

**SPARKS OPERATOR GEORGE AHRENS, W5JN, #907**

George's eyesight is about gone but attends our fledgling OOTC Chapter meetings in Dallas. This is from an interview with him on Sept 29, 1994.

I was born July 22, 1909 and lived in Norwalk, CT until 11 years old. Attended Williston Academy East Hampton MA. in 1924. At age 15, piddling around in the Physics lab, put a rig on the air (1AEN.) Obtained Telegraph license in 1927 and went immediately to sea. First ship was a 4 masted schooner, The Secony #90, towed by a tanker called "Vesta", New York down to Beaumont TX. I was the only operator, the only reason was in case the tanker got sunk. Worked coastal stations and checked in with the tanker every day at noon. It had a 1/4 KW quenched gap Marconi Spark. After three trips on that thing, I decided to get off. I wanted something better and got a job as Jr. Opr on a passenger ship. The good old Red D Line, Carabobo, New York to San Juan, La Guiara, Curacao, Maracaibo and back. It had a spark transmitter that had been converted to two 204A's that lit up the room.

Three months later I found a better ship, the Orizaba, Ward Line New York to Havana and back. One round trip a week, spark rig. I always shipped out of New York, on the East river pier 14 or 15 and North river pier 57.

The goal of every radio operator was to get a job on U. S. lines. I made 3rd opr on the Republic, an ex-German ship, it was a great big sucker, 3 stacks. Carried about 2000 passengers New York to Plymouth, England, Cherbourg, France and then to Bremerhaven and Hamburg.

Monitored 500kHz and 2100kHz. Constant radio watch with two operators, 6 hrs on and 6 hrs off. Handled passenger messages. Called on 500 and moved off to 705. 800 was direction finding frequency. Antenna was length between the masts averaging two hundred feet, two or four wire flattop, some cage. Single wire feed of 19 strands of #16 wire. I never had an antenna come down, they were very stout.

Receiver was IP501 WSA crystal detector, WWI surplus. Later had two 201A's, oscillator and amplifier. Power was ships generator 60 Hz. Press Wireless started about 1926-27, DeForest Radio.

Coastal stations in NY-WNY, NJ-WSC, FL-WOE, New Orleans-WNU, Tropical Radio Miami-WAX, RCA Port Arthur-WPA. Contacted U.S. coastal stations to about half way across then picked GLD Portsmouth, England. FFU Lisieux France and one down in Marseilles, FUC.

It was an interesting life out there I can tell you that. I gave up ships in 1940. I was ocean going quite a while. RCA acted as an employment agency. I took the Morro Castle out of the shipyard but was not on it when it was on the Asbury Beach. That was a bad situation. I continued sailing after I was married, I was lucky. I married the ship's nurse but nobody knew it. Against company policy.

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I knew I was going to have to quit some time so when there was an opening at an RCA shore station in Savannah GA, WSV, I took it.

I called Mount Vernon, New York my home. My folks lived in that suburb of New York.

When I was on the North Atlantic I did a little bootlegging now and then. The call used was 1AEN, which was the school call back in East Hampton, MA.

I used a straight key until finally got a Vibroplex. I still have my Bug, the one I went to sea with. The swing some operators had was called the banana boat swing way back then. The key (pump handle) was placed near the edge of the table on British ships and the American keys were mounted further on table and easier to use.

If a person was venturesome, he could pick the ship that he wanted. Could find out what ship was going where and boondoggle to get a job on that ship. Could travel anywhere you wanted around the world. I was a sucker for the North Atlantic, intercoastal, Carribean and west coast of South America. I went through the Panama Canal regularly, every 18 days, but had no desire to sail the Pacific.

When we went into Bremenhaven I used to regularly go up into Berlin and Munich. The German people were very hospitable. I eventually transferred to Tampa, FL as a Technician and later promoted to Manager in Galveston, TX.



GEORGE AHRENS, W5JN, AT HIS HAM STATION