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OLD RADIO

“Sparks”

As radios were being placed aboard ships in the early 1900s, it created a job market for radio operators. Many a young ham ran away to the sea, to become known as *Sparks*. *The Old Man* (the Captain) would assign him to duty in the *shack* (many times it was a quickly constructed room out on the deck of a ship, a ship that was built long before the use of radio). As he *tickles his bug* he hears his rotary gap, the *Rock Crusher*, beat out his transmission. Sometimes radiomen would give up the sea, but would continue to work at *land-side* stations.

This month we are treated to such a story about a young man who ran away to the sea, and later became a radioman and known as *Sparks*. It is written by his son.

His Handle was Al

By Carl E. Hammond, W7WQA

Al Hammond was raised in Tacoma, Washington and ran away to sea aboard the lumber schooner *Lottie Bennett* as a cabin boy. That was in December of 1911. Eighty-two days later the ship tied up to the pier at Sydney, Australia. Al became a “man” during that passage. He stuck with the merchant marine service for the next 20 years and ended his sea-going career as a radio officer. According to his “World Wide Wireless, Service Record and Identification Certificate of Radio Operator,” part of which still remains intact, he served on the *SS Hegira* (7/29/26 to 4/26/27) and the *SS Lurline* (10/21/27 to 11/18/27). There were other ships and owners for whom he worked as a radio operator—including the Federal Department of Revenue during the Prohibition era. However, one of the most interesting stories was about his stint with Libby McNeil & Libby, a pioneer commercial salmon fishing and canning enterprise in Alaska.

The 1924 photograph was taken inside his one room cabin and radio shack at the Libby cannery site in Yakutat, Alaska, during one of his several seasons there. His radio log for the 1925 season is the only record that remains of his experiences at Yakutat. As a boy, I can recall many stories of this period in his career that are not recorded in the “log.” Two years earlier on his first trip to Yakutat, he with the aid of

some local natives, erected huge antenna-poles for the long wire antenna system. As you can see from the photo the radio station equipment was primitive by our standards today. It was a “spark-gap” transmitter, with power supplied by a motorcycle engine driving a generator.

According to Al’s surviving radio log, he arrived at Yakutat that year on April 8, 1925, aboard the *SS Libby Maine* to put station KKA on the air for the forthcoming fishing season. The snow was deep and the weather was foul. It was blowing and snowing too hard to get



Al Hammond, K7IJJ, using his son’s Heathkit AT-1 and Hallicrafters S-38.



The Libby McNeil & Libby Yakutat Alaska Salmon and Cannery Radio Station. Taken in 1924, it shows the combination radio shack and living quarters for Operator Al Hammond. This was pretty good accommodations for 1924 Alaska. If you look closely at the desktop you can see his key, and just to the left his *mill* (typewriter). The spark gap transmitter, behind the mill is the same as found aboard ships of that time. Behind his key is an early tube receiver that may be an early De Forest, but it’s hard to tell. At the right, just under the calendar, you can see the butt of the pistol he used to scare off wild animals who showed up from time to time. He kept that handy, just over his bed. I have posted this photo on my Web page (www.eht.com/oldradio/arri/index.html) so you can look at it more closely. If anyone has other photos of the Yakutat Station, please contact me by e-mail.—K2TQN