That “sinking” feeling- Edition #12
2021 Virus Edition #12

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This is the twelth issue of a history hobby e-letter. Share it and pass it around. It’s free. It’s for fun. It’s read from coast to coast.

Go to www.relivingradio.com for past issues of the Bald Letter. Help yourself and forward them to others. They’re FREE.

The Bald Letter is the work of Dick Karman who is solely responsible for its content. He would welcome your comments, complaints and corrections. dick@karmans.net

As the Bald Letter continues into the new year, readers have been kind in their comments and contributions. Your editor and his love of history will carry us through another month or two of reading and reminiscing. Read on and see what radio was, not so very long ago.

Thanks to all who made this issue of the Bald Letter possible; especially the California Historical Radio Society archive.

The Bald Letter is distributed on the 15th of each month, Lord willing.

You say, “Today or tomorrow we will go here or spend a year there, and carry on business” You do not know what will happen tomorrow! What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord is willing, we will live and do this or that.”

James 4:13-15
THE TITANIC
AN INTERVIEW WITH A RADIO OPERATOR

In 1987, your editor, with the help of the California Historical Radio Society (CHRS), transcribed an audio tape of a 1965 interview. On this tape (copied many times over) was the voice of Joe Danko, a radio operator in New York City in 1912. The audio copy was distributed by CHRS as part of its audio newsletter in 1987, and after transcription your editor included it in the Call Letter of the NW Vintage Radio Society (Summer of 1987). The interview is a revealing piece of history. Unfortunately, no other reference can be found of the interview or of Mr. Danko for authentication.

(Any errors in transcription and spelling are purely the fault of your editor.)

On the Titanic's maiden voyage, the legend goes that she struck an iceberg which tore a "gash in her hull over 300 feet long". We know now that this isn't so. But no matter what the cause, the Titanic sunk on April 15, 1912. Movie makers, and thrill seekers raise many questions. Her remains being found by Woods Hole Explorations only answered some of the questions. Many will go unanswered. Some will be answered in documents like this taped interview with Joe Danko who was working wireless station NAH in New York on the morning after:

[1965 interview with Radio Operator Joe Danko]

"On March 1st [1911] after four months of practical machine shop, and shipboard electrical instruction, and only two weeks of wireless theory, I was suddenly assigned to radio duty at the yard radio station NAH. The station boasted of a Stone 15 KW 120 cycles rotary gap transmitter with tapped primary and secondary Helixes for changing wave lengths. The wireless specialty IP-76 slide tuner could be used with a choice of detector crystals, such as parakin, iron pirites, galena, carborundum, and so forth. The
headset was a novel wireless specialty type with adjustable magnets. The T-type antenna was supported by two wooden masts about 150 feet high and an elaborate copper plate ground system was buried under the station and around the station located between the two masts.

"The original open spark gap fed by battery actuated vibrator coils, like the popular Ford ignition coils, followed by the 50 or 60 cycled powered induction coils, were gradually giving way to the 120 to 500 cycle rotary gap and disk quenched gaps of Stone, Marconi, Kilbourne Clarke, Chris Lowensteine, Fessenden and others. And the transmitting condensers usually consisting of tin foil sheets sandwiched between glass photographic plates, had defaulted to banks of copper coated Leyden jars, or Dubelair encased mica and foil condensers. The coherer had been replaced by the liquid faraden with its fine silver coated platinum wire, in contact with a tiny cup of dilute nitric acid, often going in and out of contact with the roll of the ship. But the Flemming valve, an adaptation of the Edison effect and simple stress of crystal detector were just coming into their own.

"The Titanic was equipped with a 5 KW disk discharger and a Flemming Valve receiver. Despite such improvements, the normal range of shipboard transmitters of that early period was rather limited: about 500 miles for the huge Titanic, and around one hundred miles for the Carpathia class. Therefore as the collision with the iceberg occurred about mid-Atlantic, the actual details of the tragedy were quite slow in reaching the shore.

