

Tower of Suspicion in Tuckerton

By: Nick Wood

Today visitors wonder at the massive concrete blocks scattered around the Mystic Islands section of Little Egg Harbor, but few are familiar with the Wireless Tower's connection to the Great War. Wireless telegraphy, like the internet today, revolutionized

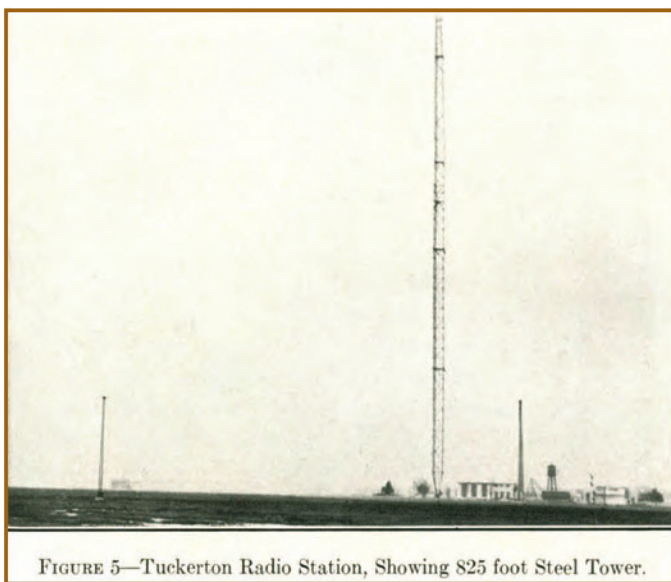


FIGURE 5—Tuckerton Radio Station, Showing 825 foot Steel Tower.

Tuckerton Wireless.
Photo credit: Ocean County Collection

ized the communications industry. With the opening of the Tuckerton Wireless a signal could be sent to and receive messages instantaneously from Eilvese, Germany – a distance of 3,876 miles without laying expensive undersea cables.

The major components for the tower were fabricated in Germany and assembled on site. Much of the labor used to construct and maintain the wireless, then the second largest structure in the world behind the Eiffel Tower, was hired locally. One of the primary qualifications sought in the new employees was their ability to speak German fluently and to work with the newly arrived engineers. The tower was in large part financed by the French, a fact that would throw the ownership of the installation into question for the duration of the upcoming war as the German's refused to turn over the completed installation to a country they were at war with.

Emil Mayer, a 28-year-old German engineer, received a career defining assignment when he was tasked to travel to the United States in 1913 to complete the construction on the Goldschmidt Wireless on behalf of the HOMAG company (Hochfrequenzmaschinen Aktiengesellschaft für drahtlose Telegraphie). Upon his arrival, Emil supervised the final installation of the sensitive equipment that made the wireless function. He stayed on as the Wireless' first Station Chief and settled into a large home on Main Street across from the wealthiest families in the town.

The wireless station took on new prominence with the outbreak of the Great War as the British cut the German undersea telegraph lines leaving the Tuckerton Station as one of the few unfettered lines of communication between Germany and the United States. President Wilson, concerned about remaining neutral in the European conflict, assigned Navy Censors to monitor communication in Tuckerton in September of 1914.

Emil Mayer, safe in the United States from the immediacy of the War in Europe, continued to administer the station under the Navy's watchful eye and to promote

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Work Crew at Tuckerton Wireless.
Photo credit: Tuckerton Historical Society



the temperamental Goldschmidt wireless equipment to his fellow engineers interested in wireless development. It was on one such occasion in 1915 when Emil was in New York attending the Society of Radio Engineers that he came to the attention of the Office of Navy Intelligence.

