Wireless at Saint John’s
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The Early Days of Radio on the Campus

“Colored by Fr. Alban Gertken.”
Nothing on the roof...

“Sience” ??!!

On back: “Welle.” (?) “SIENCE” Hall?!?
“Before 1927.”
1920s (between 1922 and 1928) aerial view,
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/6307
The Old Gym (Guild Hall) sits in its original location directly in front of Simons Hall, the original Power Plant sits directly north of the laundry building (later the Paint Shop), and Benet Hall (opened in 1922) is in place, but the main Auditorium (1928) has not yet been built.
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/2102
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/2103
Scriptorium cover  https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/2098
p. 39-40 has a great accounting of the wireless being used to "show" a MN-Iowa football game to the student body.
Photo Abbey Quarterly spring 1996 p.9
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/20026/rec/87
During the Christmas vacation of 1914, Father Hilary Doerfler, an instructor in the physics department, purchased a wireless apparatus.

Scriptorium Dec. 1944 p. 38-39

Rev. Hilary Doerfler, O. S. B.
Professor of College and College Preparatory
Physics, Shopwork
President and Director of College Radio Club

Image: 1926 Sagatagan

Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035  ROLFSON, GUNThER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR p. 38-39
Photo from 1926 Sagatagan, p. 19
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/18893/rec/25
Doerfler text box is from the 1923 yearbook p. 17
The outfit arrived, but for some unknown reason it lay around unused until the following May. Finally a goodly number of students and Father Raphael were enlisted to erect the steel towers, eighty feet high, north of the science hall. It was first assembled on the ground and then it was to be pulled into position by means of cables.

May 26, the mast for the University Wireless Station was erected. No doubt, we shall soon be gathering messages from the air.

Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNther -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR p. 38-39

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/18500/rec/1
“Erecting radio tower, 5-26-1915.”
“St. John’s radio tower, 1915.”
As it was slowly raised into position, something went wrong when it was about half way up, and with a snapping of cables and a resounding crash, down it came.
Fortunately, no one was injured and the tower withstood the accident fairly well. After some adjustments and repairs, a new attempt was made and this time with success. (3)
A room on the first floor of the science hall (4) was selected as the headquarters for the wireless department and another tower was erected on the science hall itself.
A room on the first floor of the science hall (4) was selected as the headquarters for the wireless department and another tower was erected on the science hall itself.
After all was in readiness it was found that it wouldn't work. However, the undaunted Father Hilary succeeded in locating the trouble—poor insulation and the towers were a bit too short.

Accordingly, proper insulation was provided and a wooden extension of fifteen feet was added to each tower. New aerials were also obtained and the results were satisfactory.

Post card. On back: “Old St. John's radio tower (about 1930)”

Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035  ROLFSON, GUNTER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR  p. 38-39
Father Hilary's main desire was to be able to get the time signals sent out by a powerful government station at Arlington, Virginia, but he was unsuccessful. After the purchase of a few new attachments, however, they came in well, and he even succeeded in picking up a few messages during the day time. This was considered quite an accomplishment in those days. To be able to get anything other than local reception during the night was unusual for any amateur radio operator.
Up to this time no effort had been made to send messages, all efforts having been concentrated on putting the receiving apparatus in order.

After this had been accomplished Father Hilary got things in readiness for sending messages. The first message sent out was to Malrose to inform the natives of the terrific beating their high school basketball team had received at the hands of the Johnnies. This was on December 18, 1915.

“Radio station in Science Hall 1915.”
Thus, after eight months of work and experimentation St. John’s had a wireless station that was far better than that of any amateur of the time, and comparable to the better commercial stations.

Receiving and sending radio code messages soon became quite a popular sport. Father organized a radio club which spent many an hour communicating with various stations in all parts of the United States and Canada.

Photo: Wireless PC06 v.1 p.36c. “2/29/20 Clockwise: Aske, Fleckenstein, Picotta, “Dick” Richter (in chair) and Mener (?)

Text: Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR p. 38-39
“1st radio station 1915.”
Wireless Notes

During the course of the Minnesota-Wisconsin football game, played in Minneapolis, officials of the local radio station KXT listened in as the broadcast reports came in and posted bulletins as soon as received.

In the wind-storm of November 30, the 101-foot steel tower supporting the aerial collapsed. At present a temporary tower is being erected.
In the fall of 1923 our station, 2XT as it was called, obtained a radio-phone so that not only code messages could be sent, but verbal messages as well. The materials for this were gathered from stray parts already in the radio department, and it was constructed by the club itself.

They succeeded in getting a concert from Schenectady, New York, on the first trial, and it came in so loud "that the listeners could hear it distinctly fifty feet from the phones."(5)
I found a wireless station at the school which was a beauty but which was not much use as every time a jazz music come over the wires the good fathers would shut off the works.

The old radio tower, overturned last fall during a violent wind-storm, has been rebuilt, lengthened to 108 feet, and thoroughly braced to withstand all future attacks.

1923 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 122
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/17263/rec/6

The Record October 1923, p. 329
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/23943/rec/10

1923 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 122

This photo is from the 1923 tower raising:

...but it sure looks a lot like the ones shown earlier that are supposedly from **May 1915**:

“Radio Tower raised...Raised Aug. 8, 1923”
“St. John’s radio tower, 1915.”
“Radio Tower raised...Raised Aug. 8, 1923”
The earlier photos of the tower going up probably date to 1923, not 1915.

In 1915, when the tower first went up – and came crashing down! – they probably didn’t take photos.

My guess: the second time it went up, in 1923, they made sure to take photos – just in case!

