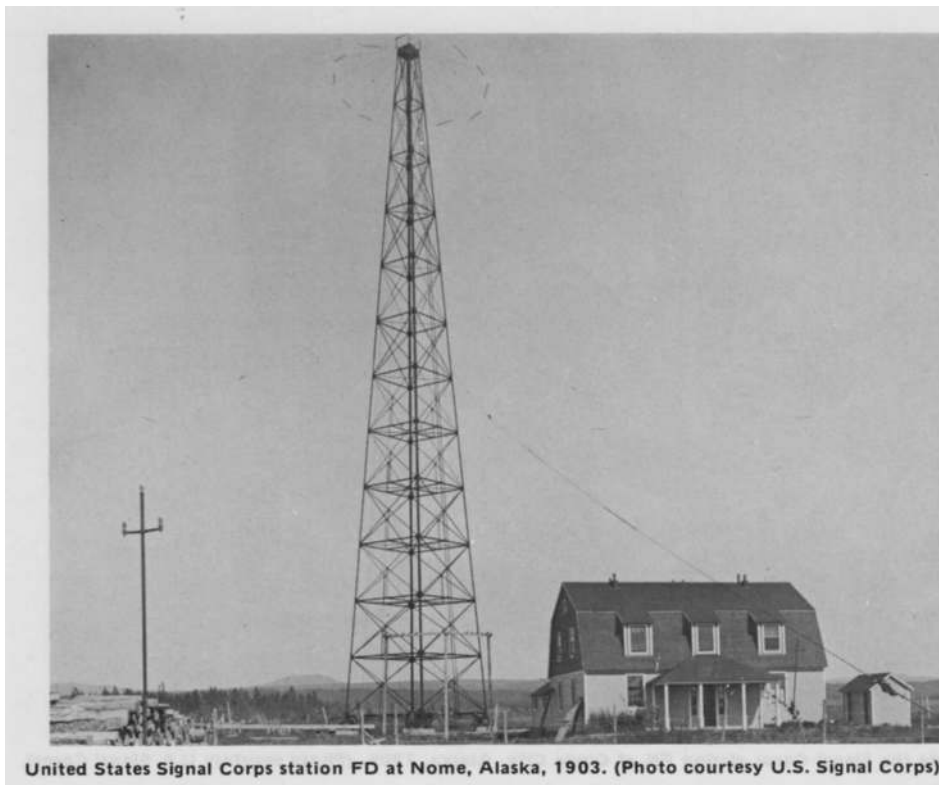


Alaska Wireless 1903 -- 1915

By Bart Lee, K6VK, CHRS Fellow in History

The Army could not rely on cables and telegraph lines in Alaska, more than a century ago. One storm, for example, took out forty miles of cable. So it turned to wireless telegraphy. The Army tasked Captain Leonard D. Wildman with creating this new system. He first had to figure out a good ground system in the frozen North. Then he had to create new equipment without infringing any patents. (The Army did use the DeForest Company detector, which itself infringed Fessenden patents). The Nome station, callsign FD, opened for business on August 17, 1903.



The Army standardized the station building at every installation.

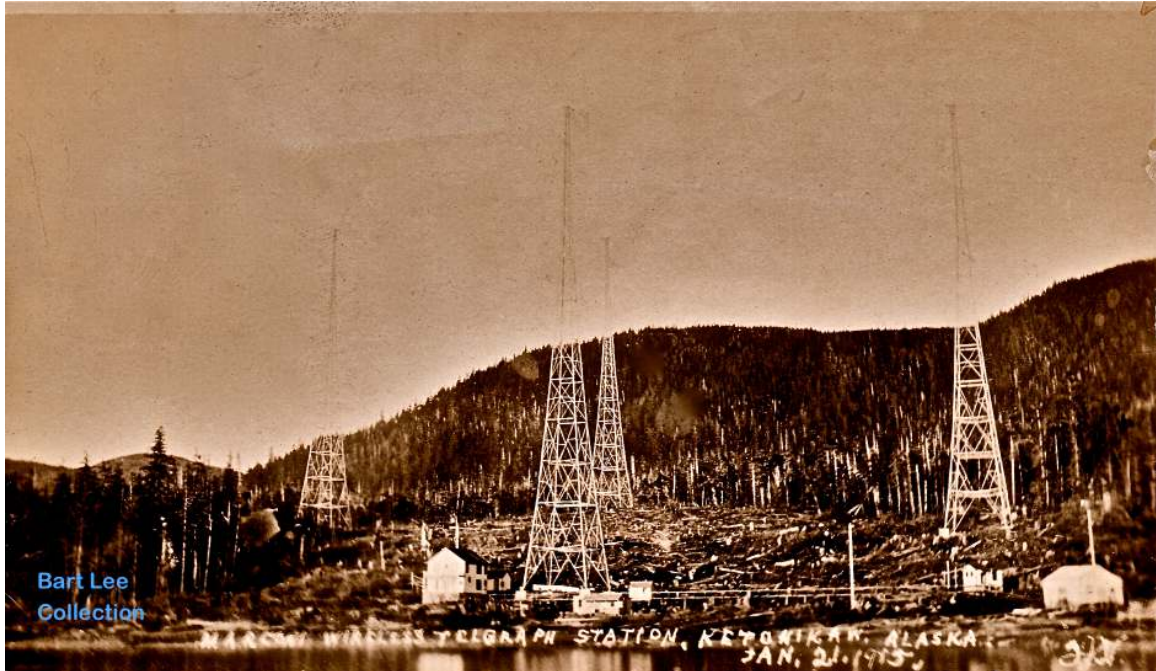


The late Ed Mariner, W6BLZ told this story in *Ham Radio* magazine, April 1973. He included the two Signal Corps photos that appear nearby. Mariner quoted extensively from contemporary Army documents to tell the real story. He wrote: “ ... The Signal Corps had started operating the longest wireless section network of any commercial telegraph system in the world.” Some stations handled 5,000 words a day.

Note the conical wire capacity hat at the top of the FD tower. This provided reactance so that the vertical antennas of the day could radiate on lower frequencies.

In the early days of wireless, the danger of ultraviolet radiation from the big sparks was not known. At least one early wireless operator in Alaska suffered blindness as a result.

American Marconi joined the party in the next decade.



The legend on the photo reads:
Marconi Wireless Telegraph Station,
Ketonikan, Alaska Jan. 21, 1915

A previously unpublished photo of the Ketonikaw, Alaska station dated January 21, 1915 appears above. By 1914, Marconi had perhaps a dozen stations in Alaska, according to the Commerce Department list. United Wireless seems to have been the first commercial wireless enterprise into Alaska, as early as 1908. Many United Alaska stations appear in the *Blue Book* of Hugo Gernsback's New York Electro Importing Company (E.I. Co.) in 1910. American Marconi absorbed United and its stations in 1912, after United's bankruptcy. (de K6VK)