

J.J. Holmes,
Safety Department,
Dom. Iron and Steel Ltd.,
Sydney, N.S.

February 18th, 1952.

Dr. T.H. Raddall,
Liverpool, N.S.

Dear Dr. Raddall:-

I was very much interested in the recent newspaper account of the old McKay Bennett and the old wireless equipment that was on her. I never personally operated aboard of her, but I went aboard to visit the operators when I was in Halifax on shipboard myself during the first world war.

With the hope that I will not bore you or sound egotistical in any sense of the word I feel that we were contemporaries in what I would term a "by gone era" at least in the wireless sense of that term.

My time dates back to the year 1911. I was in California at the time and some of the younger generation, myself amongst them, began experimenting in this "new fangled" method of communication. In those days we would our own power transformers, usually $\frac{1}{2}$ K.W. using fixed spark gap, glass plates and tin foil for our condensers and etc., We also built our own receivers. Remember the coil wound on a cardboard tube, the insulation scraped off the top and over this a brass rod with a slider on? The old silicon detector and one ear phone. Later we graduated to the primary and secondary type tuner, the secondary on brass slides to slide into the primary for coupling, the switch points on the secondary for tuning variation, but the primary - I believe - still had the slider on top for its variation.

It is hard to realise now but we were operating as "hams" before the 1911 Berne Convention. Call signs were not allocated at that time so we made up our own calls, usually the initials of our names. Following the Berne Convention I was given the call 6DQ and was the first holder of that call.

Eventually my people moved to Vancouver and in 1914 I commenced to attend a commercial wireless school there and got my first class ticket early in 1915, the number of which was 92.

I joined the Canadian Marconi Company in that year and made a few trips on the Pacific Coast run on the S.S. Venture of the Union Steamship Company of B.C. An appeal was made for operators in the East for transport work running overseas so I came East and joined the H.M.T. Vienna. Following that I went on the H.M.T. Hunsbrook, was torpedoed in this one and then joined H.M.T. Huntress. When I left her I was put on the Coal and Iron Ore trade boats for this company and eventually secured a job on the steel plant where I have been for over 30 years. I am now in charge of the safety department here and have been for nearly 11 years.

The ships I have mentioned did not constitute all of my sea service, I was also on the C.G.S. Lady Gray, the S.S. Yarmouth, S.S. Maskinonge, S.S. Watuka, S.S. Canadian Seigneur, S.S. Kamouraska, S.S. Hochelaga. If there were any more I forget them at the moment. I also served on three coast stations, Montreal VCA, Three Rivers VCB and North Sydney VCO.

Do you remember the old magnetic detector? I have never yet met any one who used one commercially, but I did on the S.S. Venture, the first ship I was appointed to. Most of the present day operators have never even heard of such a thing, and I suppose the coherer you have from the McKay Bennett is unknown to the operators of today.

I have also used the old mushroom type spark gap enclosed in a zinc lined box with a tray of lime in the bottom. The old helix with the clips on to vary your tuning. Those were the days.

If you were ever on a passenger boat in those days, 1915, you will no doubt recall the "awe" of the passengers when they saw your equipment.

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Like a good many old pro's I could not leave the stuff alone when I came ashore, and sometime around 1922 or a little before, I was given the call VE-1BT. I held this for some years but eventually became inactive and dropped it. Three or four years ago I was given the call VE-1AJ which I still hold, but I have not been on the air for some time now. Guess the "bug" will get hold of me again and put me back in circulation.

At my age, crawling up to 60, such things as the reference to the Mackay Bennett and the old wireless equipment gives me a nostalgic feeling and throws my mind back to some of the most exciting and interesting times I ever had.

Hope I have not wearied you with this rather lengthy, rambling and disjointed letter, but trust you may find something of interest in it.

Very sincerely yours,

J. J. Holmes.

Safety Department,
Dominion Iron and Steel Ltd.,
Sydney, N.S.
February 29th, 1952.

Dear Dr. Raddall :-

I received your long and extremely interesting letter a few days ago and feel a bit guilty in that I didn't get around to answering it sooner.

It is quite apparent that you got into the wireless game at a younger age than I did, that is commercially at least. I think I was around 20 or 21 when I received my first commercial license.

I think I have three or four tickets in the house. The first one covered the old marconi spark set with the ten inch coil for emergency purposes, then I sat for and received a first class one for tube transmitters - C.W. I.C.W etc., - this also was good for coast stations. After I left the sea they put in some kind of a regulation about direction finders and as I did not have it and had no intention of going back to sea, they cancelled the first class one and gave me a second class which I still have. I was disappointed in this as I lost my original certificate number of 92 or something like that. I know it was under 100. The second class ticket number was in the thousands. I was in New York one time and not having anything in particular to do, I sat for the U.S. first class ticket and got it so I have that one too.

It seems almost remarkable how our paths crossed and yet we never met, at least I don't recall having met you. I don't remember hearing much about that rather quaint station at Pictou, but I do remember Partridge Island at the entrance to St. John N.B. harbour. Many is the time I worked him when we were in the winter coal trade.

