



512

THE SMUGGLERS

by H. W. Dickow

The wireless cabin on shipboard presented an excellent hiding place for a scant few operators who once engaged in the dope-running trade between the Orient and San Francisco. There is corruption in almost every facet of human endeavor, and the rewards are highest for those who assume the greatest risks. Neither the U.S. Customs Service nor the wireless operating fraternity was immune to temptation.

The wireless transmitting and receiving apparatus offered a convenient and unsusceptible means of storage for a considerable quantity of opium. Tins of the illicit drug were hidden in the large wooden cases which housed the transmitting transformer, after the beeswax in which the transformer was completely surrounded had first been melted. The tins of the drug were then put into the case and covered with an adequate layer of wax. The cabinet of the receiving set, with its inner parts removed, provided another excellent hiding place. Sometimes a dummy receiver was carried as a spare, solely for secreting a number of tins of opium. The large metal cases containing the voltmeters, ammeters, and other indicating instruments with their mechanisms removed, provided additional hiding space. And in one instance the armature of the motor-generator was removed and in its place a considerable quantity of the drug was stored.

The contraband was removed from the vessel after it began its unloading operations at the dock. The heavy wireless transformer, motor-generator, and other parts would be lifted by crane and transferred to the longshoremen who would load it onto a waiting vehicle. Then it would be taken to the repair shops of the wireless operating company, but enroute the opium would be removed by an accomplice who sidetracked the shipment to a designated place on its way to the repair depot.

The scant few wireless operators who profited from this venture were never apprehended. They left their ships on arrival and departed for places unknown.

The ruse of using the transformer case as a depository for the opium tins was uncovered by the shop superintendent when he found the beeswax missing. His suspicions aroused, he notified the head office of the operating company. Warnings were issued to wireless operators to the extent that all containers would be opened before removal from shipboard, thus bringing to a halt this once lucrative practice.

An innocent victim of a dope-running plot was Leslie E. Grogan, wireless operator on the Standard Oil tanker J.A. Moffett, who spent all of his adult life at sea.

In 1915, the year of the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, the J.A. Moffett dropped anchor in the Bay off the Fair Grounds, waiting to be boarded by the customs officers and doctors before proceeding to the pier of the tank farm to take on another cargo of oil.

She carried a large cache of opium which one of her crew members had stashed in the compartment under the couch in the wireless room where it could be easily and quickly detected. It is probable that the owner of the drug had considered the wireless room inviolate - immune from customs inspection, yet it would be one of the first places to be searched by Uncle Sam's inspectors.

Entering the wireless cabin, the opium was discovered by a mere glance into the compartment under the couch. Grogan was placed under arrest.

He was escorted to the U.S. Customs offices in San Francisco where formal charges against him were filed. He protested vigorously, to no avail. Wireless operators on all ships from the Orient were suspect.

Grogan pleaded his case realistically. Said he: "Do you believe me to be so stupid as to hide a small fortune in opium in a place where you could find it without even a search? If I wanted to smuggle the drug into San Francisco I could have done so in one of a score of ingenious ways...but never in an unlocked compartment beneath my couch. Please give me credit for having this much sense."

In due time the culprit, a seaman, was apprehended. Grogan was released.

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Story from unpublished book "TALES OF THE WIRELESS PIONEERS" (BOOK 2 - Telegraphers & others I have known) by the late Henry W. Dickow, Honorary Member #1 and Member 3-SSGP. Mr. Dickow donated his publications to Bill Breniman before becoming a silent key on April 17, 1971. The 'Ancient Mariner' is publishing them for enjoyment of Society members.