(And the 1923 photos were incorrectly labeled as “1915” in the Archives. It happens…)

“Radio Tower raised...Raised Aug. 8, 1923”
Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035  ROLFSON, GUNTER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR  p. 38-39

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/18500/rec/1
"radio tower 10 a.m. 1923"

The old radio tower, overturned last fall during a violent wind-storm, has been rebuilt, lengthened to 108 feet, and thoroughly braced to withstand all future attacks.
In the fall of the same year, the club gave the student body a treat:

LOCAL NEWS

RADIO FOOTBALL
GAME

Details of the Minnesota-Iowa football game, staged on the University of Minnesota Northrop Field, on November 17, were broadcast by radio from the field, and received at St. John's. All of the students were assembled in the Gymnasium, where a miniature football field had been rigged up to show the relative position of the ball in play at every moment of the game. As soon as received, the operator at the diagrammatic field manipulated the ball on the gridiron. An announcer named the man carrying the ball, called the plays, diagnosed the fake formations, and interpreted decisions. The novel entertainment was attended by all the excitement, enthusiasm, din and noise of a real game.

The radio football game broadcast story is from the Dec. 1923 Record, p. 425.

The power supplied for our broadcasting has all been locally devised and assembled—old motors have been connected up as dynamos, two of which are in a series and speeded up so as to secure 1000 volts for the plate supply of the transmitting tubes. An old automonile generator is used to give filament supply, which requires low voltage and heavy current. These three generators have been connected with a motor by means of flexible couplings. An automatic starter has been devised and executed in the physical laboratory which obviates the trouble of a starting reostat every time the set is being used.

Father Hilary is to be highly commended for his excellent work in assembling and building up such a reputable station as we have here at St. John’s, and also for his ingenuity in carrying out his original ideas—which not only proves his capability, but which has also saved the Institution thousands of dollars.
Station WFBJ
Coming to Fore
Communicates Directly
With Seattle

How many of us know what the radio is—and in what it differs from the wireless? The only difference is that radio has replaced the obsolete word ‘wireless’. The wireless telephone was long in existence before the word ‘radio’ came into its own. It is also apparent that the word wireless sounds too much like a paradox, since the first approach to a station is a network of wires in the air.

At present, Father Hilary, in charge of the local station, is conducting experiments to ascertain the behavior of the antennae, that is, to measure its resistance. There are three kinds of antenna resistance, namely, High Frequency, Dielectric, and Radiation Resistance.

(Continued on page 4)
In 1925 radio at St. John's reached its height with the opening of station WJRE under the direction of Father Hilary. After many preparations a violin solo by one of the faculty members was broadcast on March 8. This brought a letter from Granville, Ohio, reporting good reception.

Encouraged by this, the band concert of March 8 was broadcast as a second trial, which turned out to be a failure because of defective wiring between the old auditorium and the broadcasting station in the science hall. Consequently the program was broadcast again a few days later, and this time successfully.

Scriptorium Dec. 1944 p. 38-39

1925 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 100
Now that everything was in working order plans were made for a formal opening on March 26. During the ceremonies Father Abbot blessed the microphone and spoke to the radio audience. Following the blessing, the University orchestra under the direction of Father Innocent presented a concert which was also sent out over the ether waves. (7)

(7) Program: Menuetto from Sonata in B minor, Beethoven; Sovalette, Chopin; Air and Vaux old time dance; Ballet from "Phidias" in film; Blue; Caprera March, Bizet; Tarantella, Beethoven; Carnival March of the Gnomes, Schrader; Serenade Rococo, Mayer-Alemund; Persian March, Strauss.

Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035  ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR  p. 40

1925 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 101
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/17431/rec/8
It was originally planned to present programs twice a month, but in time this proved to be too infrequent and they were given at shorter intervals. Sacred concerts, band programs, orchestra concerts, lectures, games, instrumental numbers, etc. were common. Mail poured in, and a special telephone connection was made between the science hall and Foster's Office in order to take care of incoming calls as quickly as possible.

The demands of the public resulted in a weekly lecture schedule. Every Sunday night one of the fathers would give a half hour talk on some topic of current interest. This was usually preceded by an organ solo or some instrumental number.

_scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035_ ROLFSON, GUNther -- ORG SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR p. 40-41

"Year 1918 Science Hall SJU."
Unfortunately this golden era of science at St. John's came to an end far too soon. For several years the station continued but eventually circumstances beyond our control demanded that radio broadcasting at St. John's cease. The last remnants of the station disappeared with the removal of the towers in the summer of 1938.
An undated photo shows the complexity of the “wireless” wires:

In the SJU Archives, Box1048:2 College Radio Club
In the SJU Archives, Box1048:2 College Radio Club
In the SJU Archives, Box1048:2 College Radio Club (Minutes) 1919-1928, 1948-1965
They skip from 1928 to 1948 without missing a page!
...but the tower on the Science Hall remained.

St. John's Original Science Hall- July 23, 1961 – from SJAA 2014 10 16
And then, in 1966, radio returns to campus in a grand way...

“The arrival of FM radio made big waves on the St. John’s Campus in the summer of 1966. Bill Kling, Dan Rieder, John Hovanec, Mike Obler, and Nancy Unger are pictured here on the cover of the Summer 1966 edition of *The Off-Campus Record.*”
Bill Kling, MPR founder and President Emeritus, on a radio tower near St. John's University, ca. 1968.

...and a new radio tower goes up at Saint John's.

SJU Archives, in folder: Collegeville MPR images from M Fiala
"Engineer Dan Rieder takes a break from assembling an antenna tower in the early 1970s."

On right: SJU Archives, in folder: Collegeville MPR images from M Fiala
"Bill Kling, MPR founder and President Emeritus, on a radio tower near St. John's University, ca. 1968."
Radio – and other media – flourish on campus again

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