The Day Mr. Marconi Came to Town

by R. C. Mazur, Radio Officer, VBA Thunder Bay, July 2009

Before the advent of "wireless," or radio as we call it today, many ships, their crews and cargoes were lost at sea, simply because there was no effective way to call for help, at a distance. Signal flags, lanterns, flares and rockets all had a limited visual range. The story of Guglielmo Marconi is well known. He was the first to build a commercially viable and reliable system, for use by land and ship stations, and the first to prove that these radio signals could cover incredible distances.

For many years (since 1902) there had been speculation when a wireless station would be established at the Lakehead. It took the MP James Conmee's hard lobbying, in Ottawa, before that would happen, in the fall of 1910, when an experimental Marconi station was located in Port Arthur, Ontario (now Thunder Bay) at the Mariaggi Hotel. Wireless equipment was also installed on the lighter (barge) EMPIRE and the tug JAMES WHALEN. The tug would tow the barge out into Lake Superior, to act as a floating test station and to extend the working range.

In late October 1910, the first Canadian wireless Great Lakes station, with call sign "MUG" was constructed at the corner of Dawson and High Streets, in the north end of town. It provided a commercial wireless telegraph service for the twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William, and to ships on Lake Superior. The first officer-in-charge was, 21 year-old, John (Jack) H. Bartlett, of the famous arctic explorers and seafaring Bartlett family from Brigus, NF. Jack would become the superintendent by age 24!

On 7 December 1910, the new station received its first distress call. The bulk cargo canal boat SS DUNELM had gone hard aground, in bad weather, near Blake Point (Canoe Rocks), Isle Royale. She did not have wireless, so distress rockets were fired and a passing freighter, who sent a radio call for help to the Port Arthur Marconi marine radio station, saw those. The JAMES WHALEN and EMPIRE rescued the crew, ship, and cargo. It was towed to the newly built dry-dock facilities for extensive repairs ($2,000,000 in 2010 dollars) and without any loss of life, vessel or cargo.

Four years earlier, in December 1906, it was a different story, when the SS MONARCH wrecked, near Blake Point (The Palisades) and the crew had huddled, for days, on the frozen, windswept shore. The Passage Island lighthouse keeper spotted their shore fires, and he bravely rowed out into the ship lanes, waiting hours for one to pass by, to get help from Port Arthur. Under very difficult conditions, the tugs JAMES WHALEN and LAURA GRACE rescued the crew, but the MONARCH was a total loss, and one crew died.
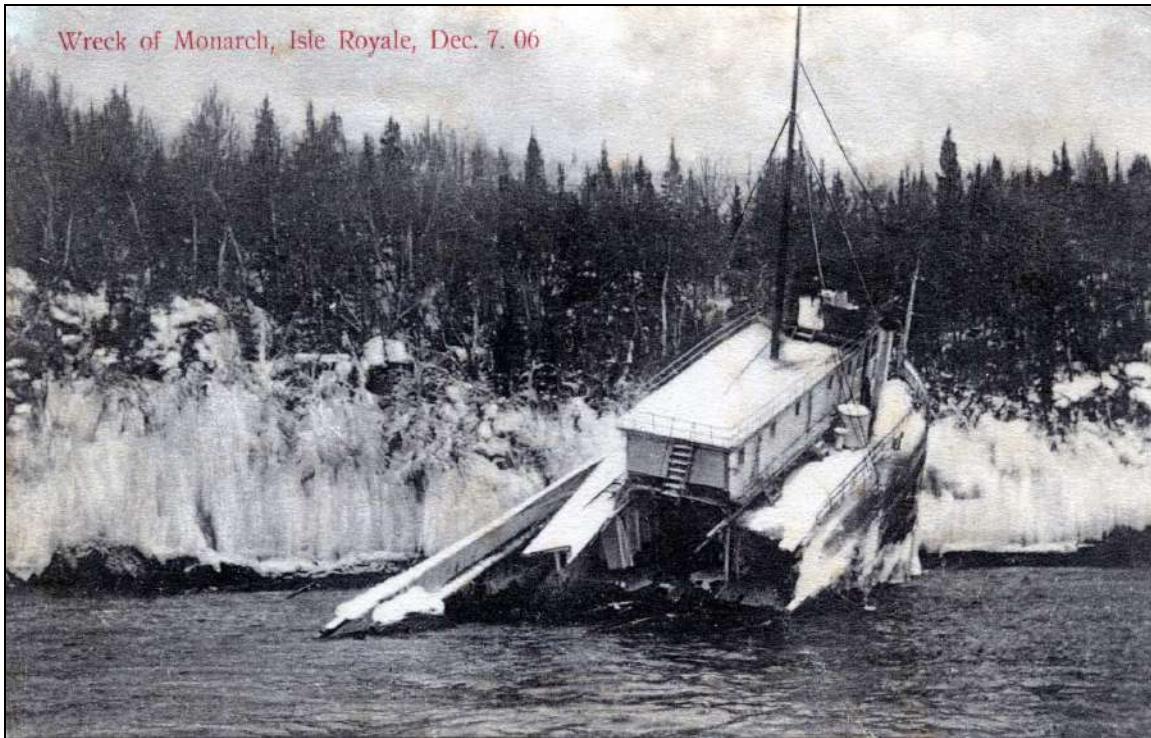
"Wreck of Monarch, Isle Royale, Dec. 7. 06"
Reverse: "Published by W.T. McKachren."

All that would change the day Mr. Marconi came to town. By 1914, the Canadian government built a chain of wireless stations, from Port Arthur to Kingston, and the station given its modern call sign of "VBA". The Marconi Company would operate these stations, under contact to the federal government, for many years, and rescues.

In the fall of 2010, VBA Thunder Bay coast guard radio will celebrate 100 years of public service.