The CIA on Swan Island
Wireless Adventure, and
the Revenge of United Fruit,
in KS4-land

A Presentation by Bart Lee, K6VK

For the ANTIQUE WIRELESS ASSOCIATION, 24 AUG 2006 and the
MOUNT DIABLO AMATEUR RADIO CLUB, 16 OCT 2009

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Swan Island on the Horizon,
c. 1922, occupied by United Fruit since 1909, named after Pirate Captain Charles Swan of the *Cygnet* in the 17th Century
United Fruit, a “multi-national”

• A Boston Company with Three Subsidiaries?
• 1) Wireless Specialty Apparatus Company, Inc. (WSA)
• 2) the country of Guatemala (and some others)
• 3) “The Company” also known as the CIA (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency)
United Fruit, a “multi-national”

BOSTON,
the land of the bean and the cod
where the Lodges speak only to Cabots
and Cabots speak only to God...
The Caribbean Sea,
**Swan Island** in its Midst
enjoying only ‘Location, Location, Location’
Swan Island, a map
United Fruit Plantation

Swan Island
Boundary
Marker 1912
“Boundary of Property Leased to the United Fruit Co Dec 10, 1912”
United Fruit Company of Boston

• Bananas, Bananas, Bananas - Yes we have Bananas, LOTS OF BANANAS, also Cuban
• Sugar and some
• Coconuts, too.
Wireless Telegraphy, c. 1903

• Spark radio systems, Morse code messages, shore stations and ships at sea; a Marconi shore station, Lizard, Cornwall

(reconstruction at Lizard Point, Cornwall, UK)

Photo Bart Lee, 2005; Curator David Barlow
Wireless Telegraphy, c. 1909

- Spark radio systems, Morse code messages, shore stations and ships at sea; a Marconi ship station (*Empress of Britain*, callsign MPB), reconstructed at the British Museum:
Wireless on Swan Island

Wireless Specialty Apparatus Company, a Subsidiary of United Fruit Co.; UFCO Steamship Pastores on the cover of the catalog:
Wireless on Swan Island

- The station and its antenna towers, c. 1922
Wireless on Swan Island

The Radio Towers of Swan Island in the Caribbean Sea, 850 miles south of New Orleans. Edison Batteries furnish current for the Auxiliary Apparatus at this Station.

From an Edison Company Promotional "Letter" 1915
Wireless on Swan Island

5 K.W. Transmitter designed and built by the Wireless Specialty Apparatus Company and installed in the United Fruit Company’s station at Swan Island, Caribbean Sea

From the WSA Catalog
Wireless on Swan Island

View No. 1. Edison Batteries Operating Auxiliary Apparatus at Swan Island Station

From an Edison Company Promotional “Letter” 1915
Wireless on Swan Island - a Banana Boat and Wireless Cabin

From Radio Broadcast magazine: Vol. I, No. 1, 1922
Wireless on Swan Island

Happy Wireless Operators (1922, no hurricane)

From Radio Broadcast magazine: Vol. I, No. 1, 1922

Below: View of the Radio Station at Swan Island, once the haunt of buccaneers in the days of the Spanish Main

Above: In spite of its loneliness and perils, the Swan Island radio men are not always depressed

UFCO Station US on Swan Island 1922
Wireless on Swan Island

- a pre-paid 1912 ‘stamp’ for a UFCO Wireless Service message (in 1913 Tropical Radio Company, which with WSA became part of RCA in 1919)

Stamp from Bart Lee collection
Tropical Radio Caribbean Stations

• Radio Stations UFCO & Callsigns (1922)
  • All weather observation stations as well, from 1914 to 1932

  • U for United + a second letter
  • Radio Call Letters & Radio Stations:

    • WNU New Orleans, Louisiana
    • WBU Burrwood, Louisiana
    • WIO Fort Morgan, Alabama

    • US [United-Swan] Swan Island

    • UC Tela, Honduras
    • UA Puerto Castilla, Honduras
    • UG Tegucigalpa, Honduras
    • UX Port Limon, Costa Rica
    • UB Almirante, Panama

    • UJ Santa Marta, Columbia
F.A.A. RADIO in KS4 –LAND,
FAA and Weather Bureau Personnel on Site

- Weather Bureau manned Swan Island during hurricane seasons from 1938.

- In 1946, the FAA installed a non-directional navigation beacon radio station for guidance of Caribbean air traffic. Its callsign was SWA and it operated on 407 kHz.

