

The Tuckerton Wireless

Transmitting and Receiving Messages Across the Ocean. The Wireless was in operation from 1912 to the 1940's.

By Linda Reddington

It wasn't the eighth wonder of the world, but it came close. The great Tuckerton Wireless station was the third erected in the country, and at more than 800 feet tall, it was an impressive sight.

Dr. Rudolph Goldschmidt of Germany designed a high-speed transmitter and chose Hickory Island, Tuckerton in Little Egg Harbor Township for its unique atmospheric conditions. The tower was built in 1912 by a German company, Hein Lehmann Engineering Company of Berlin.

Many local men were employed in the tower's construction and maintenance, and it was dangerous work. When World War I broke out, the U.S. Navy moved in and a board of censors was sent to the station to protect neutrality and all messages were screened. A court hearing was held and the U.S. government decided to allow the station to continue its transmissions, since the United States had little communication with Europe at that time.

On Feb. 8, 1917, all the German employees were ordered to leave the station. The Germans took residence in town at the hotel, and some of the others made efforts to return to Germany. Later, the remaining German workers from the wireless were interned in concentration camps at Fort Oglethorpe, GA. for observation until the end of the war.

In the fall of 1917, all personnel working on the tower had to be let go, or enlist in the U.S. Navy. Most of the Tuckerton men enlisted. In 1920, the Navy moved out and the French decided it was their turn to take over the station. The Germans declared that they had not finished their testing, and the case was taken to court. The French won, but only for a short time. Eventually, the U.S. government decided it did not want foreign powers in the country operating such a station and a new company bought the wireless station from the French. The company became known as the Radio Corporation of America, RCA.

RCA installed entirely new equipment, improved the antenna and added a second one. This involved the erection of 14 305-foot towers around the main towers.

It was during the erection of those sections that Herbert Atkinson took his famous fall. According to a document written for Dan Flomerfelt by Win Salmons of New Gretna, a gin pole was rigged inside the tower section to hoist the sections and support a circular scaffold for two men to work on. First the gin pole was raised, then the two tower sections, then the scaffold with the two men. It was at a height of 120 feet that the rigging slipped and the scaffold dropped 10 feet then stopped with a jerk. When they heard the clang, workmen who were scattered around the job site turned their eyes toward the sound. They saw the figure of a man, like a tiny doll, its arms and legs flailing, falling toward the meadow, 110 feet below. "My God, he's a goner," someone shouted, as the figure struck the meadow. It was Herb Atkinson.

He hit a soft spot in the meadow, on his hip. Charlie Buelow, who was on duty in the power house, called the late Dr. Carmona, who came immediately, gave Atkinson first aid and sent him to the hospital. It was found upon examination that he had no broken bones or internal injuries, and in due time, was as good as ever.

The wireless went on, transmitting messages across the sea and employing men like Irv Walton, Joseph Townsend (Townie) Cramer, George (Skinny) Graham, Ellsworth Flomerfelt, Earl Abbott, Warner Atkinson, Lou Speck, Nick Cullen, Harold Ireland, Paul Steinhauer, Leroy Kirchner, Cliff Budd and Franklin (Shebbin) Conover, George Shinn and Ralph (Fats) Pharo, just to name a few.

According to Townie Cramer, three or four men at a time would ride up the main tower on a boatswains chair attached to a winch. A tractor would pull the winch to raise them up so that they could scrape, paint and do other work that was required as part of the tower's constant maintenance.

"It was 765 feet when I worked there," said Paul Steinhauer. "Part of it had blown off during an ice storm before I started. My boss was Harry Rocheskey, the chief rigger. Clarence Van Doren was Rocheskey's assistant and Herb Walton also was a rigger. I was never up to the very top. My limit was 500 feet, but I worked a lot on the little ones. We only worked in the summer, not when it got cold — you couldn't climb, couldn't paint. Come October, most of us got laid off."

Electrocution was often a risk. "Harry got burned a couple of times — burned bad," Steinhauer said. "He died pretty young. When they were operating that tower, if you stuck your fingers in one of the holes up there, you could set your glove on fire," he said.



Photo courtesy of Antique Wireless Association
Dan Flomerfelt served at Tuckerton Wireless Station for over 31 years and retired as supervisor.

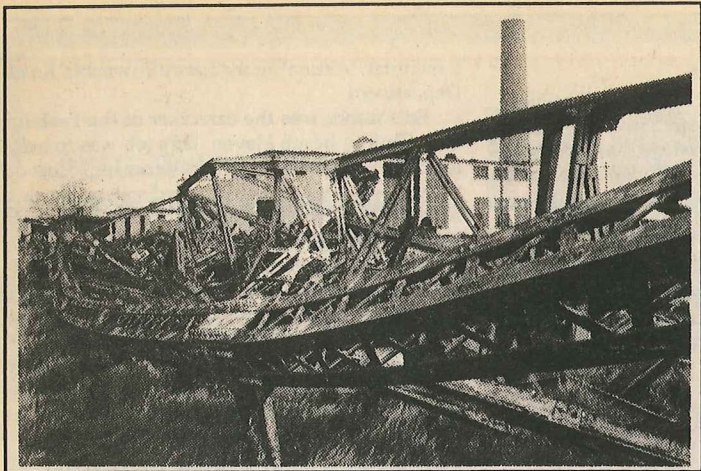


Photo by Burrel H. Adams

The Tuckerton Wireless, no longer useful, and in the way of development, was torn down in 1955. To those who worked there for years, it was a sad day. The art print to the right, is keeping the memories and history alive.

"We also greased the guy wires that were attached to the smaller towers that surrounded the main one," Townie said. "We would have buckets of grease attached to us. We would reach into the buckets with our hands, get them greased up real good and then slide down the wire."

Townie recalled that Gerald Eshelman was the top man for RCA when he worked there and Howard Smith worked in the office. "We got 50 cents an hour to work there," Townie said, "and 15 cents more to climb the towers. We could see all the way to Lakehurst from the top," he recalled.

When the United States entered World War II, the Tuckerton Wireless became an important part of U.S. Intelligence. Once again, the local men signed up for the military, but many of the enlisted men who worked at the station were allowed to remain and continue their jobs. The U.S. Navy, working hand in hand with British Intelligence, designed a system to locate wolf packs of deadly German submarines, then transmit the information over the Tuckerton Wireless to American submarines and destroyers, which maintained radio silence at sea but left their receivers turned on for the transmissions.

Some who worked at the Wireless Station at the time believe the station may have played a significant part in winning the war, although the popular rumor that the order "Sink the Lucy," referring to the Lusitania, has been poo-pooed by the experts.

When short wave transmitters came into use in 1949, the Tuckerton Wireless became obsolete and went on standby status. In 1955, those who had spent much of their lives working on the tower watched the Great Tuckerton Wireless, the tallest wireless tower in the entire world, come crashing down in a matter of minutes, making way for the housing development known as Mystic Islands. The great stone blocks used to anchor the tower are still on their original sites.

Today, only a handful of the men who worked on the wireless are alive to tell the tale, but photographs and artifacts from the wireless can still be seen in the Tuckerton Historical Society's Giffordtown Schoolhouse Museum and the Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen's Museum in Tuckerton. Many others remain tucked away in attics and drawers to be discovered someday by a generation for whom the days of the Tuckerton Wireless — days without air conditioning, television and microchip technology, are all but inconceivable.