

ODDBALL

As elsewhere in the early days of ship-to-shore wireless a chain of coast stations was built in eastern Canada and the then-separate Newfoundland. They were called coast stations because in those days that's where they had to be - as close as could be to the ships. This put most of them on windblown capes and islands where neighbours, if any, were few. The Marconi Company operated them with a staff of at most three operators and the boss, plus a cook if they could find one. During the 1914-1918 War several of them were taken over by the Canadian Navy. I got posted to some of these.

All were lonely places. Even your fellow-operators weren't always around; those on the night watches might be catching up on sleep. The biggest crowd would be if there were no messages going through and the operator on watch joined the others for lunch, his headphones hitched to an extension wire. Lonely places but I had found much to enjoy, and too often had said so.

"You liked it?" I was asked one day, "long gaps without mail or supplies? no radio? few people anywhere near? staff unscreened for compatibility -- nothing bad ever happened?"

Here was a challenge. Too long I'd been playing Stuart Little, E.B. White's mouse-sized character, the second son of Mr. and Mrs. Little, who had volunteered to be lowered down the bathtub drain to find his mother's ring. "How was it down there?" they asked him when he'd been hoisted out. "It was all right," he said.

But what were they -- those bad things pushed for sixty years under whatever pleasant thoughts came to mind...If, that long ago you'd had a bad enough toothache you wouldn't remember much else that

was bad. For me that had to be Jones -- my boss not just once but at two of these isolated posts.

And already I'm wrong: it wasn't Jones really; it was the game he sometimes played. Such distinctions hadn't occurred to me at the time. (In isolation it is especially important what games you play and what you talk about).

Jones, a wireless veteran, was well-known on the circuit for station maintenance. Breakdowns with him were anticipated -- none occurred. Inspections were infrequent, yet the nooks and crannies of the apparatus were dusted out - not just once a week but every morning -- by whoever was coming off watch at eight a.m.

Under his maintenance the gasoline engine could be counted on -- if you followed his procedure. All things mechanical worked for him; he understood how they worked and why; much of this rubbed off pleasantly onto his staff. A hard worker, he was resourceful with the few engine parts he had; in emergencies a born leader -- there'd be no doubt who was in charge and what was to be done.

He was an excellent raconteur - at times hilarious - threw himself into the role: happenings at other stations and elsewhere: the cook who'd make a stew that would last all week; the impulsive operator who nearly electrocuted himself in dangling a still-twitching mouse into the transmitter spark. A natural entertainer, he found people's peculiarities of more consequence than their virtues -- so much so that I don't recall his speaking well of anybody, ever.

But amusing as are the peculiarities of remote people, a diet of this is tedious. Jones's remedy-- and here's where his special game comes in -- his remedy was suddenly to shift the scene to the here and now -- to do as happens among children -- any let's-hide-on-Jerry sort of game: pick on somebody and gang up on him.

Even this, with us, had its place: ordinarily we respected the practical joke -- the kind where the brief isolation of the victim makes companions of everyone else -- a companionship that soon continues to include the victim, as soon as he catches on.

But with Jones there was a drastic difference. Isolation of the victim was not brief; rather it was as prolonged as Jones could contrive to make it. True, the victim was an already-isolated somebody who didn't need it, but it was well worth it to watch him squirm -- that is, to see what he would do. This, I think, happened mostly when Jones was bored.

Here, then, is Jones with his conditioned audience -- conditioned, that is, but ill-prepared for the result.

"Did you notice Oddball* yesterday? (heh-heh!)...You'd think he'd have known...Here he comes now... Now when he comes in suppose one of you says (such and such) and I'll say (such and such) and if he replies (such and such) somebody can say..."

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~~One~~ more subtly: "Oddball ought to know he needs a haircut. Now if one of you fellows told him he might listen..."

And with variations day after day. Not yet spotting this as a game I was dismayed. Here was our veteran boss laughing at the same naiveties Oddball and I had brought along on joining the navy -- things that I'd soon learned were the amusement of our messmates and that I'd become unduly sensitive about.