- The FAA radio station used the callsign WSG and communicated with Miami by radio-teletype on short wave frequencies.
Amateur Radio on Swan Island


- Before and after World War Two, FAA and U.S. Weather Bureau personnel lived on Swan Island. Many were amateur radio operators. KS4–land was KD4-land first.
The Weather Bureau’s Amateur Radio Operators’ Swan Island Station, 1941
KD4GYM’s 20 meter Station

From: Radio, July, 1941, p. 8, The Story of KD4GYM by Steve Paull, KD4GYM (W9FPF)
1947, 875 watts with a SuperPro Receiver, KS4AF in 1948
xW5LMT, running 100 watts, pp 809s

Swan Island, West Indies

KS4AF

via Tampa, Florida


Xmtr: 100 wts. pp 809's. Rec: SuperPro P6e Qsl. Vy 98 geo

Via K8CX From W2ILC
“On the Route of the Flying Clippers”
Pan American Airways 1953

Via K8CX from W8UAS
W3ZQ/KS4 -- 1963

“Site of the U.S. Weather Bureau Hurricane Upper Air Sounding Station (Supported by FAA Communications)”
James Takaki (1967, Hawaiian, also F7BY, probably also on government service) operator of KS4CC in 1968

SWAN ISLAND, WEST INDIES

KH6BCB/KS4

P.O. BOX 1148, MIAMI, FLA. 33148

JAMES I. TAKAKI

Via K8CX From K8CX
Swan Island Amateur Radio Club, (James Takaki, KH6BCB, 1968), remembering Captain Swan

Via K8CX
From OE1HGW
Palm Trees and Radio Towers

KS4CJ
SWAN ISLAND
WEST INDIES

Site of U.S. National Weather Service Upper Air Sounding Station

RADIO W9TYL CONFIRMING 2XSSB CW QSO OF 18 DEC 1971
AT 1902 GMT ON 28 MC. UR SIGS WERE 5X8

QSL TO: BOX 717
CHRISTIANSTED, ST. CROIX
U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS 00820

73
Harold R. McBidney
(Mac W3ZQ KV4AM)

Via K8CX From W9TYL (1971); see also W3ZQ/KS4 1963
HR6SWA, Swan Island, Honduras, 1975.

On Sept. 1, 1972, the United States yielded Swan Island to Honduras, keeping the right to operate on the island. ARRL deleted it as a DXCC entity. After Sept. 1, 1972 contacts count only as Honduras.

Via K8CX
From K8CX;
note suffix SWA
same as the FAA Beacon
The CIA on Swan Island 1954

- The CIA Overthrew the elected government of Guatemala by Radio Warfare from neighboring countries and likely Swan Island, and insurgency.
- Guatemala wanted to expropriate United Fruit’s vacant agricultural land, and was going Communist, importing arms from the Eastern Bloc; Che Guevara was active there.
- Boston’s United Fruit stockholders made up part of “America, Inc.”: Henry Cabot Lodge was the US UN Ambassador; John M. Cabot was high in the State Department and exUFCO president; Secretary of State was John Foster Dulles and his brother Allan Dulles was CIA Director.
- The CIA sent E. Howard Hunt (of Watergate infamy later) and David Atlee Phillips to wage Radio Warfare, in part from Swan Island – and it worked!
- United Fruit saved its land; decades of bloodshed followed.
According to E. Howard Hunt, left, he and David Atlee Phillips, right, landed on Swan Island in 1953 to set up high power propaganda shortwave radio station to be used against Guatemala. He said that they had to repulse “Guatemalan students” who objected.
The CIA on Swan Island 1954
Images from Peter McCollum, http://www.militaryradio.com/spyradio/

• CIA radios supplied to insurgents → RS-1
The CIA on Swan Island 1954

• Receiver RR-2B
The CIA on Swan Island 1954

- Transmitter RT-3
- From the Dennis Monticelli collection (AE6C)
The CIA on Swan Island 1954

- Transmitter RT-3 inside
The CIA on Swan Island 1954 --

Guatemala,
Swan Island
250+- miles East:

A British diplomat, according to CIA Officer Phillips, concluded: “The soldiers had nothing to do with it. The war was won by that radio station.”
The CIA on Swan Island 1954

• The CIA overthrew the Guatemalan government, Swan Island’s radio stood down, and then Hurricane Janet came by:
The CIA on Swan Island 1954

- Hurricane Janet 1955 -- Down came the Radio Towers

[On Swan island] “... on September 15 [1955]... [a]t 1100 hours, from our closed retreat, we heard the giant twin radio towers crash to the ground after being knocked from their foundations by the 100-knot wind …”

[From the air] “As we approached Swan Island ... the only ... radio they had was an emergency transceiver that was operated by hand cranking a small generator in the unit that was called a Gibson Girl.... What we did see when we got there was the islands covered with downed coconut trees that were laid out like match sticks and clearly lined-up indicating how the wind blew them down. There were also five (5) huge radio transmitters, flat on the ground and parallel to each other, and also indicating the direction of how the hurricane winds blew over the island.”
The CIA on Swan Island -- 1960

- The Cuban Revolution – 1959 – Real *Communists* in Cuba!
- “The Revolution is not a dinner party” said Mao Tse Tung
- Cuba expropriated United Fruit’s and other U.S. interests on the island, and imprisoned and executed many thousands of Cubans.

Some 9,389 Cubans have been listed by name as murdered by Che and Fidel and “the Revolution.”
The CIA on Swan Island -- 1960

• CIA officer David Phillips got another radio station up on Swan Island in 30 days, with help from the Navy.

