

## C. B. Cooper – Tales of the Wireless Pioneers

*This is a professional biography of wireless pioneer Charles “C.B.” Cooper, extracted from a letter and text about him from Robert S. Palmer, SoWP 61-P, to William Breniman at the Society of Wireless Pioneers in 1969 (lightly edited, some paragraphs re-ordered). Archivists’ insertions appear in brackets [] and supplemental materials as endnotes.*



Society of Wireless Pioneers - California Historical Radio Society

[C.B. Cooper working for Lee de Forest in 1905 at Leadville, Colorado. The original caption for this photograph published in *Radio Broadcast Advertiser* in 1923 at page 276 reads: *THE FIRST DEMONSTRATION OF THE RADIO TAIL-E-PHONE* [--] *The Scene is laid in Leadville, Colorado, in 1905, when Mr. C. B. Cooper (sitting on the apparatus) was Superintendent of Construction for the United Wireless Company. Mr. Cooper is now a member of the Hoover Conference Committee, the Board of Governors of the National Radio Chamber of Commerce, and Chairman of its Broadcasting and Finance Committees, and Treasurer of the Radio Broadcasting Society of America. In 1917, he left construction work to organize the Ship Owners' Radio Service, in Seattle. Recently he started the C. B. Cooper Company, Factory Representatives. His company acts as New York representative for the Crosley Manufacturing Company]*

August 17, 1969 - Dear Bill, Enclosed is my fourth attempt to write a brief story about Charles B. Cooper. I don't know how to do him justice, so I make this one also an appeal to others who knew him to relate their own incidents in connection with C.B.

Perhaps you could add a list of some of the S.O.R.S. [Ship Owners' Radio Service, Inc.] District Superintendents that you knew. I met a number but names I can't recall except that on the reorganization and expansion in 1919 when C.B. was in N.Y., the only ones I knew were Willis J. Connell at Seattle, George V. Wiltse in Portland, and Ellery Stone in San Francisco. In the K & C [Kilbourne and Clark] bankruptcy and reorganization in the spring of 1920 Bill Connell quit and went to work for the Seattle Harbor Dept. [radio station] KPE; Wiltse came to Seattle; Jesse B. Weed went to Portland. About the same time Ellery Stone left to manage Pacific Radio Supply Company [San Francisco] and N.R. Kuhn was promoted to replace Stone at San Francisco. J.B. Ferguson was District Supt. in N.Y. while C.B. was General Supt.

Writing about C.B. without prejudice has been very difficult for me — I hope I have left out most of my personal feelings. I admired C.B. for his accomplishments, but he was never friendly with me. Probably he thought of me as a Marconi spy, but I really was not. Always I tried to foster a better feeling between the various people I met in the various wireless companies.

This ... dynamic little man, so full of ideas and bursting with enthusiasm for those ideas [which] seemed to be always the center of controversy in wireless during the twelve years he was in the Northwest. A good friend to many, a bitter enemy to others, he had some of the elements of greatness, but not all. A bull dog tenacity.

Once when Ellery Stone was S.O.R.S. Superintendent in S.F. [San Francisco], C.B. said, "That fellow thinks he is more important than I am." History will no doubt record that that was true, but I doubt that C.B. would ever admit it...

## Charles B. Cooper

By Robert S. Palmer [transcribed with minor editing by CHRS Deputy Archivist Bob Rydzewski and Archivist Bart Lee]

Hundreds of us — no one knows just how many — were given our first wireless job by C.B. Cooper. Operators, construction men, inspectors and engineers were hired and fired by him continually during his commercial wireless life from 1903 to 1923. He was one of the most active, dynamic people I ever knew. I feel inadequate to tell his story, as I only knew him for about 10 years, so I hope this brief story will bring memories from others who worked with or for him. His influence on commercial wireless development, especially in the Northwest, was great and he lives on here in the minds of many of us.

