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Wireless at St. John's: The Early Days of Radio on the Campus

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Wireless at
Saint John's

The Early Days
of Radio on
the Campus

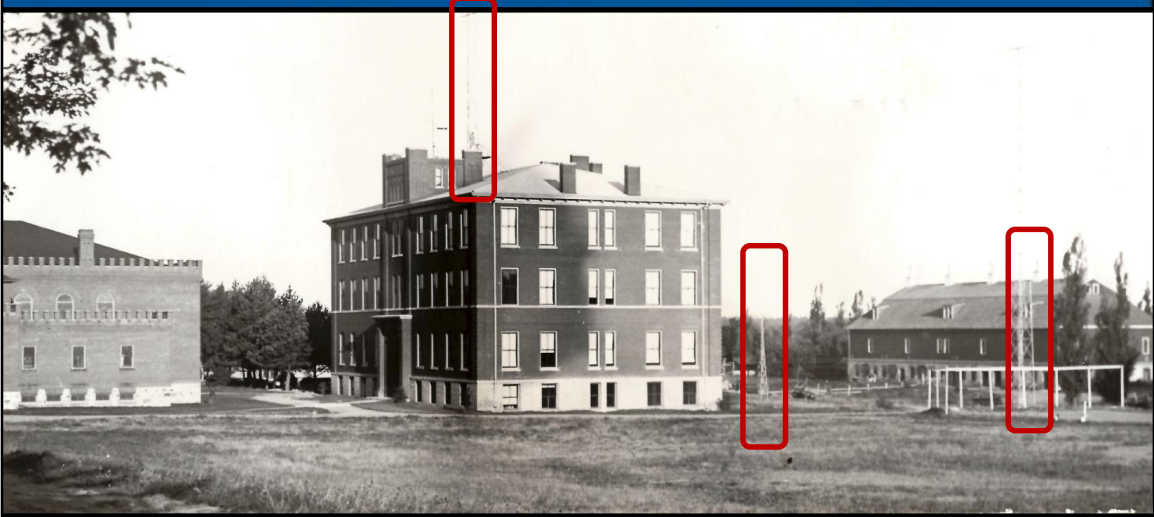


“Colored by Fr. Alban Gertken.”

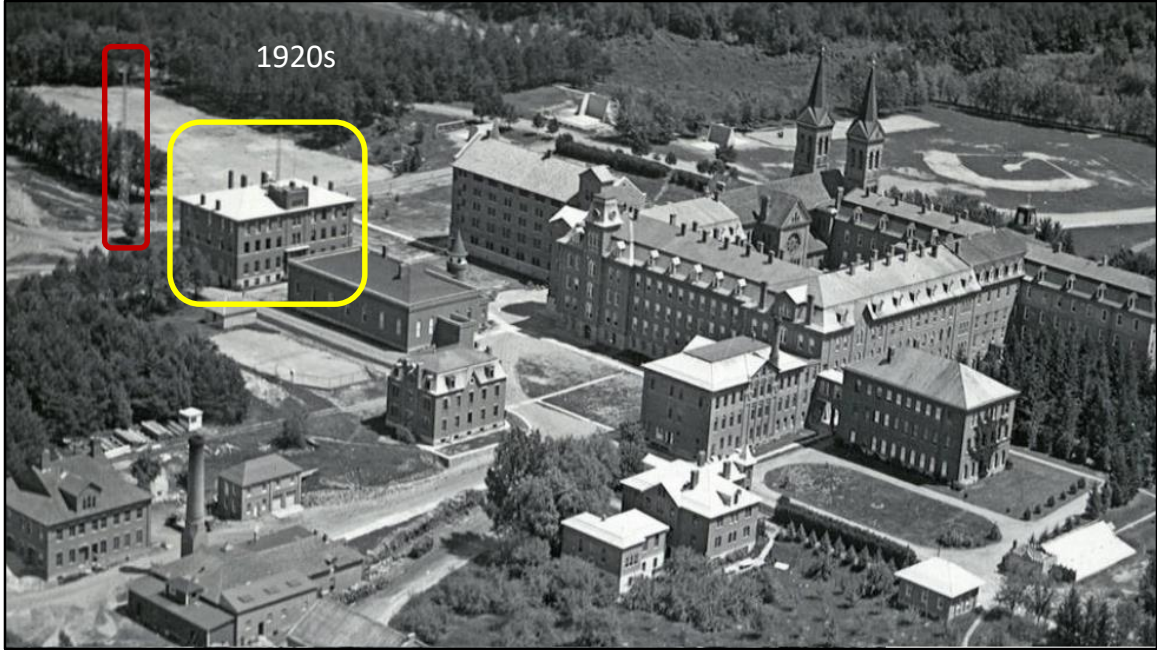


On back: "Welle." (?) "SIENCE" Hall!?!?

On back of photo: "Before 1927" – radio tower(s) in evidence!

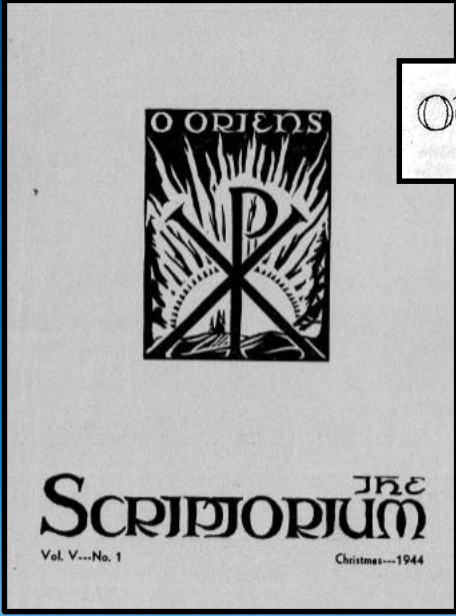


"Before 1927."



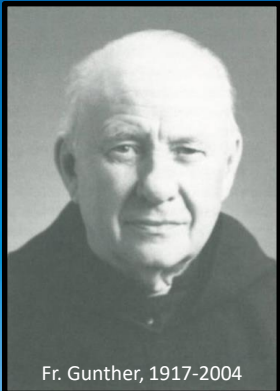
1920s (between 1922 and 1928) aerial view,
<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/6307>
The Old Gym (Guild Hall) sits in its original location directly in front of Simons Hall, the original Power Plant sits directly north of the laundry building (later the Paint Shop), and Benet Hall (opened in 1922) is in place, but the main Auditorium (1928) has not yet been built.

A great resource!:



OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR
FR. GUNTHER ROLESON, O.S.B.

p.35



Fr. Gunther, 1917-2004

<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>

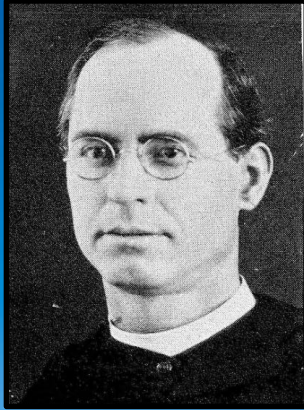
p. 39-40 has a great accounting of the wireless being used to "show" a MN-Iowa football game to the student body.