If I remember correctly L.R. Johnstone was O.I.C at VCO when I was there the first time. He, as you no doubt know, was one of the real old timers. The second time I was there, it was a Bartlett chap, a Newfoundlander who was O.I.C. Geordie Reines was there at least on one of the occasions I was there. He was a real fine operator and his handwriting was a thing of beauty. He married a girl here in Sydney, but she died and left two Daughters who were here for a long time and may still be here. They both married and Geordie also remarried. I do recall that he was at Fame Point for many years after that.

I guess I must have misced that crusty old shell back on the "Watuks". Captain L.H. Bragg was there when I was on her. The old Chief Engineer I believe was named Patterson from Pictou, New Glasgow or somewhere in that vicinity. Did the roof leak in the wireless cabin when you were there? It did, and very badly when I was on her.

It is strange, unless my memory is real bad, that I cannot recall this Sodero you mention as relieving on the "Hochelaga". I certainly knew Walter Darling very well indeed. I was on one of the coal or ore boats, I think it was the "Maskinonge" when he left to go to C.F.C.F. in Montreal. I also remember that on a number of occasions after he went there and I was in Montreal, I used to go up to C.F.C.F. on top floor of the Canada Cement Building and watch him at work. It seems funny now, but the microphone was at the bottom of a gramophone horn and he used to stick his head into it to make the announcements etc.,

Do you remember G.H. Pearson, W.J. Gray and Ralph Letts who were in the Marconi offices. Both Gray and Letts were Superintendents in Halifax while I was with the Marconi Co., Later on Mr. Gray went to the Head Office in Montreal, and I believe Ralph went there later on.

To come to Capt. McDonald and Buffett - a merry pair as you say - they were on the "Hochelaga" when I was there. Boy could they hit the booze ! I guess West was Chief Engineer when you were there too. Poor West has been retired for some years, is practically blind and living on charity here. Capt. McDonald died some years ago and I can remember attending his funeral.

I suppose it would be a nice gesture to present the coherer to the museum, but for sentimental reasons a ~~part~~ likes to keep these things.

So you had the old English mushroom gap in the zinc lined box with the tray of lime in the bottom, also the old magnetic detector. I think I told you that I had both of these on the "Venture" out on the Pacific Coast. I can't recall at the moment just where I first ran into the crystal commercially. But I do remember having one of the "Princess May" when I brought her (as operator that is) from Victoria B.C. to New York. She had been sold to a fruit company there. I made one trip to the West Indies on her and brought back something like 40,000 stems of Bananas. Gosh did I ever get sick of eating the things. Soon as they started to turn yellow they yanked them up on deck and overboard, but we could take all we wanted before that was done. I used to like them and had so many that I have sort of lost my enthusiasm since then.

Of course I remember Grindstone Island very well, used to be one of the regular contacts with VCO. I can also remember Cape Bear, but never had anything to do with it.

Yes indeed the old operators seem to have had the wanderlust in their veins. Like yourself I have lost track of them all. Do any of these names sound a familiar ring in your memory - Taylor, Goddings, McAlister, Foreman, Penny, Garner, Whiteside, Holmes (I know one myself and have heard of another, outside of myself) Gagnon, Gilbert, his first name was Maxted. Webster, Jim and Sam Currie, Roy Bent, D.R.P. Coates, Bob Aikens or Aitkens, Carew, Williams - this lad had two artificial legs, - Bill Snailham, the latter was killed in the plane crash with Sir Frederick Banting. There are a number of others whose faces I can see in my mind but their names escape me.

I notice you refer to being at Camperdown, it seems to me that one of the Holmes I heard of was there at one time.

I also notice that you refer to a Wilson I was wondering if this was the same Wilson who was torpedoed just off N.S. in this last war and lost both his legs due to being frozen in the boats.

I have heard of Inder but cannot recall any Champion or Hinselwood. Mike Walsh ~~seems~~ seems to ring a bell with me but cannot recall where I ran into him or have just heard his name. I have heard of many occupations that former wireless ops. drifted into, but Hinselwood going into the Ministry is a new one to me.

It must have been pleasing and interesting to run into your old colleague, Hunter on the "Colborne" and quite a kick to pound the brass yourself. I am like yourself I can still read anything I hear on the radio and while the fist might have slowed up a bit, I can still do a lot better than some of the hams I hear on the air.

Of course some of the old ops. had to put up with some pretty grim conditions, but for my own part I did not do too badly. Some ships and quarters were better than others, but on the whole none of them were too bad.

I suppose you read in the press where Air Marshall "Gus" Edwards died in the States recently. I knew him quite well. When I was in Halifax around 1915 or 1916 waiting for a ship, there was a Hank Morley there doing the fitting up. He could not operate but was from Glace Bay, the same as Gus, and he used to get any of us ops. who were hanging around to send to Gus for practice. At that time he was training for the R.N.A.S. He was one of the party accompanying the Duke Of Kent when he visited Sydney some years ago. I had not seen Gus for over 20 years, and my how he had changed in appearance, mustaches, stouter and that sort of thing I couldn't recognise him as the slim youth I knew in Halifax. I made myself known to him and was he ever glad I did so. Made me accompany him behind the Duke on the tour of the Plant and we had quite a gab fest over old times.

Hope to hear from you again when you find a few moments to spare.

Very sincerely yours,

J. J. Holmes