

Wireless and the Amateur: A Retrospect

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ON DECEMBER 13, 1912, the new wireless law went into effect.¹ The average wireless “fiend” who has not followed the topic from the start will be interested in the following facts:

The very first talk about Wireless Legislation in the country started in 1908. The writer in his Editorial in the November, 1908, issue of *Modern Electrics* pointed out that a wireless law was sure to be passed in a very short while.² In order to guard against unfair legislation as far as the wireless amateur was concerned the writer, in January, 1909, organized the “Wireless Association of America.”³ This was done to bring all wireless amateurs together and to protest against unfair laws. Previous to this time there was no wireless club or association in the country. In January, 1913, there were over 230 clubs in existence, all of which owe their origin to the “Wireless Association of America.”

The association had no sooner become a national body than the first wireless bill made its appearance. It was the famous Roberts Bill, put up by the since defunct wireless “trust.” The writer single handedly, fought this bill, tooth and nail. He had representatives in Washington, and was the direct cause of having some 8,000 wireless amateurs send protesting letters and telegrams to their congressmen in Washington. The writer’s Editorial which inspired the thousands of amateurs, appeared in the January, 1910, issue of *Modern Electrics*.⁴ *It was the only Editorial during this time that fought the Roberts Bill.* No other electrical periodical seemed to care a whoop whether the amateur should be muzzled or not. If the Roberts Bill had become a law there would be no wireless amateurs to-day.

¹Refers to the Radio Act of 1912, which placed the allocation of radio spectrum and the licensing of public and private stations under the authority of the US Secretary of Commerce and Labor, then Charles Nagel, the last person to hold the position before the formation of the Federal Trade Commission in 1914.

²See **The Wireless Joker**.

³See **The Wireless Association of America**.

⁴See **The Roberts Wireless Bill**.

That editorial quickly found its way into the press and hundreds of newspapers endorsed the writer's stand. During January, 1910, the *New York American*, the *New York Independent*, the *New York World*, the *New York Times*, the *Boston Transcript*, etc., all lauded and commended the writer's views.⁵ Public sentiment quickly turned against the Roberts Bill and it was dropped.

The first wireless bill not antagonistic to the amateur, The Burke Bill, appeared on March 8, 1910. It had some defects, however, and was dropped also. The Depew Wireless Bill appeared May 6, 1910, but did not meet with general approval; as the writer pointed out in his Editorial in the June, 1910, issue of *Modern Electrics*, it had several undesirable features, and the bill was never seriously considered, although it actually passed the Senate.⁶

At last the Alexander Bill made its appearance on December 11, 1911. This bill as far as the amateur was concerned was not quite acceptable to the writer, who had the amateurs' rights at heart and steps were immediately taken to bring about an amendment as the writer, perhaps more than anyone else, realised that this bill, in some term or other, would become a law sooner or later. This is clearly stated in his Editorial in the February, 1912, issue of *Modern Electrics*.⁷ In that Editorial is to be found also *the first and now historical recommendation* that if a wireless law was to be framed it should restrict the amateur from using a higher power than 1 kw, and his wave length should be kept below 200 metres. No one else had thought of it before, and it is to be noted that when Congress finally passed the present wireless law, it accepted the writer's recommendation in full, thus paying him the greatest compliment, while at the same time acknowledging the fact that he acted as the then *sole* spokesman for and in behalf of the wireless amateur.

In March, 1912 the writer, in a letter to the *New York Times* (See page 24, April, 1912, issue *Modern Electrics*) pointed out the shortcomings of the Alexander Bill, and protested against unfair legislation.⁸

⁵Gernsback: "See Editorial article February, 1910, *Modern Electrics*."

⁶Gernsback: "See Editorial, August, 1910, *Modern Electrics*"

⁷See **The Alexander Wireless Bill**.

⁸The letter to the *Times* editor reads:

I note your timely article on "The Wireless Control Bill." While you have taken your stand very well, as far as the commercial interests go, I would like to give the views of the wireless experimenters and amateurs whom I have represented for the last six years.

Although it is not generally known, there are to-day close to 400,000 wireless experimenters and amateurs in the United States alone. The Wireless Association of America to-day numbers 16,189 members, and there are now 122 wireless clubs and subsidiary wireless associations scattered from coast to coast.

