

Genesis Revisited:

The Commemoration of the First Wireless Message on the West Coast

By Paul Joseph Bourbin

photos by Mike Adams

In August 1899, the City Fathers of San Francisco were in a quandary. California's First Volunteer Regiment of soldiers were returning from the Philippine Islands aboard the troopship *Sherman*. They had participated in the Spanish American War and were to be feted by the residents of San Francisco upon their arrival. Therein was the problem. At that time there was no way to communicate with a ship once it went over the horizon. There was a cable in the Philippines, so it was known when the ship left, but when it would arrive in The City was anybody's guess.

The residents could not just wait around for the ship to arrive and making the ship wait in the Bay until the City got its celebration together would be absurd. A lookout could be placed in a strategic location to report the ship's arrival. The Cliff House had a telephone line to downtown but, more often than not, the area around the Golden Gate is enshrouded in fog in August so traditional methods would not work. The ship might not be seen until she reached the Golden Gate, which would not permit enough time for preparation, and the celebration would be spoiled. What could they do to have a reliable method to spot the ship and gain enough time to get the celebration underway when the ship landed?

It was known that the *Sherman* would have to pass by the lightship *San Francisco*, located nine miles outside the Golden Gate, before reaching San Francisco. This would give ample time to inform San Franciscans of the arrival of the troopship. George Otis Mitchell, a physics teacher at Girl's High School, had experimented with wire-

less telegraphy. He had the idea that if a wireless transmitter were put onboard the *San Francisco*, a lookout could report sighting of the *Sherman*. A receiver, located on land west of the City, would then pick up the message and relay it via telephone lines. A group of men got together to accomplish this task. The newspaper *San Francisco Call*, seeking a scoop, sponsored the venture.



Cliff House—then and now.

At first, tests of the apparatus, initially a Tesla Coil, were made from the Spreckles Building in downtown San Francisco to Telegraph Hill with mixed results due to interference from trolley cars. Later, the receiver was moved to the Cliff House overlooking the Pacific Ocean. This location was away from trolley cars, was closer to the lightship and had a telephone connection. A Ruhmkorff coil spark transmitter was installed on the *San Francisco* with an aerial, and the wait began.



1899 Welcome—Perham Foundation collection

On the 23rd of August at about 5:00 P.M., the *Sherman* was sighted through the fog and Charles Fisher tapped out, "SHERMAN IS SIGHTED." He had only the spark transmitter and had no way of knowing if the message was received. Fortunately, it was. The coherer, connected to a 75-foot vertical wire with a conical "capacity hat," detected the signals and the Morse inker noted them. A telephone call was made from the Cliff House to the *San Francisco Call* with the happy news. A cannon was fired from atop the Spreckles Building, followed by other signals. The City welcomed the *Sherman* and her heroes and celebrated for three days (they really knew how to throw a party!).



On Saturday morning August 28, 1999, a group of about fifty radio historians, supported by the **United States Coast Guard**, and an historian and a naturalist from the **National Park Service**, the press (including **Keay Davidson** of the *Examiner*), and a few bemused tourists commemorated the 100th anniversary of the first working wireless signals in America. **The California Historical Radio Society (CHRS)**, the **Perham Foundation**, the **San Francisco Amateur Radio Club**, the **Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA)**—owners of the Cliff House) and the

United States Coast Guard sponsored the ceremony.

The first wireless message hit the ether on August 23, 1899. Within the United States, three separate wireless transmission events occurred about the same time in 1899. The evidence suggests that the transmission of August 23, 1899 was, indeed, the first wireless transmission in the United States, or, perhaps, the Western Hemisphere. Only one earlier instance is known: in March of 1899, Marconi gear called for help from a lightship in England.

The commemoration was not quite as spectacular as the 1899 celebration, but the magic was still there. While the event did not start until 10:00 A. M., members of the various groups were busy setting up all the myriad of things necessary for the event. There were exhibits of early equipment, video gear to replay the commemorative documentary produced by President **Steve Kushman** and aired on **KGO-TV**, a modern radio transmitter and receiver to be used for the reenactment, public address equipment, etc. The star exhibit was **Woody Wilson's** replica Ruhmkorff coil, supplemented with an historical key from **Bart Lee**, a coherer from **Will Jensby**, and an inker from Curator **Ed Gable** of the **Antique Wireless Association (AWA)**.



Don Koijane and Steve Kushman

At the appointed hour, President **Steve Kushman** welcomed one and all and outlined the significance of the day and the agenda of events. **Don Koijane**, President of the **Perham Foundation**, explained the need for historical preservation and the Foundation's plans for an electronics museum. **Richard Everett**, Curator of the **San Francisco National Maritime Museum**, spoke about its new radio wing. Historian **Steve Haller** of the GGNRA gave a talk about the Presidio and its wars. Naturalist **Bob Holloway**, also of the GGNRA, talked about the Cliff House site, its fog and environs. **Col. Earnest James** gave listeners background information about the First California Volunteers Regiment's involvement in the Spanish American War. **Bart Lee**, impresario of the event, told listeners about the technology of that time and the event that occurred 100 years ago. **Captain Charles Williams** spoke on behalf of the Coast Guard, whose predecessors operated the lightship. **Paul Bourbin** (your author) explained how spark transmitters work while the President of the San Francisco Amateur Radio Club, **Alan Schuman** demonstrated Paul's replica spark transmitter. Spark signals were received on at least one portable transistor radio. Then came the reenactment,

From a Coast Guard cutter located just beyond Seal Rocks, under the command of **Lt. Mike Fazio**, came the Morse Code transmission, "Sherman is sighted," which was relayed through the P. A. system via a Coast Guard receiving station set up by **C.W.O John Kedge** for the pur-



Coast Guard photos courtesy of Bill Wray

pose. The transmission could be heard loud and clear. People were then invited to watch the documentary video and ask questions. Upon conclusion of the event, those who participated retired to a fine repast in the elegant dining room of the Cliff House.



Paul Bourbin's spark transmitter

CHRS made a large poster of the commemorative illustration, drawn by member **Kent Leech** for the cover of the journal. Also exhibited was an operating, reconstructed 15-watt spark transmitting and receiving station made of vintage parts, provided by **Paul Bourbin**. The S. F. Maritime Museum amateur radio station, **K6KPH**, manned by **Tom Horsfall** and **Dick Dillman**, copied the commemorative message and responded

with a QST QSL message on the 80 meter ham band. The AWA station in upstate New York also copied the message transmitted by the Coast Guard cutter, and responded. The event was reported on several news programs, including San Francisco TV station **KRON**,

and in the newspaper, *San Francisco Examiner*.



It has been said that, "Necessity is the Mother of invention." Never has this more been the case as on that day in 1899. A problem existed for which there was no ready solution. A solution was found by making practical use of a technology that was only experimental at the time. Little could any of the participants know that from the desire not to be late for a party, the center of the worldwide electronics industry would grow: our Silicon valley.



Paul Bourbin

It was a very pleasant event. Everyone looks forward to commemorating the early modulated-spark voice transmissions (the first radiotelephone) made by the McCarty brothers in 1902 from the same location.

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It was my great privilege to make the 1999 arrangements for the "Sherman- is- Sighted"- 1899 wireless commemoration, among CHRS, the Coast Guard, the National Park Service, the Perham Foundation, the San Francisco Amateur Radio Club, the San Francisco Maritime Museum, the press and others. A very special event of the 19th century got the memorialization it deserves today.

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