As I sit here in a room full of old apparatus, I can see many things C.B. bought or first used. The lamp on my desk was on his desk in the Polson Building at 67 Columbia Street, Seattle in 1916. The card file I use for addresses was bought and first used by him to keep operator and ship records, and still has in the back section his cards of Alaska SS Company ships. The original loose-leaf ledgers he used to keep ship message accounts are here. The 1914 Simpson wave meter he tuned the first K & C [Kilbourne and Clark, Seattle] sets with as well as a later Kolster Model A decimeter he used is here, along with 2 hotwire ammeters. (There were no antenna meters on the first K & C sets as was

the case with most Marconi sets at that time, so it was necessary for ship inspectors to carry H.W. ammeters as well as wave meters.) Many of the small tools he bought when S.O.R.S. [Ship Owners Radio Service] was first organized are still here.

Several generations of Marconi and RCA Seattle shop men generally did not realize that many of the tools and instruments they were using had been originally bought and used by C.B. when he first came to Seattle in 1907 as Superintendent of Construction for United Wireless. They were then passed on to Marconi and RCA.

He built most of the United Wireless stations in the Northwest and Alaska in the 1907-1911 period and hired the operators as he went along. In areas where United stations were built, amateurs soon followed and then the best of them were given jobs at commercial ship or shore stations by him.

The first commercial stations I saw were built by C.B. and the first commercial operators I knew were hired by him. He was definitely the “Mr. Wireless” of the Northwest between 1907 and 1919.

C.B. was born in Bracebridge, Ontario Canada May 13, 1882. He went to work for the DeForest Company as an operator in 1903 at Toronto, Canada. In 1904 he transferred to the Buffalo station, then Cleveland. He worked personally with DeForest at the St. Louis World’s Fair station. In 1905 and 1906, still working for DeForest, he was

Superintendent of Construction for several stations in Colorado and also in Texas for point-to-point service.

In the Lee de Forest autobiography he briefly mentions C.B. on pages 165 and 167 for his work in the Midwest in 1904.<sup>1</sup> But this is the only mention I have seen in any history book.

In 1907 the DeForest Company became United Wireless, and C.B. came to the Northwest to be Superintendent of Construction, first building [the station with the callsign] PC at Astoria and then [the station with the callsign] PA at Seattle. Other stations followed all over the Northwest, and five in Alaska.

Associates of C.B. in those early days have told me some of the difficulties he had in establishing reliable communication, especially on the point-to-point circuits in the summer when the ground dried out and the static was bad. At some stations they buried quantities of wire and chicken netting to try to improve the ground connection. He was especially noted for his ability to go to a new area and set up a station in record time at very small expense by recruiting enthusiastic local people, and using what was available to best advantage, for example often using trees for antenna supports by hiring linemen or high climbers to rig trees with guys and top masts and then cutting off the branches as they came down. Always active, he was not just the Boss. He got out and personally built antennas and connected wires, and taught others as he went along.

About the time Marconi took over United Wireless [in 1912] he became chief operator at Seattle<sup>2</sup> and hired ship and land station operators until he resigned in January 1915. During the several changes in management at Seattle during that period, C.B. was Acting Superintendent and was the one who really kept things going.

Marconi had always refused to sell apparatus for commercial use, but only leased it for one thousand dollars a year per ship. When the Lodge patents owned by Marconi expired in January 1915 it became possible to make commercial transmitters using those principles. K & C brought out the Thompson transmitter.<sup>3</sup> C.B. told me later that he thought this would be the start of a whole new deal in marine wireless. He was offered the job of Wireless Superintendent for the Alaska SS Company as soon as they started buying K & C sets and realized they needed someone to handle all operator and service problems.

He had known Frederick Simpson, Chief Engineer of K & C since coming to the Northwest. But now with the Alaska steam installations a closer association developed. Other companies, Puget Sound Tug Boat Company, San Juan Fishing and Packing, Pacific American Fisheries, Alaska Packers and others bought K & C sets and the need for a service organization for all of them developed. So S.O.R.S. as a separate company affiliated with K & C was organized by C.B. Business friendships he had made in earlier years were of considerable aid to K & C in selling their equipment.