Much has been written and said against the wireless amateur, and while it is true that some mischief has been done, report has never been made of any case where serious damage was done, except in a single instance a few years ago, when a Massachusetts amateur transmitted a false "S. O. S." call, which sent a United States Government boat out on a fool's errand. On the other hand, the amateur has done a great deal of good by taking up distress calls, and it should

The Times, as well as a host of other newspapers, took up the cry and published broadcast the shortcomings of the Alexander Bill.

All this agitation had the desired effect and Mr. Alexander for the first time realized that the amateur could not be muzzled, especially when there was such a periodical as *Modern Electrics* to champion his cause. Promptly in April the Alexander Wireless Bill, *amended*, appeared and here for the first time in history the amateur and his rights are introduced in any wireless bill.

Mr. Alexander and his advisers accepted the writer's recommendation as set forth in his Editorial in the February, 1912, issue of *Modern Electrics* and the new paragraph (15) in the amended bill reads thus:

Fifteenth. No private or commercial station not engaged in the transaction of bonafide commercial business by radio communication or in experimentation in connection with the development and manufacture of radio apparatus for commercial purposes at the date of passage of this Act, *shall use a transmitting wave length exceeding two hundred meters, or a transformer input exceeding one kilowatt*, except by special authority of the Secretary of Commerce and Labor contained in the license of that station.

It will be noted that it copied the writer's recommendations word for word.

be understood that good work has frequently been done in the past by amateurs receiving and transmitting such calls where they would probably not have been received by the few commercial and Government stations. Furthermore, a great many amateurs, while not necessarily schoolboys, have done much to further the art in general, and many patents have been taken out during the last three years by such students interested in wireless.

The interests which would like to see the Alexander bill passed have evidently not looked very much into the future. On account of the vast distances in this country, radio-telegraphic and radio-telephonic intercommunication will positively find a distinct usefulness, greater without doubt than that of the present telephone. An immense usefulness alone will be found in radio-telephonic stations between moving vehicles and fixed posts.

There is a feature in wireless which perhaps is not appreciated. It has been recognized that, on account of the great interest which a young man finds in the study of wireless, this new art does much toward keeping him at home, where other diversions usually, sooner or later, lead him to questionable reports; and for this reason well informed parents are only too willing to allow their sons to become interested in wireless. If it were only for this reason, it would be worth while not to curb enthusiasms for the new art. The public fully shares this view, which has been proved time and again.

H. GERNSBACK

Business Manager Wireless Association of America, Editor *Modern Electrics*

New York, March 27, 1912

H. GERNSBACK, "4000,000 WIRELESS AMATEURS.: To Discourage Their Work Would Check Progress in the Art." *New York Times*, (March 1912): 12, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/97272129/abstract/DEC375C239DE4859PQ/4?accountid=10226>.

The amateur had at last come into his own. This is all the more remarkable as this is the only country that recognizes the wireless amateur.

On May 7, 1912, the Alexander Bill, amended, now known as S-6412, passed the United States Senate and on May 8th was sent to the House of Representatives and referred to the Committee on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries.⁹ The bill was signed on August 13th by President Taft, thus making it a law.

In the March, 1912, issue, *Modern Electrics* long before the passage of the wireless law and ahead of any other periodical published an article on "Limited Wave Lengths" preparing the amateur for the new law and paving the way towards standardizing amateur stations.

Finally in the November, 1912, issue, page 829, the full text of the new wireless law was published, and it was announced that the law would go into effect December 14, 1912.

In the December, 1912, issue, (page 922) the new law was fully discussed and all phases explained.

Again *Modern Electrics* was the only periodical to publish the license blanks and to show the amateur how to fill them out. No other periodical had enough interest in the amateur to render this important service to him.

And last but not least in this issue we are printing a facsimile copy of an original license, which up to the present minute closes amateur wireless history in the United States.

This terminates the fight which the writer has waged single-handedly for almost five years in behalf of the American amateur. It must be apparent even to the layman, who has not followed the evolution of the present law, that unquestionably the entire credit for obtaining the amateur's rights belongs to *Modern Electrics*. This is freely admitted today by all. The indisputable facts enumerated in this article make this clear.

Now that it is all over, and that Uncle Sam has set his seal of approval upon the amateur's wireless, the writer cannot but extend his heartiest congratulations to the 400,000 American amateurs; and he furthermore wishes to extend his thanks to all the amateurs who have supported him in his fight to bring about a new wireless era in America.

Long live the Wireless! Long live the Amateur!!

⁹Gernsback: "See June, 1912, issue *Modern Electrics*, page 245."