

# VWOA NEWSLETTER

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2006



## 81st ANNUAL AWARDS LUNCHEON - 2006

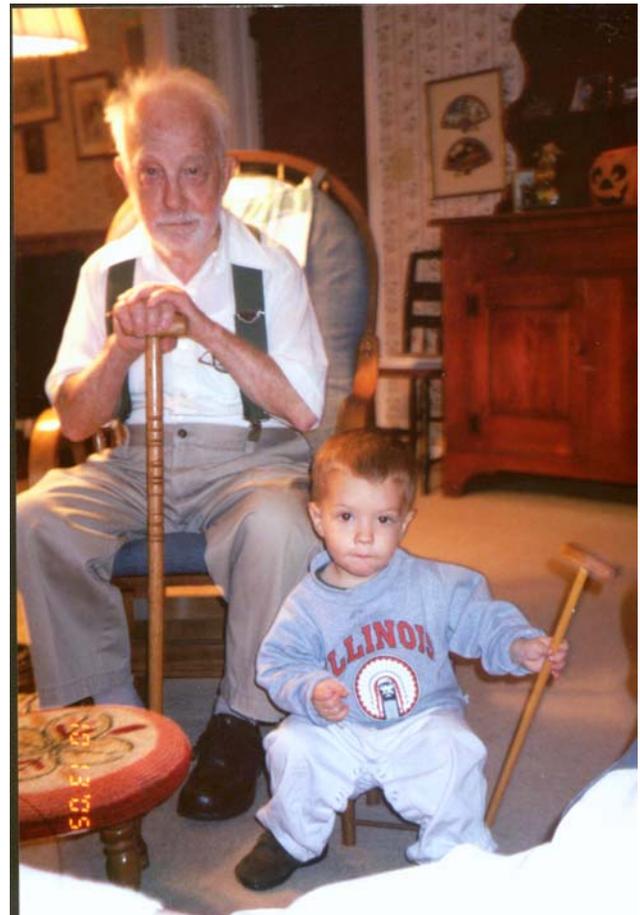
The 81<sup>st</sup> Annual Awards Luncheon will take place at a new location, on Saturday, May 20, 2006 in New Jersey at Schuetzen Park, Inc., 3167 Kennedy Boulevard at 32<sup>nd</sup> Street, North Bergen, NJ 07047

The Reception and Wine, Beer and Soda Hour will start at 1 PM followed by the Luncheon at 2 PM. You will have a choice of Broiled Salmon or Prime Rib of Beef au jus for the main course. The cost will be \$35 per person.

**John Haines Dilks III K2TQN** will be the Main Speaker at the Luncheon. He is well known for writing about Vintage Ham Radio and since the year 2000 has been providing an Old Radio Column in the QST Magazine published by ARRL.

The 81<sup>st</sup> Annual 2006 Yearbook will once again include business cards and QSL cards as illustrated in the previously published 80<sup>th</sup> Annual 2005 Yearbook.

This is an excellent opportunity for you to present yourself to all your fellow Veteran Wireless Operators Association members by including your own personal business card or amateur radio operator's eyeball card in the yearbook. Every member of the organization will receive the yearbook, which is a traditional keepsake.



*William C. Wilkinson N2HOH*  
The Oldest and the Youngest WILKINSON with their Canes and a spread of 90 Years



*William C. Wilkinson*

*Sparks on Isle Royale, Lake Superior in 1938*

## MY FIRST MESSAGE

**By William C. Wilkinson N2HOH**

My route to becoming a sea-going radio operator began in landlocked Indiana. I headed south to New Orleans to the Gulf Radio School. By the fall of 1934 the school had run into hard times, had downgraded, and was not impressive. However, in about two months I was able to obtain my first license, on 26 November 1934, with a grade of 94.2%.

That was the easy part. After four months I finally got a call from Mackay Radio, there was a berth coming up! When I arrived back in New Orleans I reported to the Mackay Radio offices and got briefed on my assignment. The SS Clearwater/KUGD was docked not far from Canal Street so I walked to the gangway and boarded her. The departing operator, Vernon Ray, was very helpful. He named all the equipment in the Radio Shack and showed me how to turn it ON and OFF. He also gave me a certain amount of guidance about the crew and the ship, and discussed what I needed to do as the Sparks member of the crew in order to blend in without too much friction.

I had arrived in New Orleans on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1935, and on the 23<sup>rd</sup> I was able to move onto the Clearwater with my few possessions. I had met the captain, Captain George C. Geetes and been accepted (on probation, I think). That evening the Clearwater dropped her lines and headed down the Mississippi River to cross over into the Gulf of Mexico to Port Arthur, Texas, where we would load almost a full cargo of cased gasoline. As we headed down river, my first travel on a ship, there was a certain amount of roll now and then. This brought on the barest sensation of queasiness. But it wore off during the evening and never occurred again.

I turned in at about a normal hour after listening on the ship's radio with marine traffic to and from other ships. I arose bright and early the

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following morning and hot-footed it to the shack and the radio. I had barely turned it on when I was astounded to hear this signal pounding in:

KUGD DE WPA MSG

WPA was the powerful marine radio station located in Port Arthur. It serviced the Gulf of Mexico and points south. KUGD was the call letters of the Clearwater, my ship! They wanted to talk to me! And they had a message for me!