In the original idea S.O.R.S. was just a West Coast company with a main office in Seattle with C.B. as General Superintendent, and a service man at San Francisco.

In 1917 K & C started building transmitters for the Navy, at first on a subcontract from Emil Simon for ½ K.W. sets and then a few months later K & C got larger contracts on 2 KW Navy set direct with the Navy. The negotiations on this required an Eastern office, so C.B. went to New York to aid in establishing the office at 149 Broadway, later moved to 80 Washington Street.

Connections made at that time were of assistance in dealing with the Navy and the [United States] Shipping Board when the 1,200 U.S.S.B. ships were put under private service inspection contracts at \$30 per month each plus labor and materials in October 1919. Marconi Company, Ship Owners Radio Service, and Independent Wireless Telegraph Company got about 400 ships assigned to each. This required each company to set up about 17 service depots around the country, so S.O.R.S. had to be reorganized and greatly expanded.<sup>4</sup> This kept C.B. busy travelling for several months. Many of the District Superintendents he appointed were old friends from United and Marconi days.

When the Navy took over all U.S. shore stations and most ship stations during the First War, C.B. became very much interested in having the government own and operate the whole marine radio service of the U.S. on a permanent basis after the war, with private companies

doing only the manufacturing and service work. The proposal was sponsored by Secretary of the Navy Daniels and even President Wilson was in favor.

C.B. made many speeches in connection with government ownership and appeared before congressional committees in an effort to get Congress to pass the government-sponsored bill. In this he was representing K & C as well as several steamship companies. Congress failed to pass any of the government ownership bills, so the Navy proposed that a government-sponsored private company be formed. With the aid of the Morgan interests in G.E. and others this eventually resulted in the formation of RCA who soon took over American Marconi. Even after this C.B. would not give up and was still advocating government ownership as late as 1921.

C.B. came west again in June 1920 to aid in reorganizing S.O.R.S. and K & C during the K & C bankruptcy proceedings. This accomplished, K & C and S.O.R.S. were able to continue a few more years, but by 1923 with the loss of a good deal of the U.S.S.B. contract revenue it was apparent that they could not last much longer trying to compete with the fast growing RCA monopoly.

As I remember he was less able or willing to forget or forgive stupid mistakes than was Arthur A. Isbell or Lawrence Malarin [both United Wireless managers in San Francisco].



C.B. left the [K&C] company about the end of 1923 and formed the C.B. Cooper Company in New York<sup>5</sup> to act as a factory representative for several radio manufacturers.<sup>6</sup> When I last saw him in New York in 1926 he was doing well and was very enthusiastic about the possibilities of a large export trade with Central and South American countries, mostly in broadcast receivers. This organization prospered and in 1931 the name was changed to Cooper-Di Blasi, which I understand is still in business [as of 1969] though C.B. retired in 1952. Charles B. Cooper died on July 29, 1961 just a month after the death of his first boss in the wireless business [from 1903], Dr. Lee de Forest.

Written by R.S. Palmer, August 1969

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<sup>1</sup> C.B. Cooper manned the wireless key at the de Forest wireless telegraphy demonstration at the St. Louis, MO World's Fair of 1904, communicating with Chicago, and later at station PH circa 1906 in San Francisco.

<sup>2</sup> In 1912, while working for Marconi, Cooper committed doggerel; namely, a poem "by C.B. Cooper" in the *Marconi Service Magazine*, April, 1914:

"WHEN RADIO MEN WERE POETS  
To the honorable Editor-in-Chief  
Who edits the grief  
In the little sheaf  
Of paper leaf  
We dedicate this dope beneath;

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And bespeak in the ‘Service Magazine’  
A place where it can well be seen.

G. C. McCarty from the ‘H. T. Scott’  
Says holidays are tommyrot,

And busted flat has returned to battle  
With radiograms on the ‘City of Seattle.’

