

Bart Lee, A Vintage Vignette

YOUTHFUL WIRELESS OPERATORS in San Francisco

About the 1909 Lowell High School Wireless Club.

*From the San Francisco Chronicle, December 26, 1909.
Story by Ross G. Miller. An excerpt:*

This is amateur morning in the wireless world. San Francisco and adjoining suburbs alone have between 200 and 300 young wireless operators; amateurs who rank as such principally in name, who are everywhere dotted about the city and country for a stretch of miles that extends way beyond the city and county boundaries.

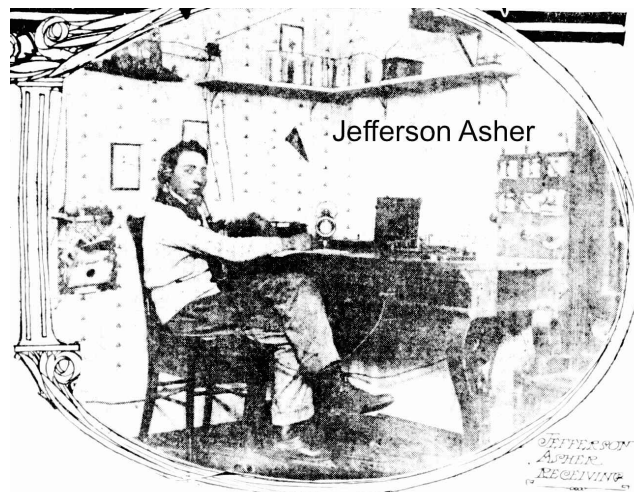
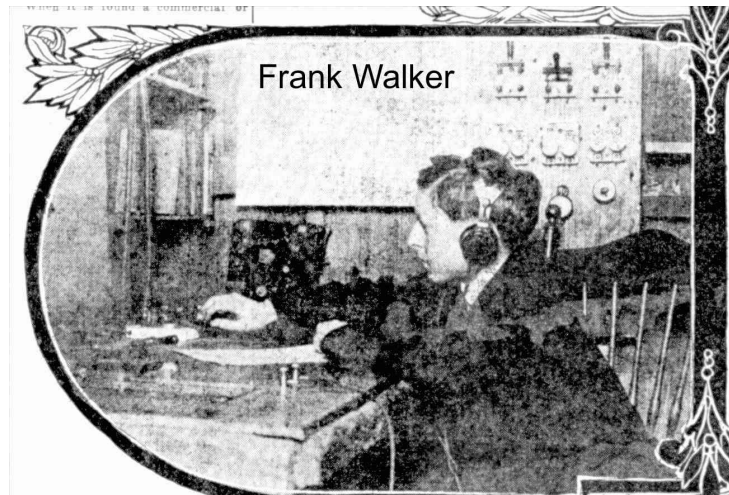
The handiwork of the young wireless expert is seen all about on house-top and barntop in the form of a pole a few feet long projecting above the gables, with a few wires running to a top window. Such signs denote the residence of a lad who may some day, somewhere, if not in San Francisco, assist materially in perfecting the system of wireless telegraphy that, while considered by electrical wizards to be still in an embryo condition, is one of the greatest achievements of modern times.



The world is now on the threshold of the wireless era, and just beginning to rub its intellectual eyes, as it were. Sometimes one looks over the wall of barred knowledge in amazement, wondering what lies beyond, that is, as yet merged in haze.

Young America, wide awake as usual, is up and ready. So far, America has led in the race toward wireless perfection. The next thing is to stay in the lead.

The experimenting boy in his home, in the small spare room, out in the barn or up in the attic, with his few simple instruments today, may tomorrow, be an authority on this greatest of sciences.



GOSSIP OF THE AMATEURS. All morning the gossip of the amateurs is kept, up at a brisk clip, and a listening operator may hear something like this:

“V-V-V-G-C-Bq. Is that V-V-you, Jack? T-R-M-Y-V-U You are very V-weak. -T-S-R-G.----- - -Tru your V- V-Sp-ark before you send again: A little - - stronger now,”

and then perhaps good and strong:

“Aw, if you can't read, get off the line and let G. -G. Good kid have it.”

This keeps up all morning until the operators at the Government and commercial stations are distracted with annoyance, and are elated when the luncheon hour arrives, for they know an amateur must eat. Then it is that the operator puts aside his pipe and paper and sends out the time on free ether – “12 M.”