"It was normal practice for Marconi equipped vessels to transact traffic with Marconi land stations; the Telefunken DD ships with TWT the Telefunken German controlled station, and so forth. Never-the-less, there was a gentlemanly agreement
among our group of stations around New York to assist one another in times of difficulty. There was OHX the New York Herald station at the Battery TWT, the Telefunken station at 11th and Broadway; MSC, the Marconi Station at Seagate; and WN on top of Wanamaker’s store for company business with the store in Philadelphia. It is believed that David Sarnoff was the operator of WN at this time. Then, too, there was dependable "Doc" Hudson, a fine amateur up on Riverside Drive. He and TWT were the DX hounds of that period, always competing for distance, and twitting one another to such an extent that on one occasion the German operator challenged Old Doc to a pistol duel. He didn't know that Doc was an expert munitions tester with the DuPont Powder Corporation until OHX gently broke the news to him. It was still a man's world, "BR" (before regulations). Words like Hell and dam could still be used without reprimand from the FCC.

"Normal scheduled placed me in the operator's chair at NAH on the 6 to midnight trick in the evening of Monday the fifteenth 1912. After routine official reports and contacts with Washington NAL, and other Naval stations, and revenue cutters, it was our duty to scan the ether waves for any unusual information regarding shipping, weather, signal reception, etc. The relief operator had not alerted me as to the events out in mid-Atlantic. All Monday morning of April 15th 1912 the Carpathia was busy plucking the living and the dead from the sea. And, after future exhaustive search until nightfall, set its course for New York.

"About 8:30 pm I heard faintly the steamship Carpathia calling the Marconi station MSC at Seagate. After several more insistent calls without reply from MSC, I called the ship and offer to relay the message. My offer was immediately accepted. Evidently NAH was the first and most convenient, under the circumstances, able to effect a readable two-way contact with the
vessel. Therefore, for the next hour or so, through the intermittent static and the bedlam of radio interference, we struggled with his message of over 800 words addressed to the New York office of the Associated Press via Western Union.

"Surprisingly the message contained the complete list of survivors of the Titanic, picked up that day by the Carpathia. After my final acknowledgement of the message, I immediately turned to our land wire circuits to the Western Union office in New York and relayed the message in "Morris", to the tune of the clickity clack of the sounder. Without interruption the Western Union operator copied my tired and sloppy fist at about 30 words per minute, finally correcting my word check from 805 to 808 due to some discrepancy in the method of handling the address count. He was certainly a real 'pro'. Sometime later Seagate came on the air, and I relayed the message to him for his disposition."

"...one state of this tragedy still haunts me. Early next day Tuesday, April 16th, we were advised that the cruisers USS Salem and USS Chester had been dispatched by presidential order to intercept and contact the Carpathia still far off shore. They were to ascertain the state of certain prominent passengers: John Jacob Aster, Isadora Strauss, Van Gugenheim, and particularly Major Archibald W. Butts, who was returning from Europe presumably with confidential information for President Wilson. Later it was confirmed that all had perished.

"The Salem and Chester made repeated efforts to contact the Carpathia, even with the aid of NAH, but without result. Earlier in the day I had intercepted a message from MSE at Seagate to the rescued Harold Bride as follows: "Hold your story for dollars in 4 figures. Signed, Sammish". Was this the reason for
Carpathia's continued silence, even ignoring presidential concerns?

"At the congressional investigation following the docking of the Carpathia, it was learned that the British Marconi company employed Jack Philips, the senior operator of the Titanic, at £6 Sterling approximately $28 per month; and Harold Bride, a second operator, at £4 Sterling, about $20 per month. This seemed like a paltry insurance premium for the potential safety of over 2,200 lives.

"As of this period, only four ships carried two operators. All other wireless equipped vessels, presumably for economic reasons, shipped only one. Of course a primary use of this new medium of communication was for company business and for its revenue value in public messages. It is doubtful that a 24 hour vigil could have saved all the lives as the rescue ships had been too far away. There were still many variable and unpredictable factors involved in a fair appraisal of the true insurance significance of wireless despite the famous Jack Binns S.O.S. episode of January 23, 1909 on a White Star liner Republic.