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

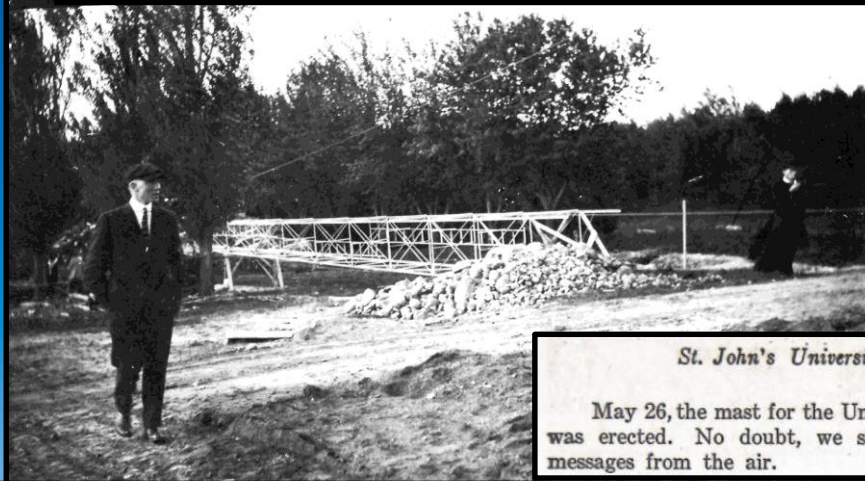
Photo from 1926 *Sagatagan*, p. 19

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/18893/rec/25>

Doerfler text box is from the 1923 yearbook p. 17

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/17213/rec/20>

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.



Radio Tower to be raised - north of old Science Hall (1915?)

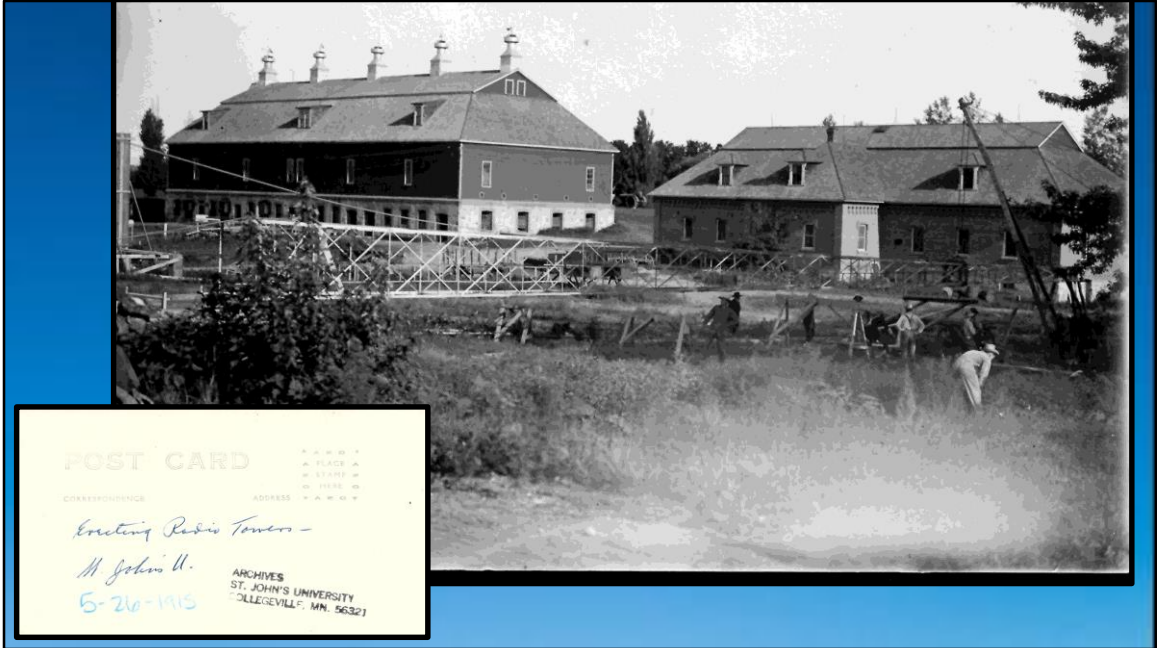
The Record May 1915

St. John's University Record 363

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>



POST CARD

CORRESPONDENCE

ADDRESS

Erecting Radio Tower -

M. John U.

5-26-1915

ARCHIVES
ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY
COLLEGEVILLE, PA. 19322

“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.



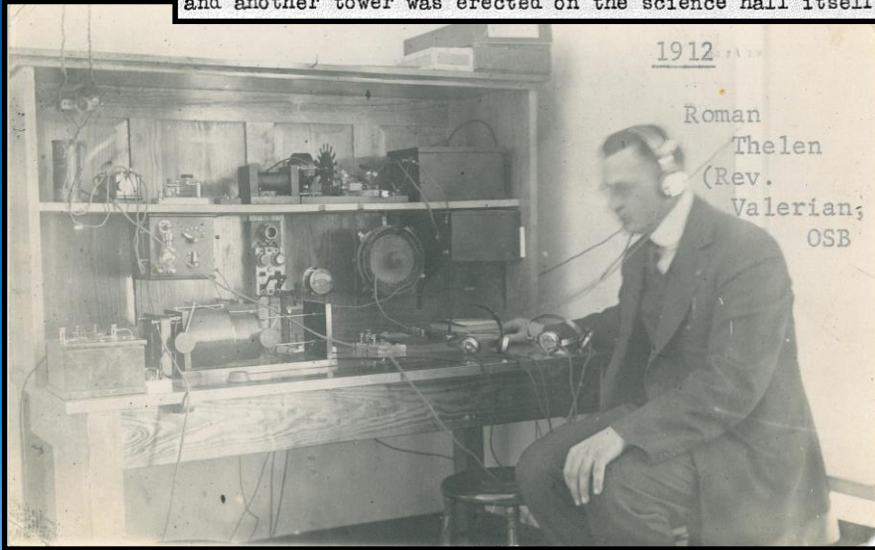
[Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR](#) p. 38-39

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)



Image: O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Buildings\CAMPUS SITES\Farming & Ag SJAA photos scanned 2017
Farm Photos 35 Dairy barn 1910-1919 & radio tower

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.



1912??