According to arrangement, the Government has the first half, and the commercial the last half of every hour. Thus both departments have an opportunity of sending messages without interference from outside forces.

Yet no official time has been allotted the amateur in which to experiment. Consequently the amateur has usurped all the lime or any portion the twenty-four hours he may choose to use.

During the school term a boy finds very little time available to be at his wireless instruments other than Saturday and Sunday. Saturday is usually spent in experimenting for new effects, making new instruments and adjusting them for use, leaving Sunday morning for sending and receiving messages.

The most remarkable feature to amateur wireless telegraphy is that an amateur makes and adjusts his own set. The ability some of the boys

display is marvelous. A boy 14 years old, with a few pieces of brass, some insulators and several hundred feet of wire, will rig up an aerial and a set of instruments that will receive many miles without even a dry battery, using a tuning coil, condenser, receiver and detector — all made by his own hands.

Instruments that are sold for a few dollars each, and on exhibition in store windows, will be seen by the boy; he will make a sketch of the display and then go home and rig up instrument to match the one he has seen with the expenditure of a few cents.

Following is the record for receiving taken from a diary of a fourteen-year-old amateur on a self-constructed set for the period of one month, recording only the time he was at the receiver:

“October 17th, A. M., got Japanese cruiser Idzuma and Goat Island; 10:10

P. M., United States steamship St. Louis; 10:20, Murphy.

“October 18th. A. M. United States Steamship St. Louis, twice; Lots, Oakland; Russian Hill.

“October 25th, P. M., Mare Island. United States steamship St. Louis.

“October 26th, Russian Hill and Mare island.

“October 28th, P. M., Russian Hill.

“October 30th, P. M., Russian Hill.

“October 31, P. M., Russian Hill.

"November 7th, P. M., Farallones island; Mare Island and

'Chronicle.'

"November 8th, 'Chronicle' talking to Table Bluff.

"November 9th, 'Chronicle'

"November 11th, 'Chronicle'

"November 12th, 'Chronicle' and Celt.

"November 13th: put up new aerial and received 'Chronicle,' C. K. and Grant building.

"November 14th, Potter, 'Chronicle.' Cattail, Celt, D. L., Mare Island, Grant building, Davis, steamer President and Mare Island."

[End of Excerpt — Archivist's note: 'Chronicle' is the newspaper's station in San Francisco used to contact incoming vessels; Grant is the Western Wireless Company station in the Adam Grant building just off Market Street near the Embarcadero; the Japanese cruiser *Idzumo* visited San Francisco in 1909 according to the wiki; Russian Hill is the second location of station PH; Goat Island (now Treasure Island), Mare Island, Table Bluff and 'Farallones' (Farallon Islands) were US Navy stations.]

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This 1909 newspaper article goes on to talk about the club members and their activities. One boy, Haraden Pratt, went on to fame in the radio world at the telecommunications advisor to Presidents Truman and Eisenhower. Below is a photo of the framed 1909 newspaper article about the San Francisco Wireless Club. It presently resides in the archives of the California Historical Radio Society. The 1909 club at Lowell High School is likely one of the ancestors of the San Francisco Amateur Radio Club, founded in 1909 and incorporated in 1916. Noted radio engineer Haraden Pratt is mentioned associated with the San

Francisco club; he was also active in the Bay Counties Wireless Telegraph Association. The west coast commercial operators, as early as 1906, were all too familiar with the amateurs:

“8:30 a.m. The combined forces of 3,000 ham factories are bursting forth with their weird codes upon the quietude of this lovely rainy morning.”

(Quote from *Pacific Radio News*, 1916 excerpting the Deforest Wireless Telegraph Company San Francisco station PH log of 1906).



The article in its entirety reads as if pre-prepared to be used in any city, with a great deal of general explanatory text and ready for local insertions and local photographs. It would have been sent by wire to the subscribing newspapers. December 26 is, after all, a slow news day.

A version of this note first appeared as a Special Edition of the San Francisco Amateur Radio Club *Nuts and Volts* presented by club historian Bart Lee [then KV6LEE, now K6VK] and the original newspaper article is archived at the museum *Radio Central* of the California Historical Radio Society.

73 de K6VK (revised 20 X '20) ##