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OLD RADIO

The Wireless Boys

I've received e-mails asking to see some early stations. One question that I'm always asked is "What was it like to be a ham during the early years?" My fast answer usually is "Exciting!" But really it was much more than that.

The hard part is finding good examples to talk about. Most, if not all, of the operators from around 1910 are now Silent Keys. Their stations and most of their documentation are long gone, as families moved on with their lives. So we must search the early magazines and books to get a good look into those times; those times where we find:

Boys in the Attic

Many early stations were located in bedrooms and in attics. In the 1913 technical book, *Harper's Wireless Book*, by A. H. Verrill, there is a great photo of a

1910 attic ham shack. It clearly shows a teenage boy sitting at his radio, copying code. The photo also details the interconnection of all of the station's components.

In that book, a young Eric Thompson Bradley wrote chapter 10, *A Boy's Experience with Wireless Telegraphy*. It is his experience learning about radio, and building his own station. Later, he joined a Wireless Club made up of boys from a neighboring town. I will reprint this interesting chapter on my Web page, www.eht.com/oldradio/arrrl/index.html.

Another great book is, *The Wireless Man, His Work & Adventures on Land & Sea*, by Francis A. Collins, 1912. This book is loaded with wonderful short stories about radio operators. One chapter, *The Wireless Boy*, talks about clubs, [that] "are open to members of twelve years, and it is common for a club to limit its membership to boys between say fourteen and eighteen years of age." (See this chapter on my Web page.)

Attic Radio

One of my favorite books is *Riding the*

Air Waves with Eric Palmer Jr, 1930. Eric's family had enough money for him to have a very good ham radio station during the 1920s. He was also able to get a tremendous amount of publicity for himself, and for ham radio, due to some unusual happenings. His book is about his many adventures, both ordinary and not so ordinary. In reading his story, you get a glimpse into how exciting radio was to a young person back then.

Writing the book in 1929, he starts off in his first chapter, "Attic Radio," by saying:

We've got to what my dad calls the parlor stage of radio. What he means is that radio has gone ritzy. With fancy cabinets, to roost in the drawing room along with the curio cabinet and grandpa's picture. The idea is that radio has ascended from the attic era, or descended, rather, from the top floor corner to a position of state for the visitors to gaze at.

He continues, "But I'm still up in the attic. There are thousands like me, all over the world." And later he said, "Hams started the attic epoch in radio. That's where it really began."

