

Charles Herrold:
Radio's Forgotten Founding Father

An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

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Introduction

Today radio is an important mass media tool. It generates billions of dollars a year and elevates radio personalities to super stardom. But in spite of radio's importance, one of its founding fathers has been forgotten. When one thinks about radio, the names people think of are Marconi and Howard Stern. However few know about Charles Herrold, who was one of the most important men involved in early radio, and has the distinction of being the first man to broadcast regularly on radio.

Early Days of Radio

In 1899 one of man's most important inventions, the radio was made. It was known as "wireless" in those days and it astounded everyone with its remarkable abilities. Despite this no one really understood how radio could be used to its full extent. Its purpose was to link ships out at sea to one another. Because nobody thought that there was anything else radio was good for, people gave it little attention after its invention.

A quote from a contemporary technical magazine best describes the opinion of the average man :

Telegraphy without wires - how attractive it sounds. No more unsightly pole lines disfiguring the streets and highways, ornamented with the dangling skeletons of bygone kites. No more perpetual evacuation of the streets to find room beneath their surfaces for additional circuits that cannot possibly be crowded onto the staggering lines that darken the sky with their sooty cobwebs. A little instrument that one can almost carry in the pocket, certainly in a microscopic grip, and if your correspondent be likewise equipped, you may arrest his attention and talk to him almost any time or place... possible? Certainly. But will it pay?... The answer must be NO.¹

¹ "Electrical World" June 10, 1899

Early Years of Herrold's Life

Charles Herrold was born in Fulton, Whiteside County, Illinois on November 16, 1875. He was born to William Herrold and Mary Lusk Herrold. His father, a veteran of the Civil War, was also an inventor. He invented such practical items as the "automated prune dipper" and the "jumbo-wagon."² Herrold's mother was a school teacher.

Charles Herrold had little elementary education. In Fulton there were only two books on science in the entire town.³ These were two volumes of Zell's Encyclopedia.

In 1885 the Herrold family moved west to San Jose where they resided on North Fifth street.

² Sawyer, Eugene, History of Santa Clara County

³ Ibid

Education

Herrold applied to San Jose High School in 1891, and despite the fact that he had no elementary training he was accepted because of his brightness and high test scores.

It was during high school that he found an interest in astronomy. He began to work at a nearby observatory. There he designed and made machines to help with the work.

When Herrold graduated from San Jose High in 1894 he moved on to Leland Stanford Junior College. There he studied astronomy, his main interest at the time. He had to change subjects soon, however, because the professor moved.⁴ It was only then that he began to study electronics. One must wonder how the world would be today if the professor had stayed and Herrold had continued to study astronomy.

⁴ San Francisco Metro "Broadcasting News" Sept. 15-21, 1994

After College/ Start in Radio

After Herrold graduated from Leland Stanford Junior College, he moved to San Francisco. There he made a prosperous living designing, making, and installing electrical switches and other equipment. He did this until 1906, when the great earthquake rumbled across the Bay Area. Because of the mass destruction he felt an urge to move out of San Francisco.

He began to teach at Heald's college which was located in San Francisco. The college is still around today but now it is a business college. After several years of teaching at Heald's he moved to San Jose and opened his own vocational school, Herrold's College of Wireless and Engineering which opened in 1908 in San Jose.

Herrold opened his radio station as a project for his students. All of the equipment in the station was his own design. From the antenna to the microphone, (which he later patented) everything was made by him.

When Herrold began to broadcast he soon found out that almost no one had a radio to listen to him. He then made his students make radios and hand them out on the street, encouraging people to listen to the station.⁵

Herrold broadcast by the call letters RN. At this time the Federal Communications Commission had not been created so Herrold's call letters were only two letters, not like today's standard three or four. Herrold continued to broadcast only news at regular intervals. But in 1912, in order to fill dead time, he began to buy records from a nearby record store and broadcast them over the air. By the next day the record that had been broadcast would be sold out at stores across San Jose.⁶

As the years passed, Herrold's high tech. station's equipment was becoming more and more obsolete. Herrold's station was one of the last to convert to vacuum

⁵ Fogelquist, Gary. "Station KQW Pioneer report, 1970

⁶ San Francisco Metro "Broadcasting News" Sept. 15-21, 1994

tube technology. Herrold's old antenna used "11,500 feet of copper wire" and crowded the Garden City Bank Building's roof where the station was located.⁷ The antenna also would crowd the AM wave-band by blocking out all other radio station's broadcasts in the area.

When Word War I broke out in 1917 the military banned all civilian radio broadcasts because they thought that it would interfere with ship-to-ship communications. Herrold went on teaching at his college but did not include his radio station as part of his lessons.

⁷ Fogelquist, Gary "Station KQW" Pioneer paper

Return to Radio

Herrold began to broadcast once more in 1922. The early twenties would be a bad time for Herrold. Both his parents died in 1920 and he was divorced from his wife, Sybil, who was one of the first people to broadcast on Herrold's station.⁸ Sybil quickly remarried and Herrold's only son would not take on his last name but would instead be called by his stepfather's name.

Still Herrold did broadcast once more. This time The FCC was in operation and Herrold was one of the first to get a broadcasting license. Herrold was not the first to receive his FCC license and because of this others have said that he was not the first to broadcast regularly. The station now was equipped with new vacuum tube transmitters and although the range of this transmitter was not as good, others could now broadcast in the Bay Area. At this time Herrold owned the entire rights to the station now called KQW.

During these pioneering days of radio Herrold asked the FCC if it would be appropriate to broadcast advertisements or commercials. The FCC responded saying that it would be all right but not profitable. This represents one more case where Herrold's vision proved others wrong.

Herrold soon needed a new place to broadcast and the First Baptist Church in San Jose allowed Herrold to use their property. Because of this the church gained half of the rights to the station. Ultimately, Herrold did not like the church's authority and sold them the rest of the rights to KQW in 1924.

The church kept the station for only six years, 1924 to 1930, when it sold KQW to the Santa Clara Farm Bureau. In 1949 the Farm Bureau sold the station to CBS.⁹ CBS moved the station to San Francisco where it still remains today as the station KCBS.

⁸ San Francisco Metro "Broadcasting News" Sept. 15-21, 1994

⁹ Century of Service San Jose Bicentennial Commision Inc., 1977

Later Years/ Remembrance

Herrold drifted until he could find a steady job as an audio-visual repair man in Oakland schools. Later during World War II he worked in the San Francisco shipyards. He was sent to a Hayward rest home where he died in 1948 at the age of seventy-three. He is buried in San Jose, at the Oak Hill Cemetery.

He did not leave behind much. A thriving radio station that he was no longer affiliated with, a son who did not share his last name, and a few small plaques in San Jose that few look at and those who do, usually do not know his story.

It was only in recent years that a few people began looking through old newspapers and reports to find out what Herrold really accomplished. He was the first person to regularly broadcast on radio, he made almost a dozen inventions (ranging from dental drills to water cooled microphones and oscillators), and he changed the way people viewed radio. Because of him radio is used to inform and entertain people, not just used as ship-to-ship communications.



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