[\*\*\*]  
etc.etc.etc. ”

(Quoted in RADIO PIONEERS 1945, by the Institute of Radio Engineers (New York – C.B. Cooper is listed on the General Committee):

<https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/iel5/30/4180181/04180204.pdf>, and  
<https://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-IRE/IRE-Radio-Pioneers-1945.pdf>;  
also available in hardcopy)

<sup>3</sup> “In April, 1916 Kilbourne and Clark’s manufacture of wireless gear in Seattle led to litigation with American Marconi. Lee de Forest’s old assistant C.B. Cooper acted as a principal in the trial. Kilbourne and Clark won in 1917. Marconi as a British company faced disadvantages in the United States. Only its absorption as part of the Navy-created RCA ‘naturalized’ it as American.” (Bart Lee, “Wireless Comes of Age on the West Coast,” AWA REVIEW (2011) at page 268, citing *inter alia*: “Kilbourne & Clark,” *Pacific Radio News*, Volume 1, No. 1, (January, 1917), and SoWP sources.

<sup>4</sup> The Ship Owners Radio Service, Inc. listed 12 US offices in 1921 (and London, UK) in a QST advertisement (see below) reaching out to amateurs, noting that all of its branch Managers had been amateurs. It asserted that it serviced over 700 vessels. (*QST* (ARRL) October, 1921 at page 65).

<sup>5</sup> Cooper served on then Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover’s Radio Committee in 1923, along with radio luminaries Maj. Gen. George O. Squier, of the War Department; Edwin H. Armstrong, Columbia University, New York; Dr. Alfred N. Goldsmith, Secretary, Institute of Radio Engineers; Prof. L. A. Hazeltine, Stevens Institute of Technology; Hiram Percy Maxim, President, American Radio Relay League and others. So reported *The Wireless Age*, Volume 10, No. 8 (May, 1923) at page 40: “‘The New Radio Regulations’ Secretary Hoover Accepts Conference Report and Puts It Into Effect — Future Broadcasting to Be Done Between 222 and 545 Meters — Every Class B Station to Have Exclusive Wave Length — Plan Expected to End Interference.”

<sup>6</sup> *Wireless Age* also reported on a related speech by Cooper: “INDUSTRIAL INKLING Joint Meeting of Radio Manufacturers and National Radio Trade Associations [-] OVER sixty representative manufacturers and jobbers of radio equipment heard C. B. Cooper, eastern representative of the Crosley Manufacturing Company, a member of the Hoover Committee,

explain the close co-operation that can be expected from the Government in radio matters at a joint meeting of the Radio Manufacturers Association of New Jersey and the National Radio Trade Association held at Newark, N. J., recently." (*The Wireless Age*, Volume 10, No. 10 (July, 1923) at page 74).

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[re endnote 4 above:]

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No. UM 533 Antenna Ammeter 0-5 RCA.	6.25
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No. 120A FADA Rheostat.	1.25
No. F-500 DeForest Rheostat.	1.65
No. PR535 Rheostat for C.W. RCA.	3.00
No. PR536 A-Battery Potentiometer RCA.	2.00
No. 21A Saco Clad Ampl. Transformer.	5.00
Brandes "Superior", old type bands.	7.00
No. 53-W Federal Liberty A&N 2200 ohm phones.	8.00
No. UC567 Tubular Condenser .00025 RCA.	1.20
No. UC568 Tubular Condenser .0005 RCA.	1.35
No. UC569 Tubular Condenser .001 RCA.	1.50
No. UC570 Tubular Condenser .0025 RCA.	2.00
No. HM-100 Hand Microphone, DeForest.	6.00
No. UV-200 Radiotron Detector Tubes.	5.00
No. UV-201 Radiotron Ampl. Tubes.	6.50
No. UV-202 Radiotron Transmitting Tubes, 5 watt.	8.00
No. 50 Pacent Universal Plug.	2.00
No. 156 General Radio Socket.	1.50
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