

Frank Butler, Wireless Pioneer — and a correction

By Bart Lee, CHRS Archivist & Fellow, AWA Fellow.

Lee de Forest employed Frank Butler as his primary lab assistant for many years. This comes to mind as SCARS has just republished an earlier note of mine about an American De Forest Wireless Telegraph Company stock certificate. (The SCARS note is below).

The infamous Abe White, stock promoter, signed the 1906 certificate but so did Francis **X.** Butler, as the company treasurer. This was ***not*** de Forest's assistant, Frank **E.** Butler (as I once thought).



Frank E. Butler devoted himself to de Forest's work for many years. In later articles he styled himself as Lee de Forest's Chief Assistant (de Forest later called him "My Old Standby" in inscribing a photograph, below). He worked at Lee de Forest's 1904 St Louis Fair demonstration station. He wrote about this pioneering work in 1924.* The company arranged a portrait photograph at the time.

* "Making Wireless History With De Forest," *Radio Broadcast*, December 1924, pages 211-219.

† "How Wireless Came to Cuba," *Radio Broadcast*, March 1925, pages 916-925.



MR. BUTLER IN 1904

A photograph of the author, taken by the official photographer of the St. Louis World's Fair, where he and Dr. De Forest were exhibiting the marvels of wireless

Radio Broadcast abstracted his article thus:

Thrilling Days of Trial and Error in the True Pioneer Wireless Times
— A Ten-Kilowatt Set that Sent Four Miles
— Thrills for the Natives at the St. Louis World's Fair
— Twenty Years of Wireless in Retrospect

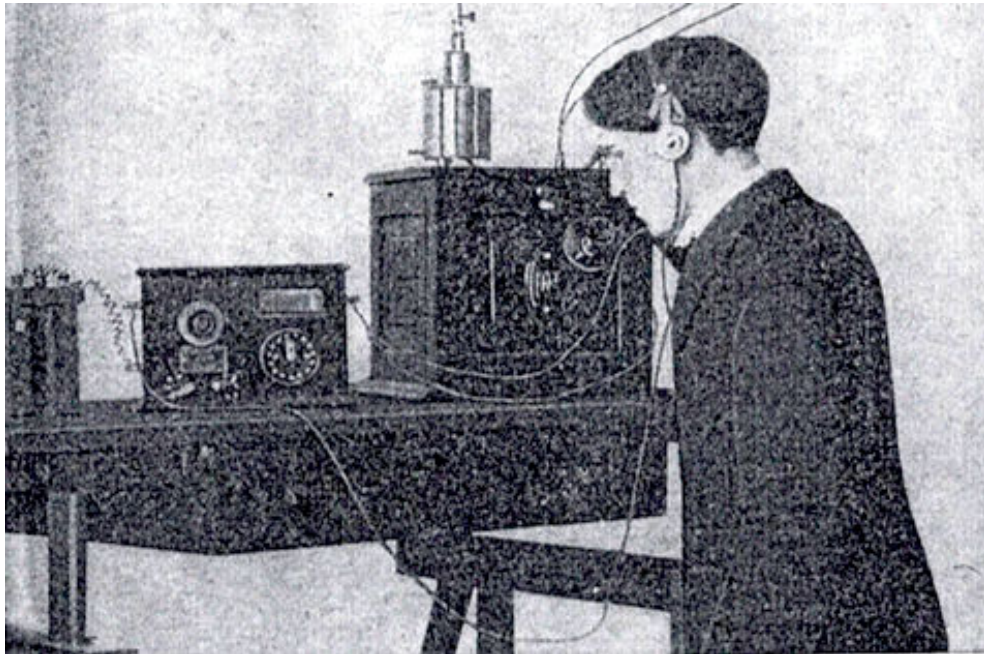
In 1905 he and de Forest lived through the hell of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba to set up a very early U.S Navy wireless station. (De Forest in his autobiography is quite colorful about this

miserable experience). Butler also wrote about this adventure.[†]

Radio Broadcast abstracted his article thus:

The Drama and Struggle of Strenuous Radio Times in the Jungle
— Hitherto Unpublished Memoirs of High Technical and Human Interest
— What Really Happened in the Early Days of Wireless Telegraphy

Butler also helped de Forest in the development in 1907 of the arc-phone transmitter that the Navy eventually bought.[‡] The Navy hoped to communicate among its vessels with it, but couldn't figure out how to use it.

