

THE 1921 TRANSATLANTIC TESTS AND THE RADIO CLUB OF AMERICA

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Most GVARC members are familiar with the history of ARRL, but the other organization responsible, with ARRL, for the success of the 1921 Transatlantic Tests, the Radio Club of America, may be less familiar.

RCA, not to be confused with the electronics company, is the oldest radio club in the world that is still in existence. It is unique in that it includes all phases of wireless communication: amateur, government and commercial. Approximately half its members are licensed amateurs. The club gives awards to recognize significant contributions to the radio art, as well as scholarships to promising students.

RCA's story began in 1907 with 11-year-old William Earle Dodge Stokes, Jr., who lived at Broadway and 73rd Street in New York City. That's a lot of names for an 11-year-old to carry around, so he went by his initials and was known as "Weddy." Weddy and his friends were fascinated by wireless telegraphy. Magazines were full of plans for building wireless stations, typically consisting of a small spark gap transmitter and a crystal detector for receiving. The kids taught themselves Morse code and were able to communicate around the neighborhood, up to a mile or two, until later in the evening when the larger stations came on, with ranges of 10-20 miles or even more. Licenses did not exist in 1907; that didn't happen until 1912.

The club grew, and in January 1909 Weddy's father, who happened to be a lawyer, incorporated it as the Junior Wireless Club, Limited. It continued to attract members, adults as well as teenagers, and adopted its present name in 1911.

Many of those who joined were faculty and students of Columbia University, including RCA's most famous member, Edwin Howard Armstrong. He is best remembered today as the inventor of FM radio, but that was much later. It was his invention of the regenerative and superheterodyne receivers and the vacuum tube oscillator, during and after World War I, that made the 1921 Transatlantic Tests possible and made Armstrong a very wealthy man. By 1920, amateurs using Armstrong's inventions were communicating over distances of 1000 miles or more.

Before leaving Weddy, we should note that he had more in common with us than our interest in radio. Besides being a Dodge and a Stokes, Weddy was also a Phelps, whose great-grandfather started a copper mining company called Phelps Dodge. So, the next time you see Green Valley's copper mine, which Phelps Dodge built, think of Weddy.

Other RCA members who made essential contributions to the success of the Transatlantic Tests included Paul Godley, 2ZE, the receiving operator in Scotland; Harold Beverage, 2BML, inventor of the antenna that bears his name; and of course Minton Cronkhite, 1BCG, on whose family estate in Greenwich, CT, the club's transmitting station was built and whose callsign was therefore used.

Despite their similar names, there has never been a rivalry between ARRL and RCA. I received my RCA Fellow award at its 1991 annual dinner, as did then ARRL CEO Dave Sumner, K1ZZ, and ARRL president Kay Craigie, N3KN. For more information, see <http://www.radioclubofamerica.org>

