If all our business was with foreign shipping we'd pile up a neat profit."

I thanked the old Chief, and bundled into my overcoat preparatory to again facing the icy blast. The wind had died down a bit and dusk was closing in as I stepped out in the deep snow drifts. It was quite a long walk to the tiny railroad station and I mused on what I had just heard. It was worth considerable thought. It would seem to me that, were I back in a ship's cabin and the words of the old Chief were brought to me, I'd be just a bit ashamed to read my comparison with the foreign operators. I would be inclined to take stock of myself and see if perhaps I wasn't one of the cogs that was not properly meshing with the shore station machine in the greatest game in the world. Give it a thought—are you a contributing factor in the gradual decline of the American radio operator afloat, or are you a valuable asset to the game?

THIS RADIO PROPOSITION

By J. E. HARA

Lately many of the older operators have been heard to voice complaint with the conditions under which they labor. And it seems to us that their dissatisfaction is well founded at that. It is only the new man in the game who shows any content, and that is readily understood. He does not intend to remain long in the game, so while he is seeing the world, as per the advertisements of the school he attended, he can put up with anything, temporarily. But this is decidedly unfair to the man whose profession is that of tapping a key for his bread, butter and bunk.

There is room for considerable change. First, radio operating should be placed on a solid foundation, that is, advancement should be accorded to experience, ability and ambition. It is entirely wrong for a new man, just fresh from school, to draw the same pay that an older man and decidedly more capable one receives. Nor should a new man be given a ship that an older and more experienced one really rates.

After promotion had been well organized, then a decent maximum remuneration should be set, or better still a legitimate compensation and bonus for years of service.

In this way the youth, who in his teens bounces joyfully out of the Ham factory and realizes that he is in a game where he can get somewhere, if he settles down to the routine, will be an asset to the game. But in the present chaos that exists a young fellow knows he can get nowhere and after a year or two, in which he tries to see as much of the world as possible, he casts the business up.

One of the worst practices known today is the fashion of wedging young fledglings into openings that require one man. The boy is unused to going to sea, to radio operating in its finer points, or to the multitude of little things that count to make up a successful and efficient operator.

He gets outside where many stations are buzzing away, many far too fast for him to understand because he is excited, so fear-