"It was also disclosed that Cottom of the Carpathia failed to acknowledge the calls from the cruisers Salem and Chester because the Navy operators used the American Morris Code while he was versed only in the Continental Code, despite the fact that there is a difference of only 11 letters between the two. This claim is questionable, because Navy operators, for the sake of uniformity, were drilled in the Continental code. Besides, I had offered to act as a relay station and could handle either code. All our pertinent station records were later requisitioned by Congress for this investigation.
"Admittedly many of the American wireless operators of that day had been dyed in the wool railroad telegraphers using the Morris Code. It was however almost essential for a land station man to be able to send and receive over air and land wire both Morris and Continental. The US revenue cutters Mohawk NRM and Seneca NRE had Morris men. Occasional we encountered a Navy former signalman who liked the dots & dashes of the "Arnord Blinker Code" [sic] thus adding to our confusion. A certain transition from the clickety-space-clack of the land wire sounder with its traditional Prince Albert tobacco can resonator to the more soothing dit-dat-buz of the wireless signal was also quite disturbing and confusing.

"The Titanic was reportedly unsinkable, with facilities for isolating any flooding or damaged compartment. Was Major Butts the possessor of highly secret and confidential information bearing on a darkening cloud between Great Britain and Germany with war actually declared 2 years later? Was the sinking of the Titanic opportunely accelerated by sabotage to prevent delivery of this confidential information carried by the President's emissary? And at the same time destroy England's new potentially high capacity troop carrier? It could be in light of the cloak and dagger international activities always in progress.

"The proceeding is a true and factual account of my connection with that tragic episode."

This transcript of the 1965 interview with wireless operator Joe Danko was made possible through the California Historical Radio Society News (Audio) Vol. 10 No. 3.

You can read the complete 1912 Senate Committee report on the Titanic Disaster (right) on the U.S. Senate History site: https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/TitanicReport.pdf
Old Time Radio Quiz

Compiled by Reliving Radio of Portland, OR


Soap Operas

1. In 1943 Earle Stanley Gardner ran a weekday afternoon soap opera-like series on CBS for more than a decade. What was its name?

2. Who was the creator and writer of “Pepper Young’s Family” and “Rosemary?”

3. When the clock in the tower of Glen Falls Town Hall struck four it marked the beginning of what long-running soap opera?

Mysteries

1. In the radio show “Illustrated Press” what actor was originally cast for the hard-bitten roll of Steve Wilson?

2. What mysterious, omniscient, third-person narrator always opened the show with a scary, anonymous introduction that included, “I know many things, for I walk by night”?

3. Old Nancy accompanied by her black cat “Satan” was reported to have brought one of the first major horror shows to the air in the early 1930s. What was that show?

Quiz answers are discussed on page 14. Your comments and reminiscence are welcome, and encouraged – address them to the editor at Dick@karmans.net.
1935 saw the advent of metal tubes. Manufacturers were promoting them as indestructible. This is the October 1935 cover of Radio Craft Magazine. Take a look at the lineup on page 15.
2020 marked 130 years since the birth of Edwin Armstrong. Born in 1890, raised in Yonkers, New York, and son of the American Representative of the Oxford University Press, he changed the history of radio.

In 1913 Armstrong dramatically demonstrated his receiving set. A few days later David Sarnoff, thought to be a friend, declared the invention "the most remarkable receiving system in existence." The invention was indeed a new and novel approach to radio. The license royalties on his regenerative circuit made the inventor nearly $10,000 each month by 1922.

During World War I Armstrong envisioned his next major invention, the superhetrodyne. Though Fessenden was mixing frequencies as early as 1903, Armstrong developed its commercial practicality. Armstrong Laboratories continued to improve on the idea and the circuitry improved in selectivity and sensitivity. By 1922 Armstrong stumbled onto another
refinement in radio, the super regenerative receiver. It was this invention that brought Armstrong into partnership with RCA. He and David Sarnoff became partners, but not friends.

In 1933 there were over 19 million radio sets in homes; the New Deal had begun; Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany; and Armstrong introduced Frequency Modulated radio. Regrettably, radio was already entrenched. It was entrenched as A.M. and RCA wasn't about to change a good thing. Armstrong had sold off his portion of the RCA stock during the 1929 crash, so he resolved to introduce FM using his own bankroll. To shorten a very painful and long story, Armstrong had to fight with all of his wealth and physical well-being to hold onto the patent rights and royalties for FM.