Roman
Thelen
(Rev.
Valerian;
OSB

Photo: PC06 v.1 p.38

Text from [Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR](#) p. 38-39

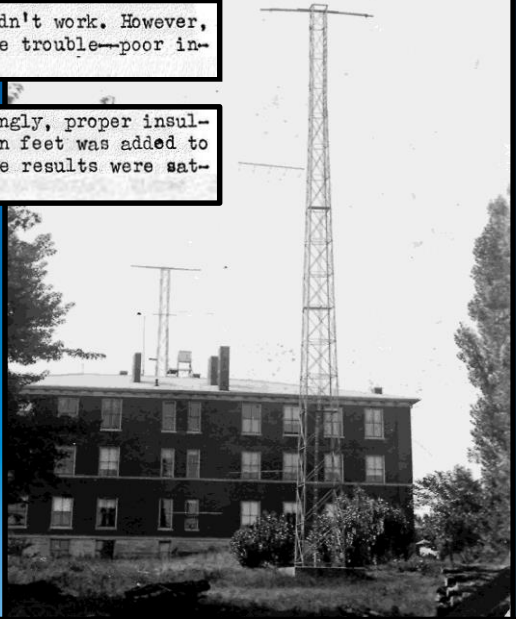
A room on the first floor of the science hall (4) was selected as the headquarters for the wireless department and another tower was erected on the science hall itself.



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.

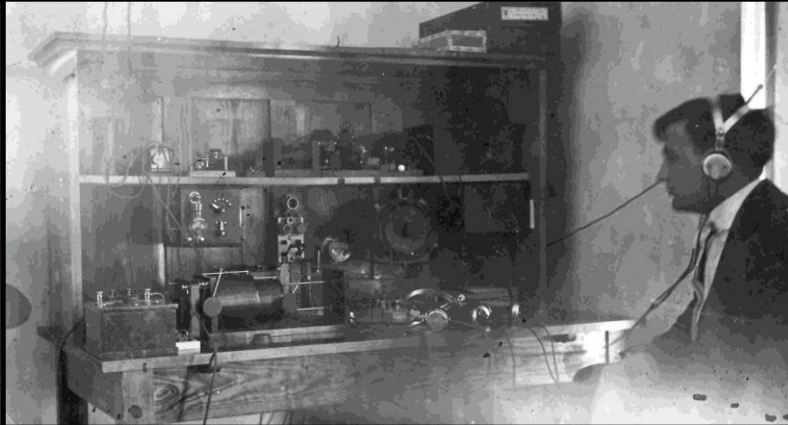
Accordingly, proper insulation was provided and a wooden extension of fifteen feet was added to each tower. New aerials were also obtained and the results were satisfactory.

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



[Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- 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.



*Radio Station
St Johns 1915--
Roman Dworschak*

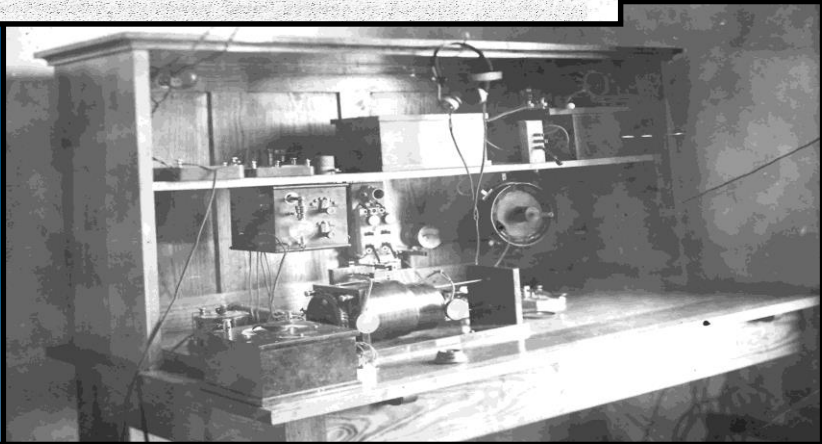
*Scriptorium Dec.
1944 p. 38-39*

[Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR](#) p. 38-39

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 Melrose 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

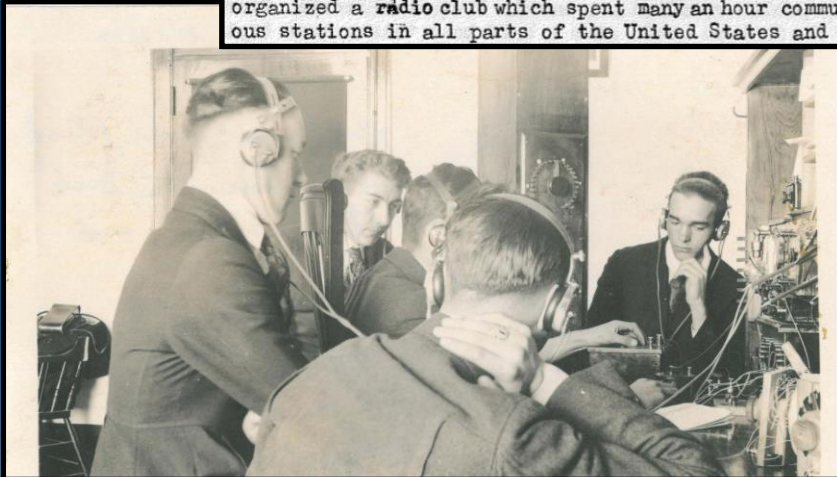
Radio Station
in
Science Hall
1915



"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.

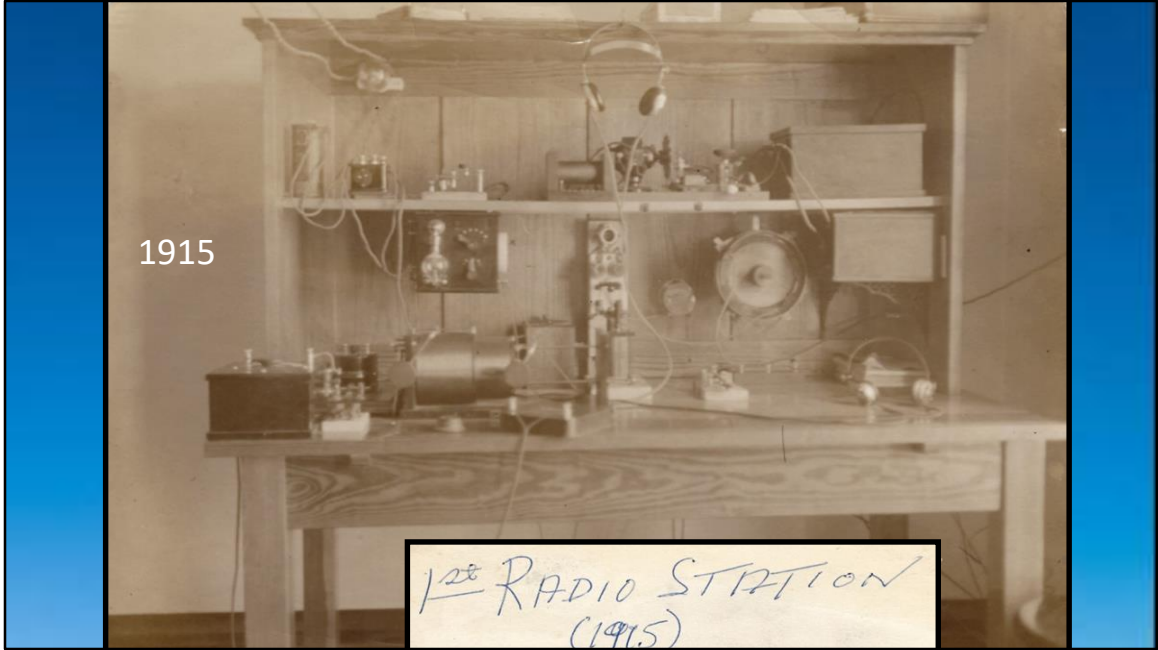
Receiving and sending radio code messages soon became quite a popular sport. Father organized a radio club which spent many an hour communicating with various stations in all parts of the United States and Canada.