RS transmitters were portable jobs mounted in vans parked under a roof. The small announcers studio building is at the right, though most of the programming was on tape and flown in from Miami. (Photo by Tom Kneitel)
The CIA on Swan Island – 1960

Gibraltar Steamship Corporation, running **Radio Swan**, was a CIA proprietary company whose “President” was Thomas D. Cabot, a former president of United Fruit Company.
The CIA on Swan Island – 1960

CIA wrote a Brief History of Radio Swan for itself:

1. On 17 March 1960, President Eisenhower approved a covert action program to bring about the replacement of the Castro regime. Within the propaganda framework of that program, an important objective was to create and utilise a high-powered medium and short wave radio station. CIA was asked to provide such a station, outside the continental limits of the United States, and have it ready for operation within sixty (60) days.

2. Swan Island, in the Caribbean, was chosen as an appropriate site. The United States Navy furnished CIA with splendid support: within sixty days, equipment had been brought from a landing strip and cleared on the island, and the station was able to go on the air on 17 May of the same year, precisely on schedule.

3. Originally it was planned that Radio Swan would be a clandestine station.

   Just prior to inauguration, however, it was decided the station should be a commercial one. This was at the request of the Navy, which reasonably argued that should their participation in construction of a cyclic facility be known, explanations would be difficult.

4. Using a “commercial” station for the tactical and strategic tasks envisaged for Radio Swan is not, of course, the most desirable way to support a covert operation. The only practical method of operation is to “sell space”. Thus, program time on Radio Swan was sold to various Cuban groups. These included organizations of veterans, students, women, two publications in exile, two radio
[The CIA’s] Brief History of Radio Swan. -- 1. On 17 March 1960, President Eisenhower approved a covert action program to bring about the replacement of the Castro regime. Within the propaganda framework of that program, an important objective was to create and utilize a high-powered medium and short wave radio station. CIA was asked to provide such a station, outside the continental limits of the United States, and have it ready for operation within sixty (60) days.

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The CIA on Swan Island – 1960
The Radio Swan & Radio Americas period, 1960 to 1968

CUBA LIBRE
Swan Island - Isle of Palms
Key West - San Juan
Courier Service
Two Dollars Fifty Cents
The CIA on Swan Island -- 1960

• *Radio Swan* broadcast to Cuba along the same lines as the radio propaganda against Guatemala.

• Before and during the 1961 CIA Bay of Pigs invasion, *Radio Swan* provided both operational and disinformation transmissions.

• President Kennedy denied air support to the insurgents and Castro’s forces repulsed them.

• Radio Swan continued as a propaganda station, as *Radio Americas* (“purposelessly” said Phillips).
The CIA on Swan Island -- 1960

The CIA on Swan Island -- 1960

This will verify your reception of Radio Americas

on 1160 kcs, at 8:25 EST, on May 18, 1966.

Our 1160 kc transmitter is a 50 kw RCA using two 250-foot vertical radiators. The 6000 kc transmitter is a 7.5 kw RCA feeding a full-wave dipole.

Thank you for your interest.

73's

Alfredo Fierro
Radio Americas
CIA Still at Work in 1975?

Radio Swan’s Ghost – in Honduras; A Press Card
CIA Still at Work in 1975?
Radio Swan’s Ghost, claiming paternity

JULY 30TH 1975

Dear Mr. Dexter,

We received your report today that you heard Radio Swan on 6185 Kc., on the band of 49 meters.

Radio Swan was born in 1960 as an anticommunist station; it was transferred to the Island of Swan, which at that time belonged to the American Government.

After the May of Puro invasion in Cuba, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) closed down Radio Swan. The Island of Swan was given back to the Honduran Government 2 years ago.

As you know, the communists are trying to take over Latin America. We found it necessary to put Radio Swan on the air again in the defense of democracy and the free world.

Thanking you once more for your report and appreciating to keep us informed of our transmissions.

In our next letter, we will send you a souvenir of Radio Swan.

Respectfully yours,

[Signature]

Ralph H. Humber
President
The CIA on Swan Island – 1980s

• More Trouble in Latin America – Sandinistas in Nicaragua

In the 1980s the CIA, despite Honduran sovereignty, used Swan Island for a base for supplying Contras dedicated to the overthrow of the elected Sandinista government in Nicaragua, as did private supporters. See Plane Supplying Contras Crashed, 11 Believed Killed… Plane Struck by Missiles, New York Times; January 25, 1988.

“[A] small station … was established on Swan Island in support of a variety of operations which were being conducted as part of our support for the CIA's efforts in Nicaragua. … The communications setup for this facility was something that we called a flyaway package. Basically it consisted of a HF [high frequency] transmitter/receiver[,] a PC-based communications terminal and a KG-84 encryption device.”

From an ex-CIA operative on Swan Island
Amateur Radio on Swan Island - 2008

• A Dxpedition to the Middle of Nowhere, HR6/HQ8
“Have a Banana!”
Presentation Diploma