“The following day he met an officer of the

United States Navy on the Brooklyn Bridge, where they held a casual conversation, Mayer being at the time well dressed. About thirty minutes later he was observed by another officer of the United States Navy at the Brooklyn Navy Yard or in that vicinity, shabbily dressed and presenting the appearance of a workman, and a short time thereafter was seen by this same officer talking with a man wearing the uniform of a Chief Petty Officer of the United States Navy, whom the officer believes to have been attached to the [USS] Texas and who has reported to have made the statement he would blow up his ship before he would fire upon a German submarine. ... This same officer at the time jokingly asked Mayer if he were a German spy, to which the latter replied, ‘No, all the German spies are over in New Jersey.’” (Will M. Offley (sp), Division Superintendent, May 7, 1917) The report also notes that Mayer was sketching ships and taking notes on the Navy Yard, further casting suspicion on the Wireless’ Station Chief.

Given his attire, associations, and surveillance of the Navy Yard, the offices of Army & Navy Intelligence placed Emil on a watch-list and provided information to the Department of Justice. Over the course of the next two years, the Federal government frequently dispatched agents to Tuckerton to keep an eye on Mr. Mayer, going so far as to set up a counter spy ring in town consisting of the post master, rail station keeper, and a handful of enlisted informants. They also surveilled his house in preparation to seize any German State Secrets they believe he might be hiding there. Investigators gathered accusations of graft, transmissions of unauthorized messages, and improper fraternization with Navy personnel over the course of their surveillance.

On April 6th, 1917 when the United States entered World War I, President Wilson signed a broad-reaching proclamation stating that “An alien enemy whom there may be reasonable cause to believe to be aiding or about to aid the enemy ... will be subject to summary arrest”

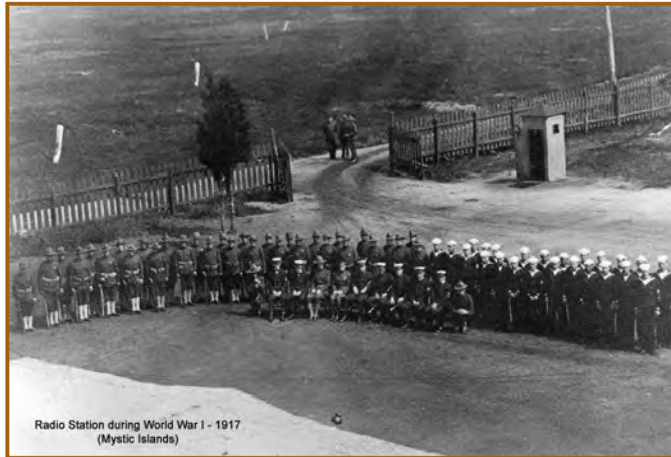
The Department of Justice immediately dispatched agents to arrest Emil Mayer and the other Germans who worked at the Tuckerton Station. Due to the irregular schedule of the Tuckerton Railroad at the time, the agents were forced to rent a car and did not arrive in Tuckerton until the next day. According to the diary of Eleanor Price, who lived across the street from the Mayers, “The rumor about town is that Mr. Mayer was conducting a secret wireless station at Manahawkin, one that could be taken down in the daytime.” The Department of Justice investigated the rumor with assistance from Navy personnel at the Wireless Station but discovered no evidence.

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Of his arrest, Emil said in a letter dated April 11, 1917:

“I have not had a hearing; I do not know what charges are preferred against me. From what scant information I got at my arrest I concluded that I am under suspicion as a spy.



Military Guards.
Photo credit: Ocean County Collection

After two and a half years of the most friendly co-operation with the representatives of the U.S. Navy in Tuckerton, this is rather a surprising thing. ... However that [references the tower construction] must be the reason for the suspicion, since during the whole duration of the war I have never uttered one word inimical to the U.S., not even because of extraordinary restraint on my part but simply because living amongst Americans I sought to see, and I believe I saw, their point of view. And as between men so between nations: Everyone has a right to his own opinion.”

To be continued next issue in “Internment” ...

26th Annual Ocean County Columbus Day Parade and Italian Festival



One of the performing groups: “La Teglia”
The Italian Festival will run from Friday, October 6th through Sunday, October 8th. The Columbus Day Parade will be held at 1:00 PM on Sunday, October 8th.