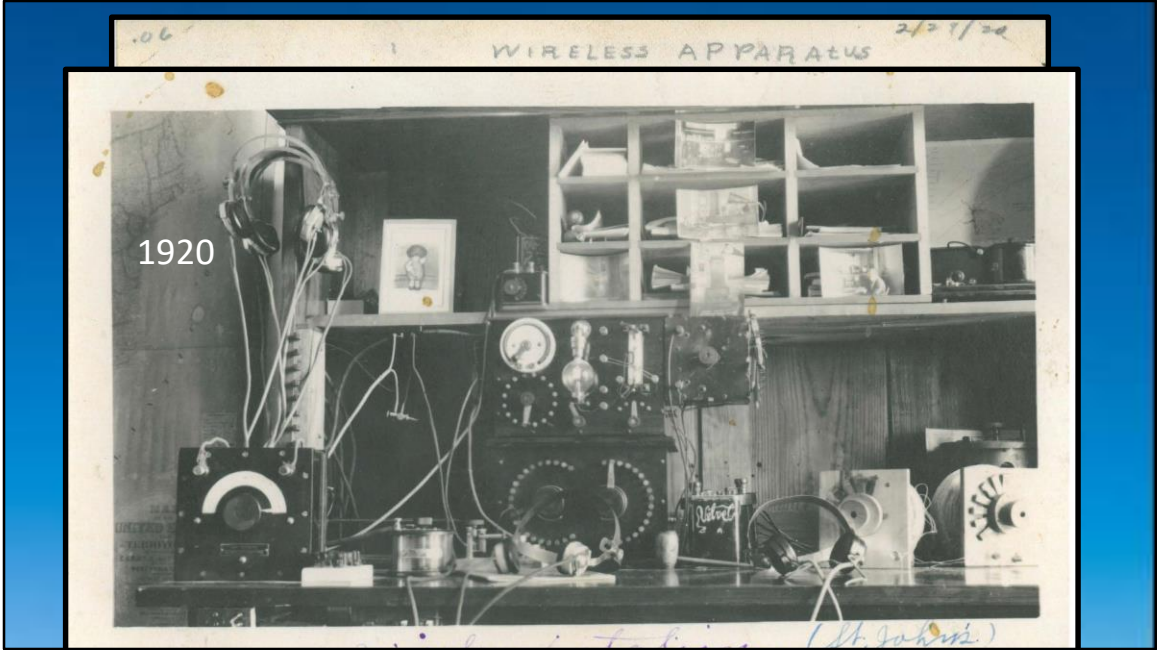
Scriptorium Dec.
1944 p. 38-39

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."

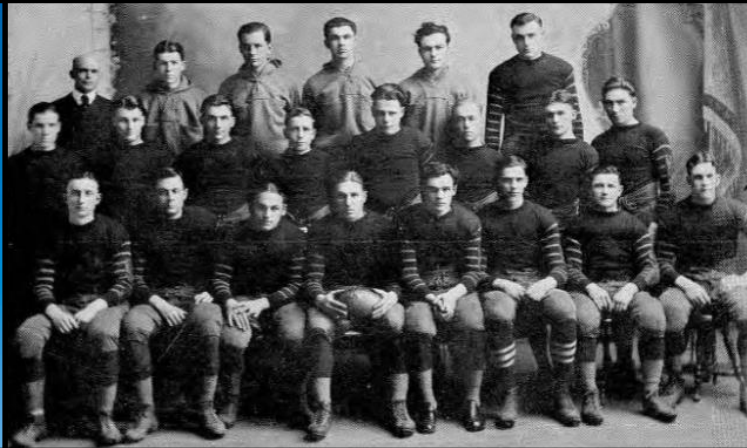


Wireless PC06 v.1 p.36a

WIRELESS NOTES During the course of the Minnesota-Wisconsin football game, played in Minneapolis, officials of the local radio station 9XT listened in as the broadcasted 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.

The Record,
December
1922, p. 482



Text from 1922-12 *The Record*, p. 482

<https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/23124/rec/41>

Image from the 1923 *Sagatagan*, p. 91

<https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/17246/rec/6>

In the fall of 1923 our station, 9XT 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 Schenectedy, 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)



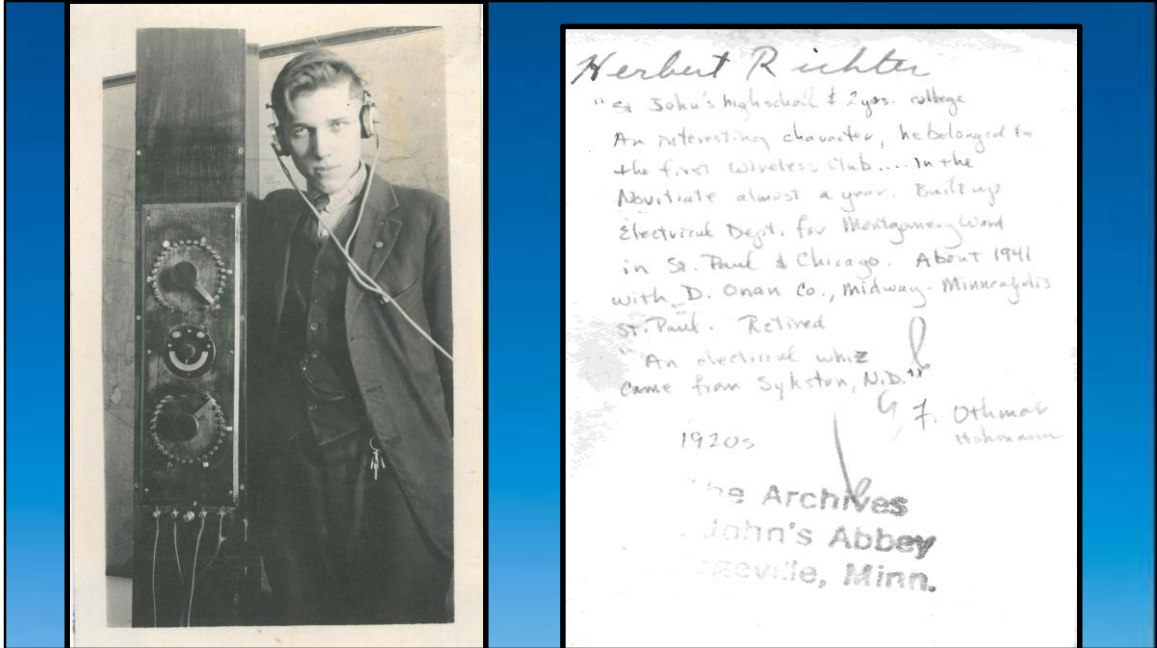
(The future Angelo Zankl OSB, '23, is on the right.)

[Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR](#) p. 38-39

(5) The blow-down was on Thanksgiving Day: *The Record* Dec. 1922 p.484

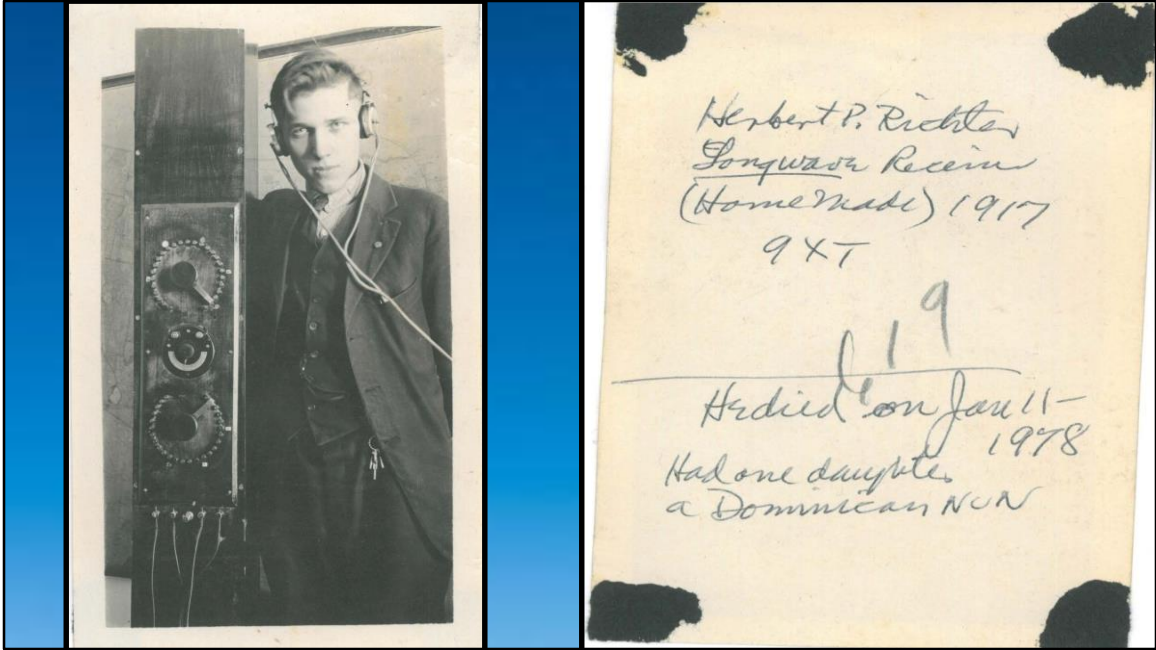
<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/23124/rec/41>

Photo: 1920s. The future Angelo Zankl OSB is on the right.



Wireless PC06 v.1 p.36b

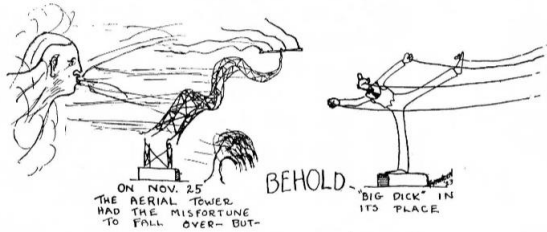
1920s. Herbert Richter "St. John's high school & 2 yrs. College. An interesting character, he belonged to the first Wireless Club...In the novitiate almost a year, built up Electrical Dept. for Montgomery Ward in St. Paul & Chicago. About 1941 with D. Onan co., Midway – Minneapolis St. Paul. Retired. 'An electrical whiz came from Sykston, ND.' Fr. Othmar Hohmann."



Wireless PC06 v.1 p.36b

1920s. Herbert Richter "St. John's high school & 2 yrs. College. An interesting character, he belonged to the first Wireless Club...In the novitiate almost a year, built up Electrical Dept. for Montgomery Ward in St. Paul & Chicago. About 1941 with D. Onan co., Midway - Minneapolis St. Paul. Retired. 'An electrical whiz came from Sykston, ND.' Fr. Othmar Hohmann."

However this here wireless station blown down about the middle of November. I'll tell you how it happened. A couple of guys named Joe Norton, Jerry Aske,



and Fat Clay all went to St. Cloud on the same day and the hot air pressure was so low that all the air for miles around rushed in to fill the hole and it blew so hard that it blew the radio tower over. However, that was soon fixed as you can see for yourself.

1923 *Sagatagan* yearbook, p. 122

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.