Instead of leaving things to cure themselves I was foolish enough to mention it to my friend. He, being of sterner stuff, quoted Emerson: "To be great is to be misunderstood", and turned further into

*Oddball. Actually The queerfellow -- a term in those days without overtones.

loneliness, disappointed in the boss and in me, but retaining something I hadn't -- his self-respect.

Time eventually brought a partial replacement of staff, including Oddball. It was soon agreed amongst ourselves -- including the newcomers -- that nobody -- none of us -- was to be another Oddball, no matter what tales the boss might tell. The test soon came; in turn each of us was unsuccessfully attacked. We were triumphant. But this had an unexpected, though predictable, result; we now had a fresh outcast: Jones -- not much of an improvement, but something to cling to.

To Jones this was outrageous. The entire community, such as it was, heard his woes. In the ensuing cold war we triumphed in discovering on a high ledge within his reach the missing cog wheel of the ice cream freezer, he when unknown to us the hens again started to lay (just try cooking for a while without any eggs).

Parodies also helped.*

Going back a few months, I was with Jones one evening when he called at the men's house -- the dormitory for a nearby staff. He was in fine fettle. Most of the time, as far as I remember, was spent in baiting the least stable of their members. "Dick", said a friendly voice close to my ear as we were leaving, "get out the door first, quick, and jump to one side. We've a bucket of water ready to throw at him."

Which was done. Jones was mad, but not ~~viently~~^{violently}. Their response, he seemed to feel, lacked imagination, subtlety.

*Our Mr. Jones is a prize, and he can tell so many lies/On us poor innocent guys in injured tones./ If he would but name the day, An' jus' go trip trip away,/I would sing hip-hip hurray for Mr. Jones.

Earlier still was my very first post out of wireless school (I was eighteen) -- my first station, and with Jones as boss. Strange, then, that at no time while there did I hear the term of Oddball. Something had happened, though, very soon after I arrived: The only habitation anywhere near was the lightkeeper's, where we got our milk.

Going on watch one midnight, I'd found no milk left for my mid-watch snack, so went over to the lightkeeper's for some more. Nobody was around, so this would get put on the bill in daytime when I woke up.

By then, though, the situation was serious. The lightkeeper had complained; the milk had been stolen. Jones of course understood but would be in some difficulty pacifying the lightkeeper. I'd be well advised to stay away from there.

Which stupidly I did for the remaining several months of my stay. This soon gave the lightkeeper a better grievance -- my aloofness.

Come to think of it, Jones was most successful with the lightkeeper. What had those two found to laugh at so hilariously? Was this ^{SITUATION} ~~station~~ so different?... You've guessed it some time back -- Oddball was me.

Maybe, then, my stupidity was the smartest thing I could have thought of: diverting Jones from further mischief, adding a secret, smug, dimension to my life -- that essential "something to do", and on my own secret stage: an actor. Something I might have got away with: merely to go on pretending the way I'd been acting -- incapable of deceit.

I should also mention another incident - the operator I relieved at my second "Jones" station, where Jones had preceded me. This operator, I suspect, had been the current Oddball for some time.

Obviously overjoyed to be relieved, he was too dejected to show it.

Thinking over the whole thing, the isolation of Jones was poor entertainment. What we needed and had failed to find was diversion. Each week there could have been a fresh Oddball volunteer, the rest of us in his absence berating him with taller and taller tales or in his presence;

"Who's Oddball this week? of course, you! Why don't you wash your shirt?"

Well no. That one wouldn't have worked. Then let's be sensible? No! not in isolation -- not in our immature state. Jones was almost right: whatever is eccentric -- ridiculous -- crazy! Something "really crazy" might have eased us -- all of us -- through that last, long, winter, if it was crazy enough.

There was, then, a good side to Jones? Perhaps he, more than any of us was the worst victim of isolation?... I was too close to him to tell. To me he was -- for ^{sure} ~~sure~~ -- an Oddball.