



On 12 July 1999 the last commercial Morse code message in North America was sent from a Globe Wireless station south of San Francisco. This is a report on what it was like to be at that station on that day.

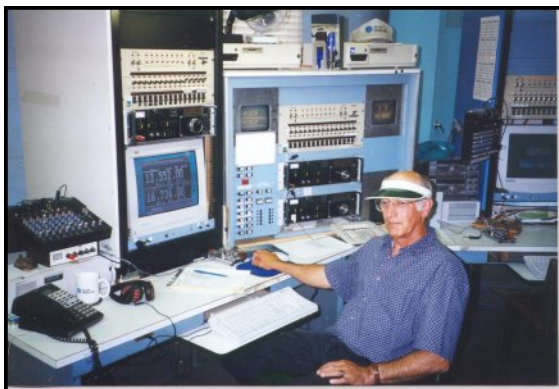
THE END OF MORSE

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Paul Zell



Richard Dillman

The end came yesterday. We knew it had to come. But the end had been predicted so many times for so many years while Morse soldiered on, paying no attention, providing good, reliable service for decades after it was declared dead... maybe some of us thought the day would never come. But when KPH/KFS signed off the air for the last time yesterday it was the end of commercial Morse in the United States.

It was a sad day but one I knew I couldn't miss.

Tom Horsfall and I were invited along with many others to be present at the Half Moon Bay master station of Globe Wireless from which the final messages would be sent. I held in my hand two messages I hoped to have transmitted. They were messages of greeting and farewell from the Maritime Radio Historical Society and the San Francisco Maritime Historical Park - typed of course with a mill on historically correct Mackay Radio radiogram blanks. I secretly dared hope that I myself might be permitted to send these messages. I brought along my favorite straight key in its carrying case and my radiotelegraph license just in case.

I have visited KFS many times over the years. On my first visit the operating room had nothing but Morse positions. Over the years the number of computers steadily advanced as the Morse positions retreated to the west end of the building. When we walked in yesterday both sides of the operating room were lined with racks holding sleek black computers and monitors. And way down at the end was the one remaining Morse operating position.

Tom spotted him first... Paul Zell, the Morse operator on duty. We knew him by his green eyeshade. All real radiotelegraph operators seem to wear green eyeshades. Pictures I have taken at KFS and KPH decades

ago show men in green eyeshades at the key or the Kleinschmidt. Pictures taken at those stations decades before show the same thing. I am convinced there is a secret ceremony of the green eyeshade in which the distinctive headgear is carefully placed upon the head of the operator newly welcomed into the fraternity. This is of course a ceremony we have not been permitted to witness, a ceremony that will never again take place.

I sat down next to Paul Zell as we listened to Russian and Cuban ships calling their respective coast stations. I realized that true to its nature, Morse will carry on in other parts of the world even after the keys in the US are finally silent. I had to ask Paul the question... "How are you feeling about today?" An impossible question to answer but he answered it. "CW (Morse code) was my life," he said and turned back to the receiver.

More people started to arrive, a surprising number of reporters among them. But the real dignitaries in my eyes were the radio men and women who knew they had to be here on this day. Jack Martini, manager of KPH when it shut. Ray Smith, the operator who sent the farewell message when KPH at Bolinas/Pt. Reyes shut down. John Brundage, manager of KFS in its golden age of Morse. Denise Stoops, the first female operator at KPH. Rex Patterson, chief engineer at KFS in its glory years. And many more. We swapped stories and I showed them my photo album. We ate from the delicious spread of food provided by Peter Kierans of Globe Wireless. But our eyes kept glancing at the clock. It was less than two hours to the end.

I finally screwed my courage to the sticking place and asked Tim Gorman, Director of Operations, if my messages might be sent and if, perhaps, I might be permitted to send them. Tim had met me only that day. I might be a fumble-fisted lid for all he knew. And he was busy with the press and with all the details of the ceremony. "We'll see...", he said. And that was enough for me.

The final transmissions from WCC/WNU began. We copied them off the air. The room fell silent. I noticed one man in particular. He was probably the oldest person there but had a presence that we used to call "spry". He had a quick laugh and twinkling eye. I watched him now. He stood leaning forward, eyes closed, as the sound washed over him.... drinking in... the Morse. He was a pioneer operator, the genuine article, no doubt about it. I wanted to meet him, to ask his name at least. But of course I couldn't possibly interrupt his reverie. (Later we found he was Dalt Bergstedt, a true radio pioneer.)

Paul Zell sent the first of the KFS/KPH sign off messages from the local position. Again we were all silent and when he finished... there was a round of applause! Applause for a radiotelegraph operator! Well deserved applause, deserved by every radiotelegraph operator everywhere, applause unheard for 80 years. Paul made a small, embarrassed nod of his head, accepting the tribute for himself and for all the operators on all the ships and at all the coast stations over the years.

Then he copied the last commercial message KFS would receive, from the Liberty ship Jeremiah O'Brien/KXCH on 500kc. The op on the O'Brien said he would standby until 15 past the hour. Zell replied "better make that 18 past, OM." The operator on the O'Brien understood and said that yes, he would observe the silent period - which of course is no longer required by regulation but is absolutely demanded by tradition. Then Paul said that he'd standby "on 600". The crowd got a big kick out of that - 600 meters instead of 500kc. Subtle, but all the more meaningful for that.

I saw Tim approaching me across the room. "Get your key...", he said. Get your key! Holy mackerel, they were going to let me do it! So I got out the key, gathered up my messages, and plugged in. But then I realized: the best Morse operators in the country... the best Morse operators in the world, probably... would be listening to every dot and dash I sent! They would be too polite to say anything if I flubbed it of course... but they and I and everyone else in the room and all the ships at sea would know! My palms started to sweat at that thought but there was no turning back now. I took Paul Zell's seat. I sent a couple of Vs to see if there was side tone in the 'phones. The knob on the key was loose! I tightened that up... and began to send.

I sent the first message from the Maritime Radio Historical Society and all went well. Then I signed the station calls.. "de KPH/KFS". Tom and a few others noticed that I sent KPH first and understood why.

Then the second message from the San Francisco Maritime Historical Park. And the calls again... followed by my "sine", RD, ... and AR. I had gotten through it! And there was a round of applause for me! Thoroughly undeserved but very much appreciated. Someone even said, "Nice fist". High praise indeed in that crowd.

Then the final messages from KFS/KPH began. Paul Zell sent the first ones. Then Tim Gorman sat down and proved himself to be much more than just a competent manager. He sent the final message in meticulous Morse using the chrome-plated Vibroplex, signed off with "What hath God wrought"... then SK... and it was over.

There were wet eyes in that room, mine among them. I heard more than one tough-looking old timer mumble, "I didn't think it would get to me, but..." and then turn away.

I had one further item on my agenda: to get my license endorsed showing me as an operator at KFS/KPH on the last day of North American Morse. Once again Tim Gorman showed himself to be a gracious and understanding man as he took pen in hand to write "satisfactory" in the blank provided for operator evaluation on the back of the license and add his signature.

Finally it was time to go. I gathered up my key and my photos and my papers and shook hands once more with all the great men and women who were there. And finally we were heading north on highway 1 with the beautiful Pacific sunset on our left and the green coastal hills on the right. "That was one helluva day," Tom said. "Yep," I agreed.

VY 73,

RD