The Record
October 1923,
p. 329

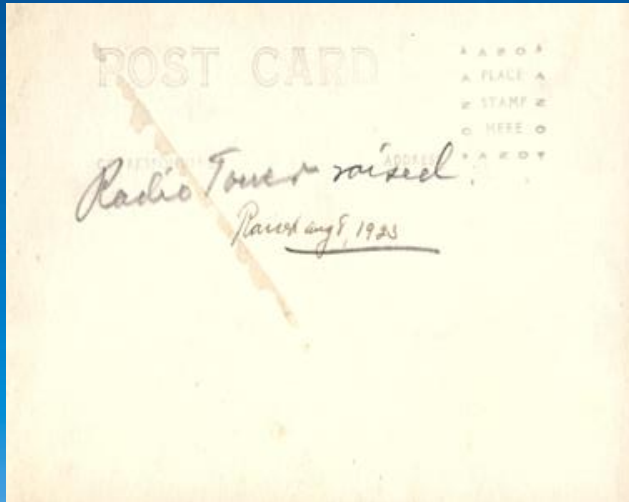
1923 *Sagatagan* yearbook, p. 122

<https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/17263/rec/6>

The Record October 1923, p. 329

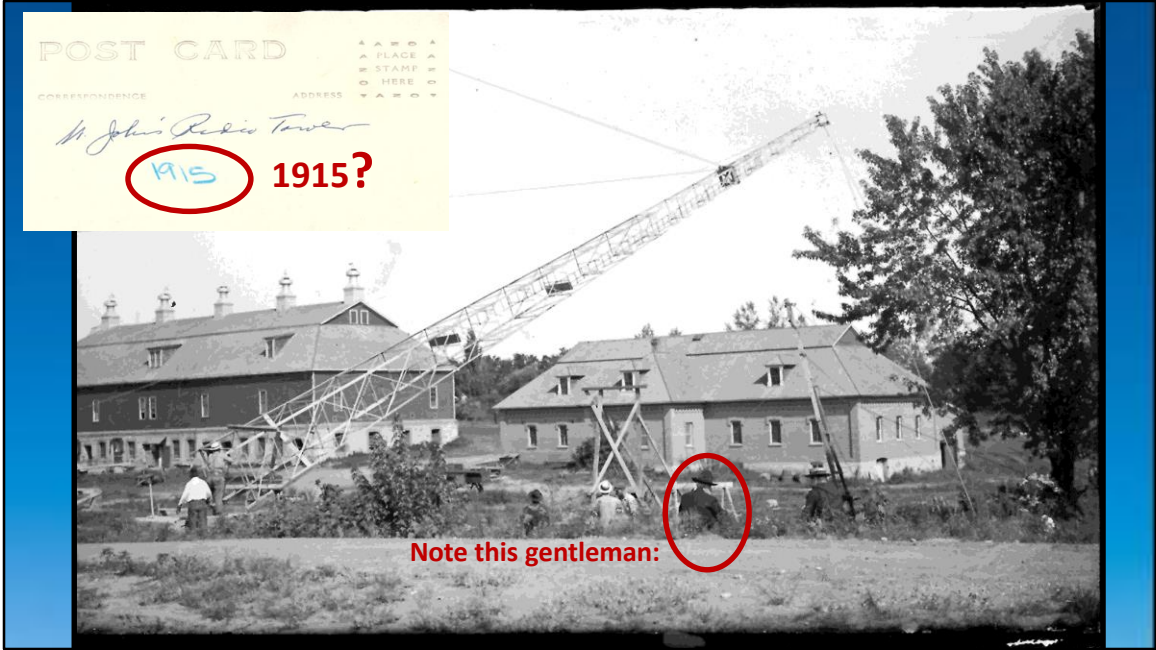
<https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/23943/rec/10>

This photo is from the 1923 tower raising:

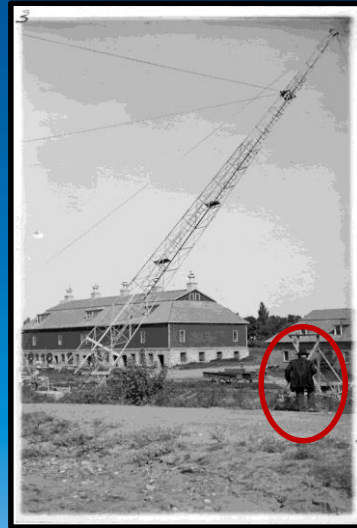
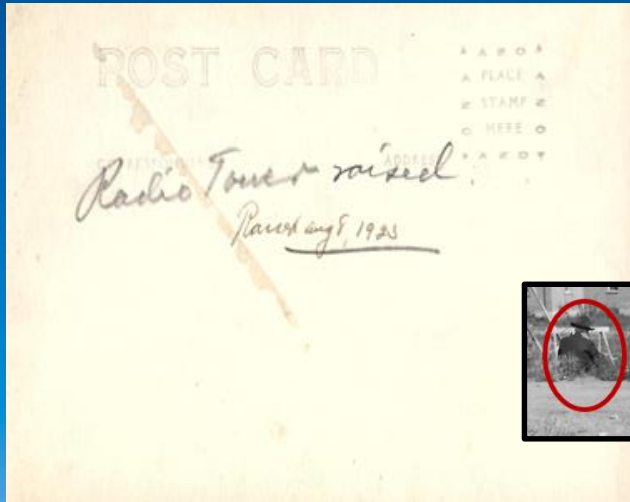


...but it sure looks a lot like the ones shown earlier that are supposedly from **May 1915**:

“Radio Tower raised...Raised Aug. 8, 1923”



"St. John's radio tower, 1915."



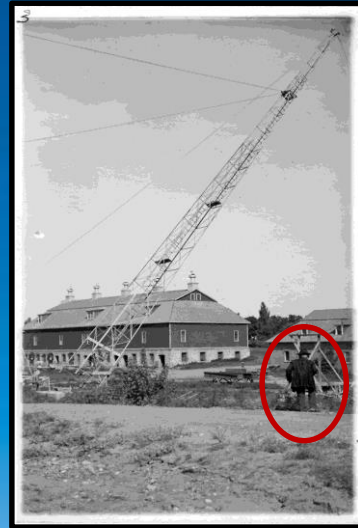
Same guy? I think so!

“Radio Tower raised...Raised Aug. 8, 1923”

The earlier photos of the tower going up probably date to **1923**, not 1915.

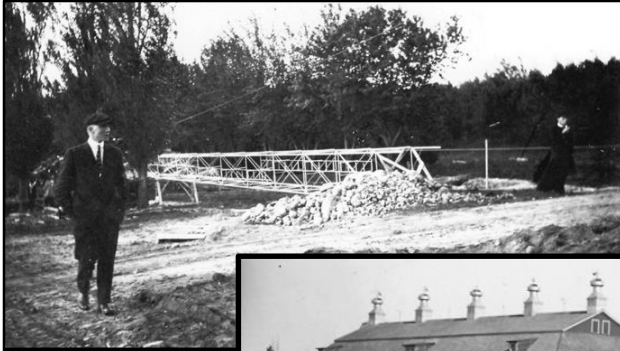
In 1915, when the tower first went up – and came crashing down! – they probably didn't take photos.

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"



1923



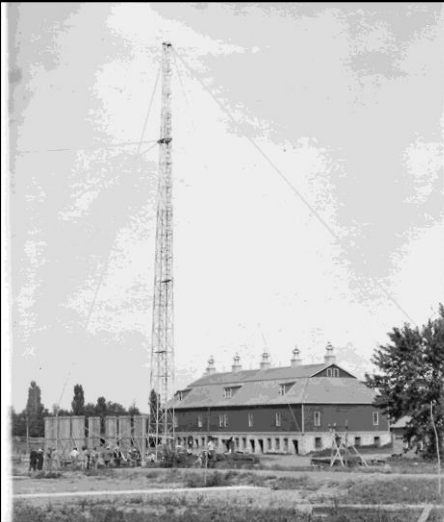
1915



[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>

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.

The Record
October 1923,
p. 329

“radio tower 10 a.m. 1923”

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 broadcasted 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.

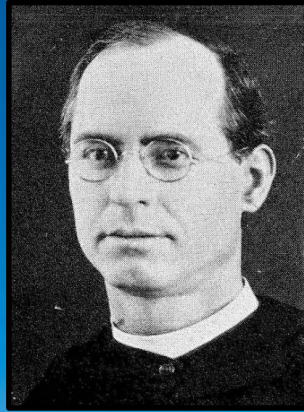
Dec. 1923
Record, p. 425

[Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR](#) p. 39-40

The radio football game broadcast story is from the Dec. 1923 *Record*, p. 425.
<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/23548/rec/13>

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.



The Record Nov. 27, 1924, p. 3

The Record Nov. 27, 1924, p.3 (not 4)

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/30013/rec/45>

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 antennae resistance, namely, High Frequency, Dielectric, and Radiation Resistance.

(Continued on page 4)

Station WFBJ to Fore

(Continued from Page 1)

The result of this analysis will enable him to tell on what wave length he will be able to reach farthest.

The local station has recently communicated directly with an outfit in Seattle Washington, a distance of 1350 miles, and also with a station in Texas—communication being carried on by code. At midnight it is possible to send ten to twenty times farther than at mid-day.