Ken Padget on his biography* site summed it up this way:

“‘That's when RCA and the other corporations who now wanted FM but were unwilling to pay for it, delivered a staggering blow to Armstrong. They got the FCC to change the frequencies allocated to FM, so that all the FM sets in existence at that time were rendered useless. RCA then developed and patented its own FM specification that was essentially a rip-off of Armstrong’s idea. Armstrong sued of course, and RCA used its superior resources to keep the case tied up in the courts for years while they continued to make millions on products based on FM technology.’

The suits began in 1948 and continued for nearly two decades. In 1953, his health gone and his wealth dwindling, Armstrong all but admitted defeat to his lawyer. In January of the following year, Armstrong stepped off the twelfth-story balcony of his New York apartment to his death.

As much in his memory, as for the benefits, his estranged wife continued the 21 separate legal battles, primarily against RCA. Before 1954 ended RCA agreed to a 1 million dollar settlement. The patent infringement suits were settled in Armstrong's favor in 1959. The final suit against Motorola wasn't decided until 1967. Edwin H Armstrong, the genius, (having been dead for 13 years) had won his rightful place in the history books.

*https://agilewriter.com/Biography/Armstrong.htm
By Dick Karman

Many Bald Letter readers know that your editor loves vintage broadcasts and broadcasters as much as he loves old broadcast receivers. He has collected radio shows, news commentaries, and radio features since the 1960s.

If you’re familiar with names like Edward R Murrow, Joan Blondel, Jack Benny, Ernie Pyle, Norman Corwin, Edgar Bergen, Freeman Gosden, and so many more, you should be familiar with Martin Grams. His web site promotes his excellent “history” books, and there are too many to list here, but his Blog site is even more interesting. From day to day Martin tells us what is happening in the world of OTR and provides tidbits of history.

His blog entry after Thanksgiving (11-30-20) let us know about the passing of Charlie Summers. Who is Charlie? According to Martin “At a time when the [OTR] hobby needed communications and a transition to new collectors in the digital age, who was there? Charlie.” and when Bill Pfeiffer died unexpectedly in 1999, friends helped keep Bill’s entire endeavor alive through Charlie's personal website. We appreciate Martin letting us know about the passing of Charlie Summers.

A history example was in Martin Gram’s blog entry on March 16, 2012 regarding radio actor John Dehner: “I started out actually by studying art," recalled Dehner, . . . “and tried out for Disney in the art department, and they hired me.” . . [later I] “went into the Army, and when I came out I didn't want to be an artist. I wanted to be an actor. So I went into radio." By 1959 Dehner was indelibly identified as the radio voice of Paladin.

Learn more about old time radio, history and the people who made it and enjoy the journey as you visit Martin Gram’s blog http://martingrams.blogspot.com/
OLD TIME RADIO QUIZ ANSWERS

Soap Operas

1. The show written by Earle Stanley Gardner was “Perry Mason.” In contrast to the television version, the radio version had many more tears and complications, although Perry still won every case in court.

2. Elaine Carrington wrote “Pepper Young’s Family.” Throughout a series of name changes and time slots, Carrington wrote the script from 1932 well into the 1950s. She also wrote “Rosemary,” and “When a Girl Marries” which was the highest rated soap opera on the air in the mid-1940s.

3. The chimes in the Town Hall of Glen Falls heralded the opening of “Big Sister,” the soap opera written by Lillian Lauferty and aired on CBS from 1936, until the end of 1952.

Mysteries

1. The tough editor in “Illustrated Press” was Edward G. Robinson who stayed with the roll until 1942.

2. The show and the narrator were both “The Shadow.” The narrator was always the same although the person playing the part changed many times.

3. The black cat was never heard, but only referred to. For that matter Old Nancy, was not called old, she was simply referred as a witch from Salem. But the show was a “Witches’ Tale” and reportedly came to the air as early as 1931 as a creation of Alonzo Deen Cole who we also know as creator of “Casey Crime Photographer,” and “Gangbusters.”
The RCA breakdown of the “First 10 Metal Tubes” as published in 1935 Radio Craft Magazine and other trade magazines of that time.

You might remember QRS as Piano Rolls. They are still around today as the “Music Technology Company.” In the 1920s they saw the future of radio and put their name on tubes.