I tried to recall all the instructions that I had received from Vernon and threw the big switch that started the 2-kilowatt spark transmitter. With a trembling hand I answered WPA:

WPA DE KUGD K

The shore station operator recognizing immediately that he had a greenhorn, sent each word twice at a slow code speed. We shifted to a slightly different frequency to avoid interference on the calling frequency. He then transmitted the message:

MASTER SS CLEARWATER  
NO DOCKING SPACE FOR CLEARWATER STOP  
REMAIN AT THE ROADS TO AWAIT A BERTH  
STOP DOCKMASTER

I copied it, each word twice, and hot footed it up to the bridge to deliver it to the captain. I knew we were approaching Port Arthur but I didn't have any idea where the "roads" were. I was

fortunate, indeed. We were then just approaching the "roads". The captain read the message PDQ and started procedures to drop the anchor. I had passed my first hurdle as a "Sparks".

The SS Clearwater was one of a fleet of eight ships operated by the Mississippi Shipping Company of New Orleans. The Clearwater was a freighter. She had been built in 1920, at Philadelphia in the shipyard located on Hog Island. As a result she was known as a "Hog Islander". There were 122 of these ships built and launched between 1918 and 1920, the Clearwater being the 81st. They were not beautiful but they did the job for which they were designed, carrying cargo throughout the world. They were 410 feet long and 46 feet in beam, carrying a crew of 32. They were not fast, about 10 knots under normal conditions.

The Radio Room or "Shack" was located in the Island amidships on the port side. It was about 8 feet athwart ship and about 6 feet fore-and-aft. The radio equipment, when installed, cost \$6000. The receiver was a 3-tube set and the transmitter was a 2-kilowatt spark set. The power was supplied by a 115-volt dc-generator located in the engine room. There was also a large bank of lead-acid storage batteries to be used as emergency power.

The Quenched Gap spark transmitter was on the desk at my right hand and the motor-generator was located beneath the operating table. Both

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were quite noisy. During the period that I served aboard the SS Clearwater, 21 March 1935 to 6 November 1936, we made six round trips between the Gulf of Mexico down the east coast of South America. We generally loaded cased gasoline, sometimes a deck load of lumber, various kinds of machinery, and general cargo at the Gulf ports. Thence we headed southeast towards Brazil. Our first port varied: being as far north as Para (Belem) on the Amazon River, from there south, and to the extreme south at Bahia Blanca, Argentina, below Buenos Aires

On return trips our principal cargo was coffee. This was shipped in 100-kilogram bags of un-roasted beans and while we loaded much of it in Santos the main coffee port of Brazil, we also stopped at small ports to pick up smaller consignments. These were loaded in slings from barges while we were at anchor.

Other than coffee we carried considerable cocoa beans in similar bags and on one trip we loaded a full hold of dried bones in Argentina. There were many stowaway bugs on this trip! Captain Geetes ruled a tight ship. He brooked little or no nonsense. It took me some time to become accustomed to his brusque manner, he rarely smiled or joked. He cautioned me on several subjects: take down those nude pictures from your cabin wall; be more careful of your water faucet to prevent flooding; playing poker with the crew is too much fraternization; get rid of that god damned monkey. [I had acquired

the monkey in one of the Brazilian ports for what reason I know not. It was not one of my best buys. I had not intended to keep it for long but this was taken out of my hands as it seemed to have disappeared one day. Jumped overboard or thrown overboard, I never learned.]

Life aboard ship as a radio operator was a breeze. It probably was the best position on the ship, even including the captain. I got paid a princely sum, at least in my eyes. I lived and ate on the ship, rarely ashore. My expenses were not great, mostly clothes of which I was almost destitute when I first shipped out. I purchased suits in New Orleans, all tailored to fit. Other clothes I picked up both in New Orleans and in Buenos Aires, mostly. There was a famous street in B.A., Calle Florida (Flower Street), that was kept free of motor traffic and contained many stores. I shopped there.

After the sixth trip I signed off to enter Purdue University.

**William C. Wilkinson N2HOH**

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## WVOA MEMBER NEWS

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Eugene Kauder W4PRS writes to the WVOA and submits one of his stories which he feels might be of interest to our membership. He provides a story that he had written for **THE RADIO OFFICERS UNION MONTHLY MAGAZINE** in May of 1975. The union has since gone out of business.

He recalls that his ship had just returned from the great evacuation of Saigon. In this evacuation, more than 275,000 Vietnamese were evacuated in this seelift by many United States merchant vessels and MSC civilian manned mariners.

The next issue of WVOA Email Newsletter will feature this pre-published write up of 30 years ago. Gene whets our appetite by stating that this story is just one of many stories he has to tell.

**LOOK FOR IT IN THE NEXT WVOA NEWSLETTER**

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VISIT [www.VWOA.org](http://www.VWOA.org) on the internet!!!  
Doug Stivison our 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President and Web Master of the WVOA Site has recently put the SPARKS AT SEA presentation by WVOA former 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President Miles D. MacMahon PhD available for ADOBE READER PDF file download and viewing. It is a great Wireless History Lesson to be shared with your friends and Grandchildren.

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We at the WVOA Newsletter would like to hear from you and try to pass along to the rest of the WVOA stories of events that you have experienced and that you feel the rest of the membership would enjoy hearing about. Send us a picture or two and we will try to include it in one of our Email Newsletters.

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We would prefer to hear from you by Email at:

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Or

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but if you must, send mail to:

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