

The ARRL Board of Directors Historical Committee

The ARRL Heritage Museum Presents The Historian's View

Chapter 12, 7/01/2019

Epilogue — Chroniclers of the Vestiges of “Marconi Towers” (The Big Picture: The British Bring Wireless to America)

By: Michael W. Marinaro, WN1M

The four, 210-foot towers of the first Marconi Transatlantic Wireless Station were painted red to be visible from a distance above the flat terrain of Cape Cod. The locals called the site “Marconi Towers,” although to the wireless world it was known by its initial call letters CC, later as MCC, and finally as WCC.

The progress of the endeavor was followed by vacationers to the area and of course, the operators. Some aspects of their observations have survived. Of interest, are the contemporary accounts of Frederick Parsons who recalled the site before the station was created, as well as *QST* articles written by Irving Vermilya. Irving was the last manager of the station before moving on to the succeeding WCC site nearby at Chatham and Marion, Massachusetts.

Irving was a legendary pioneer amateur radio operator known as “VN” in the first days of spark. As a professional, he was the last of the managers of “Olde WCC,” managed the succeeding RCA complex at Chatham, and succeeded at several commercial professions.

Accounts describe the operation of the state as a spectacle. Irving describes it as follows in “Wireless Cape Cod,” from the February 1942 issue of *QST*:

We ran about 30 kilowatts on that old spark, and the noise from the old gap was terrific.

The flashes from the spark were blinding. We always worked in a sound-proof room. The flash from the spark could be heard and seen a mile or more from the building, with the

window opened. The radiation from “that baby” was 50 amperes in the antenna. Everything that was loose was throbbing with the code.

The sound-proof room was built on a side of the transmitter building to isolate the operators. It had a door with a glass pane for observing the spark and housed the receiving apparatus and switching devices. The pump handle of the key protruded into the space, permitting the operator to interrupt the secondary of the keying relay, and the operator stool was insulated. Most traffic was sent on perforated tape, however, the shore-to-ship traffic was individually sent arduously on the key at a limited 16 words per minute. The “normal” speed was 30 words per minute. The station operations began at early evening, every hour, for 45-minute intervals with a 15-minute interval for cooling.

This is how Irving described the demise of CC in, “The Passing of Old ‘WCC’,” from the February 1920 issue of *QST*:

None other than the US Navy purchased this station from the Marconi Co., and instead of using it, they entirely dismantled it. Yes, flat to the ground...all that remains there are the buildings... Every article was positively taken out and junked. The engines, generators, batteries, d.c. machines, lathe, transformers, etc. — even the door knobs taken off and the water pipes pulled up out of the ground. The towers are all down. They were given away for the wood that was in them, as payment to the man who took them down.

Except for sporadic wartime military training activity or the passing of the occasional hiker, the site remained dormant in the grasp of nature as the wind and surf sculptured the cliffs.

Historians and wireless enthusiasts, however, recognized the significance of the location. In 1953, a bronze plaque was placed at the location. Reverting to the control of the National Park Service, by 1974 an exhibit shelter was erected shielding the scale model of the station and a bronze bust of Marconi. But nature acted and the shelter was removed before it fell over the eroded cliff. The contents were brought to the nearby park headquarters building.

The National Park Service staff has shared that most of the remains of the station are gone.

Remnants of foundations are likely under the sand or have eroded out of the bluff — half of the original site is now eroded away by the ocean.

Two of the four tower concrete bases can occasionally be seen at very low tide on the beach at the waterline. The other two tower bases on dry land atop the bluff are buried by sand. A few small bits of tower support structures are on the site for display purposes.

There are a handful of items at the park headquarters on display, and there are a few Marconi-related items on display at Salt Pond Visitor Center.

The park holds talks periodically at the site and offers a 12-minute movie. They also host an annual Marconi Day in January when ham operators communicate from the site all over the world to commemorate the 1903 overseas transmission.

(It is the author's intent to visit the site headquarters this summer to report on the status of the relics).



The Model