

Living in the Past

Historical perspective



The father of amateur radio

Many of us recognize the name **Hiram Percy Maxim** as belonging to one of the key historical figures in the beginnings of amateur radio, and to the title photo of this column. But did you know that this man invented the firearm silencer, developed mufflers for internal combustion engines, was a filmmaker, developed one of the first electric cars, invented the gasoline-powered tricycle, and took first place in the first closed-circuit automobile race in the US?

Hiram was born in 1869, then graduated from [MIT in Mechanical Engineering at the age of 17](#), after which he started work at a Boston electric utility company.



Hiram's father [invented the first portable automatic weapon](#), used extensively during World War I. It was on the shirttails of [his father's inventions](#) (hair curling iron, mouse trap, amusement park ride, among others) that Hiram felt free to experiment with his own ideas. The young Hiram developed mufflers for the noisy automobile engines of the day, which led to his invention of the firearm silencer. Eventually, public outcry against the silencer out of fear caused Hiram to [discontinue production](#) on it around 1930.

Maxim was a [filmmaker](#) at one time, having founded the Amateur Cinema League in 1926, and served as its first president. Maxim wrote about his youth in an account, which was made into a 1946 [film starring Myrna Loy and Don Ameche](#), who played Hiram's namesake.

Hiram's amateur career began in 1911, when his 11-year-old son became interested in wireless telegraphy with a schoolmate who had just constructed a wireless set. The skeptical Hiram asked his son for a demonstration by sending a specific question, so the young lad had two of his schoolmate friends send messages to each other, and the boy repeated the answer to his dad. The amazed Hiram was hooked on amateur radio since that day (*QST*, January 2014, page 9), often referring to himself as *The Old Man*.



It became apparent to Hiram that the wireless of his day did not have much range, but that its use in an emergency or military application was indispensable. To solve this problem, he set up several wireless stations between incident points, each relaying messages from one station to the next. Hiram founded ARRL, the [American Radio Relay League](#) in 1914 to recruit operators for such relay stations. He also "became a champion of the rights of amateur operators, and was instrumental in opening shortwave and ultra-shortwave radio to them."

Hiram passed away in 1936, and his wife Josephine 11 days later. Numerous hams joined in a [Final 73 at his funeral](#) in Maryland (*QST*, April 1936), titling him the *Father of Amateur Radio*.