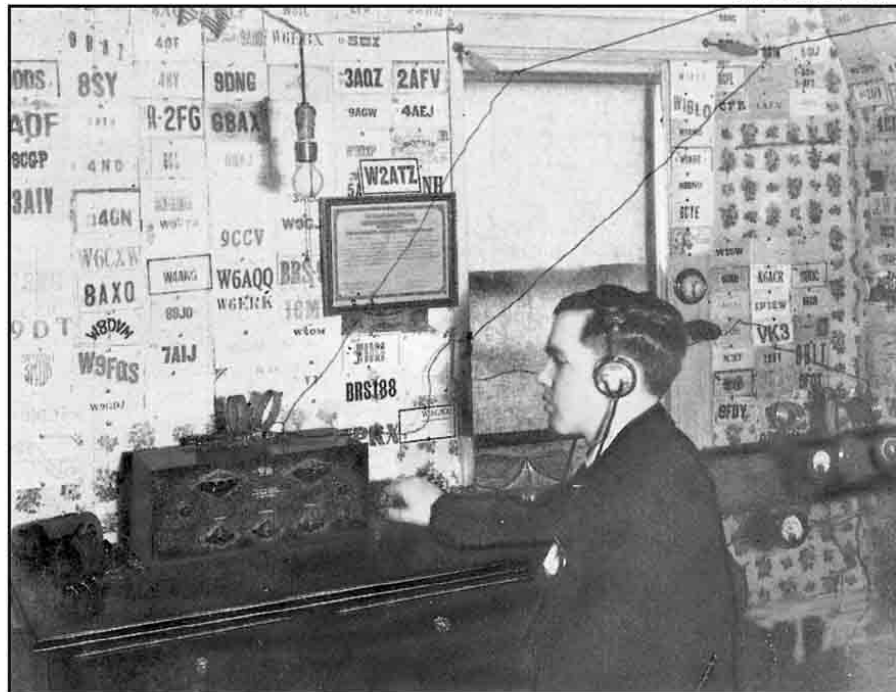
HARPER'S WIRELESS BOOK, 1913



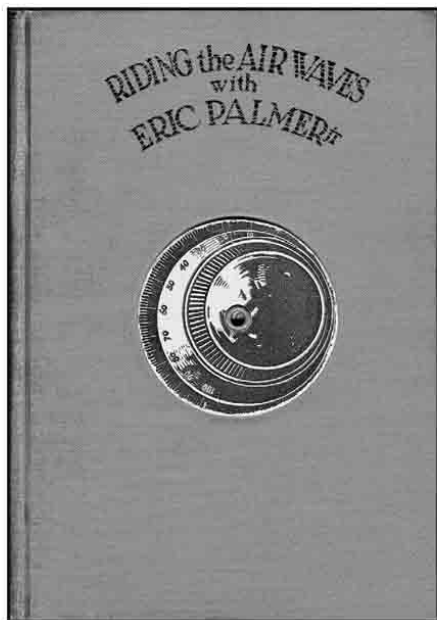
THE WIRELESS MAN, 1912



ERIC PALMER, W2ATZ



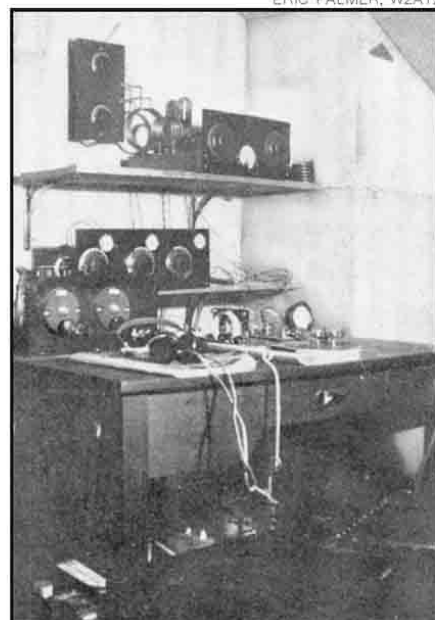
Eric Palmer, W2ATZ, using his 1926 Grebe CR-18 receiver in his attic station. His homebrew transmitter is at the far right.



The book is easy to identify with its paper radio dial riveted to the front cover.



Eric's good friend Joseph Goldstein, W2CRB, who helped him get started in radio.



W8CFR, the station of Robert Lloyd from Emsworth, Pennsylvania. Eric talked daily with him from Rio de Janeiro, and kept in constant contact with his parents in Brooklyn.

W2ATZ Makes the Newspapers

Eric tells the story where his parents were worried that he spent too much time on his radio and not enough time eating, going to school, sleeping, etc. It got so bad that one night his father removed all the tubes from his radio and forced Eric to go to bed at a reasonable hour.

He said this about his father, "But he was busy, I found where the tubes were hidden, and the next night I was chinning with a chap on a boat in Shanghai."

Eric continued operating too many hours on his radio, and after switching schools, then being suspended, his parents threatened to take the radio away from him.

He said, "About two months before he [his dad] had threatened to write to the Radio Commission and ask for a suspension of the license, but he felt that this would be rather foolish. Now he got so darn mad he sat before a typewriter and addressed a letter to the commission. He rushed right out and mailed it."

Someone in Washington leaked his father's letter. Three days later the Associated Press sent out a long story about it. The story had also gone out via the United Press, the International News, and a story was even printed on the front page of *The New York Times* by Orrin Dunlap Jr., the radio editor.

Now famous, Eric received copies of newspapers with his story from around the world, with headlines like:

Radio Killing Son, Father Seeks License Suspension

Dad Invokes U.S. Aid to Cure Boy of Radio Mania; Asks License Ban

Devotion to Radio Saps Vitality of Brooklyn Youth

Thus began the next phase of Eric's radio adventures. When a noted explorer wanted to search the jungles of Brazil for treasures in lost cities, and needed a radio operator, Eric was asked. Of course his mother said no, but his dad came through and allowed him to go. So at 17, Eric was off to Rio de Janeiro and the beginning of a great two-year adventure.

Throughout the trip, Eric kept regular contact with his family via ham radio with Robert M. Lloyd, W8CFR. I've included several photos from his book, including one of W8CFR's station.

Finding this Book

You'll have to find a copy of this book if you want to read it. I've included a photo of its unique cover to help you spot it. Copies are around, but they're not common. There are also articles about Eric in some of the old magazines, like *Radio News*.

If anyone knows what happened to Eric Palmer Jr, W2ATZ, in his later life, please let me know. If I find out anything, I'll update everyone in a later column.

Girls and Ham Radio

Eric enclosed two photos of girl hams in his book. We must remember it was a so-called man's world back then and girls were left out of many things. Ham radio had some great YLs, but most of them didn't get a lot of publicity. I'll cover



Visiting the Brazilian High Power Station in Santa Cruz. W2ATZ is at the right, wearing smoked glasses as a protection from the dazzling South American sun. At the left is Alvaro Friere, one of South America's foremost amateurs.

some of them soon. In the meantime, you can reread my September 2002 column, "The First 'YL,'" for an interesting story about a remarkable YL. Please visit my Web page, www.eht.com/oldradio/arrrl/index.html.—K2TQN

