

Living in the Past

Historical perspective



The first ham

In 1901, after hearing about Guglielmo Marconi's amazing feat of sending the letter "S" over the Atlantic without wires, a young boy by the name of Irving was intrigued. Barely 11 years old, Irving begged his parents to take him to [attend a lecture](#) Marconi was soon planning in Newfoundland. Accompanied by their minister, they relented and took the trip.

Marconi, who was addressing a hall of engineers and scientists, took special note of the young boy among this college of wizards, and was impressed enough to give the young lad parts (coherer and tapper) to take home and assemble into a receiver. Irving did so, even though there was no transmitter to hear, but he knew it worked, because it detected the doorbells ringing up and down his street.

Irving soon built a [spark-gap transmitter](#), and became so proficient at wireless communication, that each of several ships offered him a job as its wireless operator, even as a high school student. In 1912, the US government established wireless licensing rules, and required all wireless operators to become licensed. When Irving heard about the new rules, he rushed down to the Brooklyn Navy Shipyard, [took and passed the exam](#), and became the first licensed wireless operator. And being a non-professional operator, he also became the first licensed radio amateur in the US, and many claim, the world.

Once licensing and call sign rules evolved and became more established, **Irving Vermilya** became W1ZE, and had made numerous friends through his hobby. Irving served in the Navy during World War I, and after returning, helped start up several broadcast radio stations, some of which are the first in the US.

And speaking of firsts, Irving was one of the first to mentor a female amateur ([Eunice Randall](#), who almost always beat Irving in code speed contests), one of the first to install a ham radio in his vehicle, the first to set up a police radio station, and the first



American to obtain a [Canadian radio operating permit](#).

Shortly after his wife passed in 1964, Irving also passed away. Many from long ago remember how passionately Irving incorporated community involvement into amateur radio, and to this day, his multi-dimensional legacy lives on, as one who envisioned and then embodied the benefit of ham radio in so many ways.