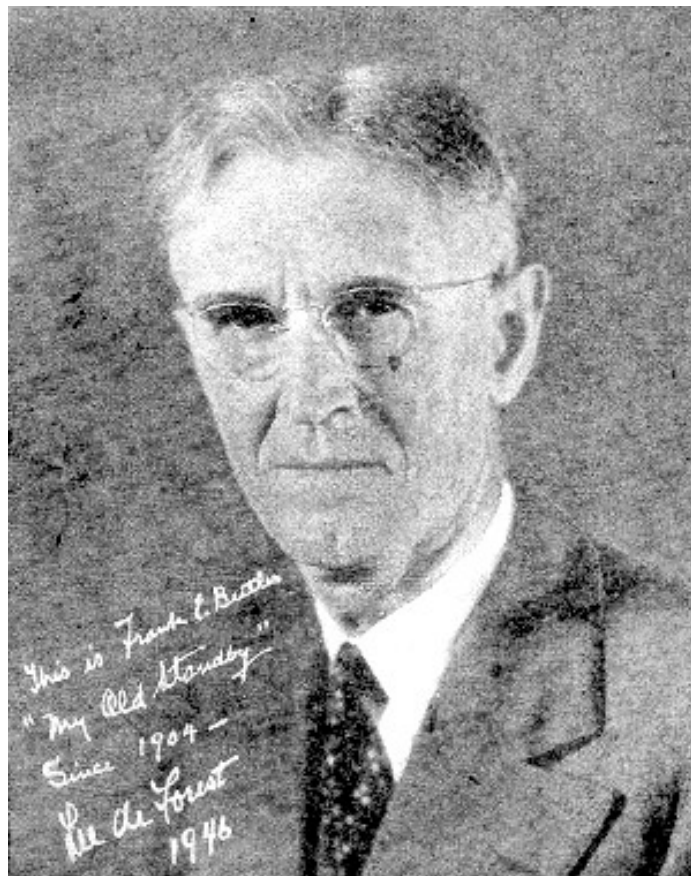


[†] "How Wireless Came to Cuba," *Radio Broadcast*, March 1925, pages 916-925.

[‡] Frank Butler, DeForest Arc-phone, *Literary Digest* June 15, 1907.

So, Chief A.J. Minerati played music from gramophone records through the Navy de Forest arc-phone all over the world as the Great White Fleet showed the flag, including in San Francisco in 1908.

Frank Butler stayed involved with radio until his passing in 1948 at age 71. He lived in Toledo, Ohio and operated a radio school there: American Wireless Institute.



Three decades earlier, Butler had arranged for Lee de Forest, newly impoverished after yet another legal tangle, to live and work in Butler's hometown of Toledo (in 1907), to develop the arc-phone.[§] He later wrote:

“Surely, the most enthusiastic radio fan cannot realize the exceptional thrill which is now mine as I listen-in on my radio receiver and compare its wondrous achievements to those of the struggling, experimental days when I assisted Dr. De Forest in his elementary pioneer work; in the building of his first few ‘Audion bulbs,’ and shared with him the marvel of listening-in for the first time to a wireless telephone.”

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The SCARS note follows:

[§] The Summer In Toledo That Changed The World (2012)
<https://toledogazette.wordpress.com/tag/frank-butler/>

Old Radio Stock Certificates

These old radio and wireless company certificates can tell interesting stories. Pictured is one for Lee de Forest's American DeForest Wireless Telegraph Company, issued in 1906, four years after incorporation in 1902.

It is signed by the (in)famous Abraham White, a now notorious stock promoter. The second signature is that of Lee de Forest's assistant, Frank Butler. Lee de Forest probably knew that this was not likely a good investment, but White gave him enough of the proceeds to continue working on his inventions. De Forest had enjoyed world-wide renown for the use of his system in the reporting on the Russo-Japanese War, 1904 - 1905.



American DeForest Wireless Telegraph Stock

The \$5,000 investment in 1906 is equivalent to over \$130,000 today, a healthy chunk of change. There are some of these old certificates around for collectors ("scripophily" is the term for that particular addiction) but they're not cheap, no matter how long the company has been defunct. They usually run into the hundreds of dollars each for the earlier ones. American Marconi certificates are fairly common because they all had to be cancelled when that company became part of RCA.

Adapted from a short note by Bart Lee (de K6VK)

The signatory on the certificate, Francis **X.** Butler, was a long-time confederate of stock promoter Abraham White. Frank **E.** Butler, on the other hand, was an honest man.

[14 IV '21, v1, de K6VK] ##