A proof of the efficiency of our station is based upon the test made several days ago when a person, 65 miles distant, reported that he could hear and understand our transmitting with the phones lying on the table, and as loud as the Twin City Station, which is twice as distant. The Twin City Station has also ten times as much power as is used here. This feat gives us the hope that we may soon reach out to 500 miles.

The Record Nov. 27, 1924, p.1

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/30011/rec/45>

...and p.3 (not 4)

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/30013/rec/45>

In 1925 radio at St. John's reached its height with the opening of station WFBJ 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.

Scriptorium Dec. 1944 p. 38-39

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.



1925 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 100

[Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR](#) p. 40

[1925 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 100](#)

<https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/17431/rec/8>

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 E minor, Grieg; Novelette, Glazounow; Air gai (Joyous old time dance) Ballet from "Iphigenia in Aulis", Gluck; Carmen March, Bizet; Tancred Overture, Rossini; Carnival March of the Gnomes, Schroeder; Serenade Roccoco, Meyer-Helmond; Persian March, Strauss.

1925 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 100

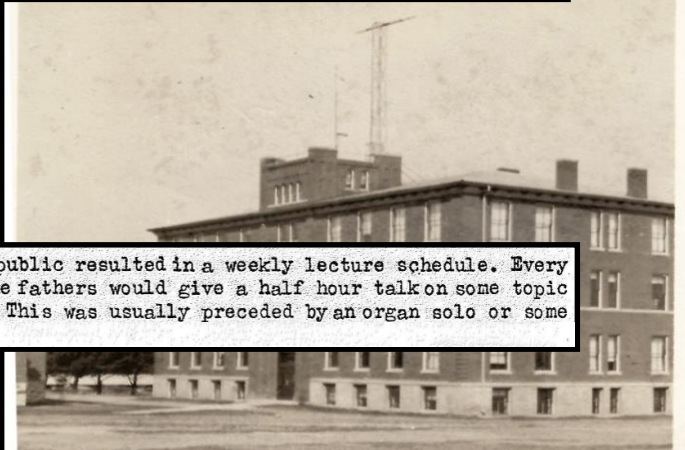
[Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR](#) p. 40

[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 Porter's Office in order to take care of incoming calls as quickly as possible.

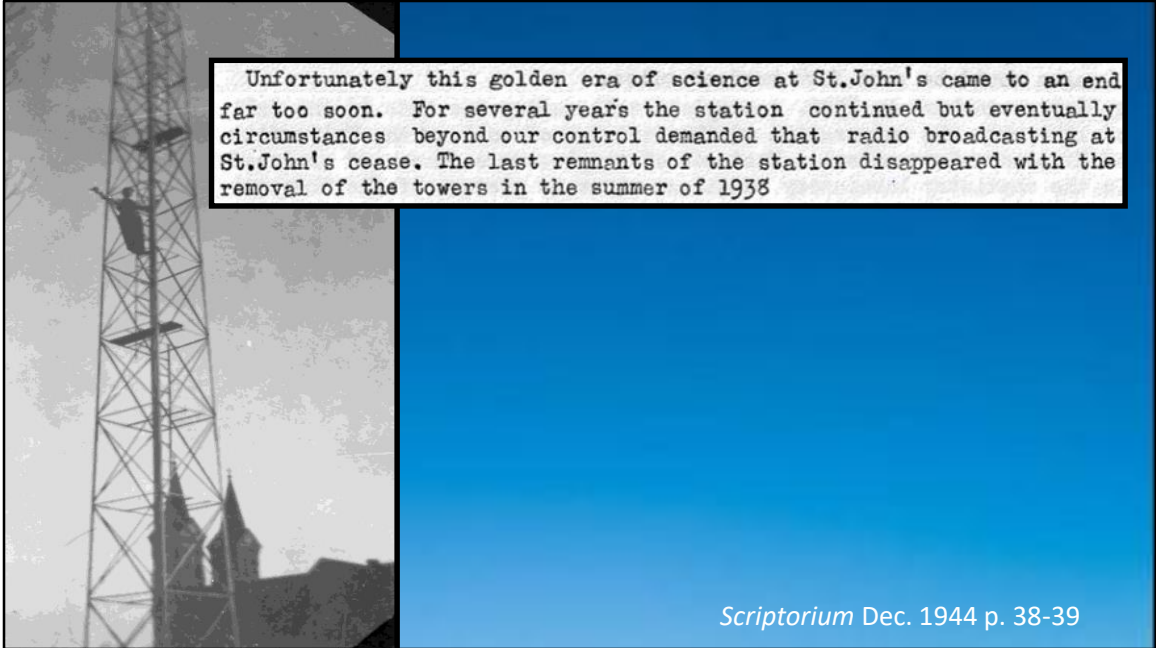
The demands of the public resulted in a weekly lecture schedule. Every Sunday night one of the fathers would give a half hour talk on some topic of current interest. This was usually preceded by an organ solo or some instrumental number.



Scriptorium
Dec. 1944
p. 38-39

[Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR](#) p. 40-41

“Year 1918 Science Hall SJU.”



Scriptorium Dec. 1944 p. 38-39

Image: Post card.

Text: [Scriptorium 05/1 : 1944 : p.035 ROLFSON, GUNTHER -- OUR SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOR](#) p. 40-41

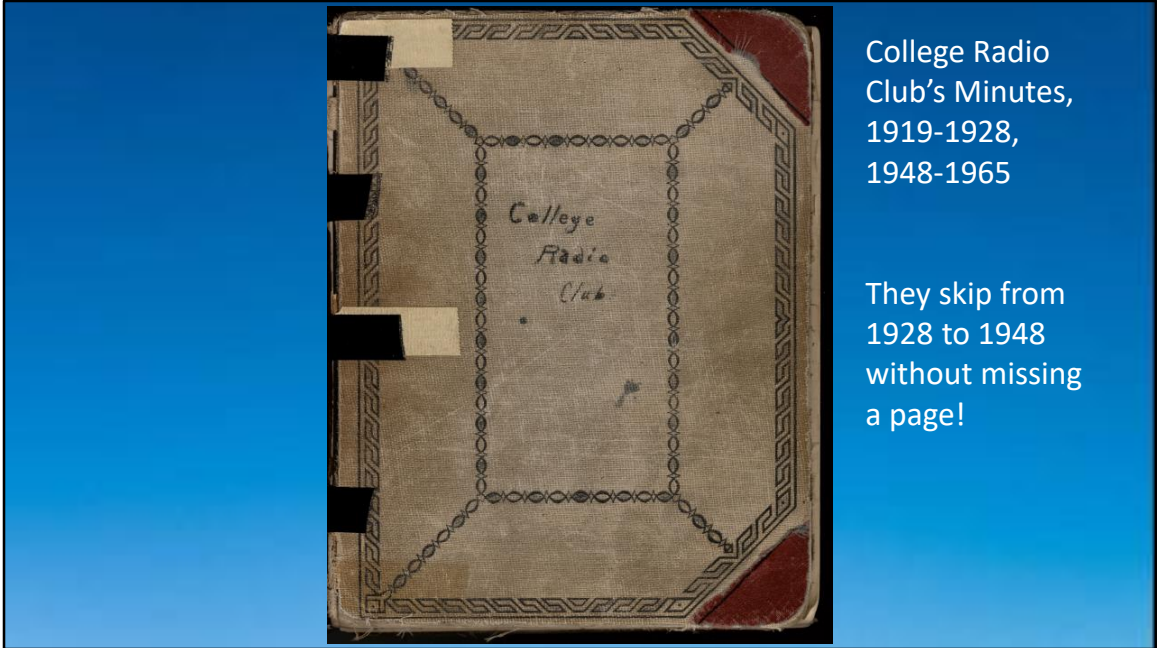
An undated photo shows the complexity of the “wireless” wires:



In the SJU Archives, Box1048:2 College Radio Club



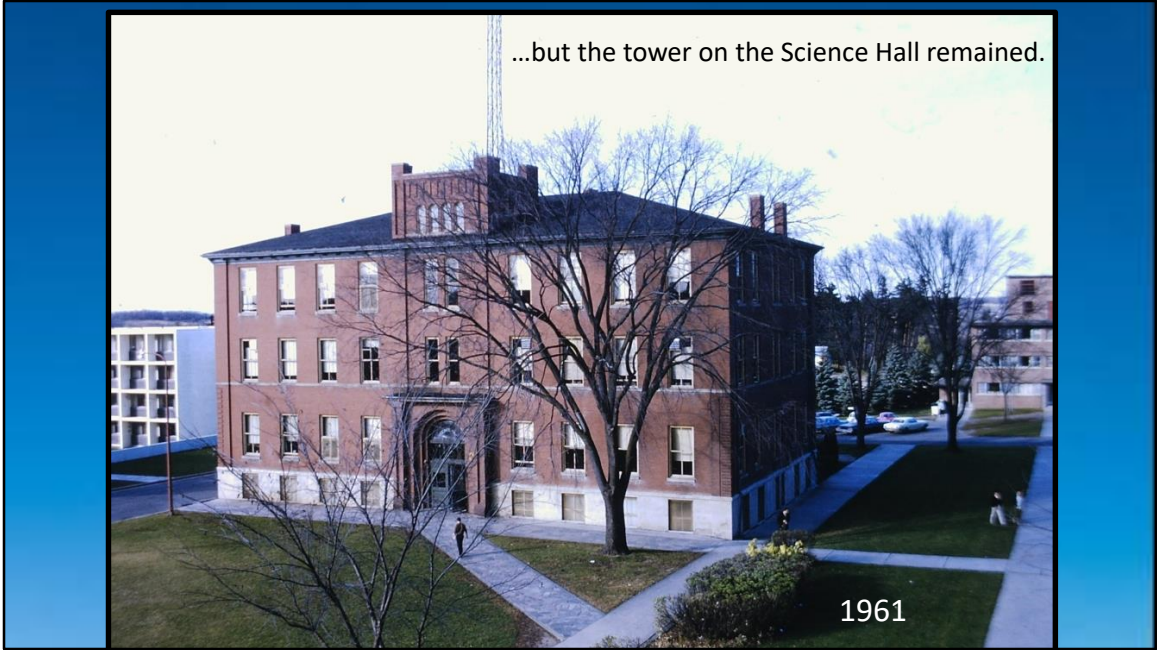
In the SJU Archives, Box1048:2 College Radio Club



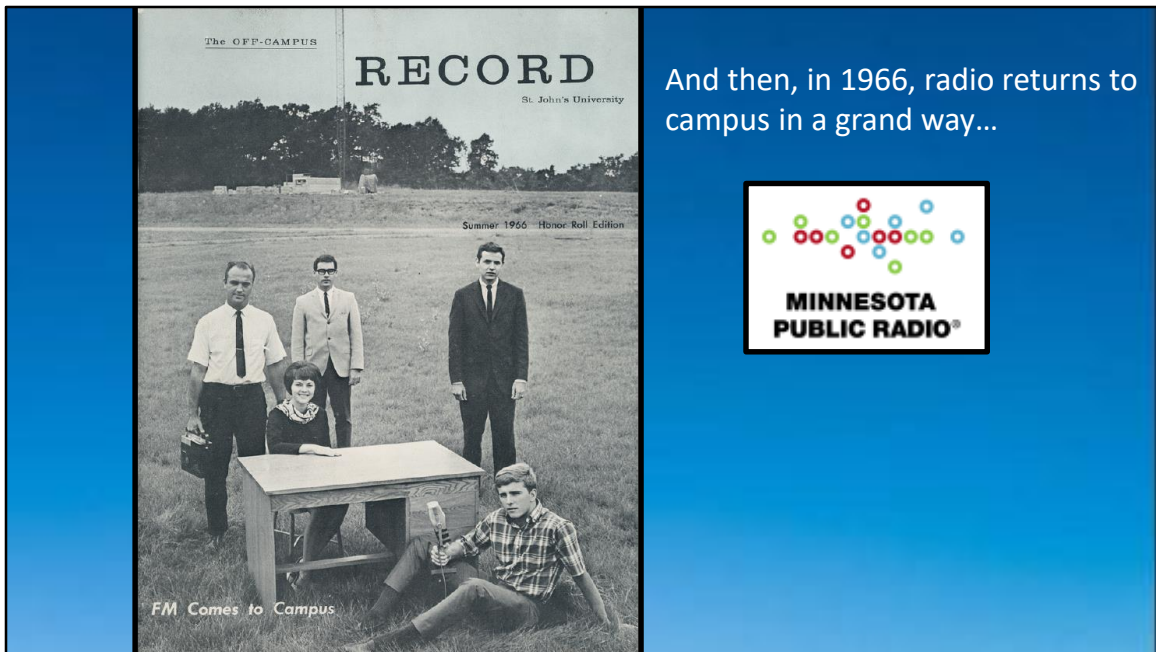
College Radio
Club's Minutes,
1919-1928,
1948-1965

They skip from
1928 to 1948
without missing
a page!

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



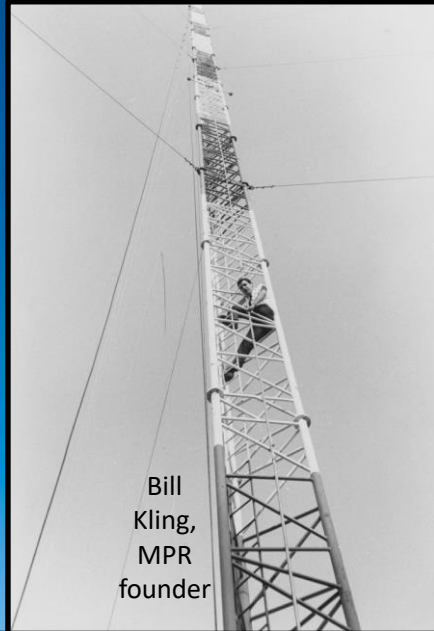
St. John's Original Science Hall- July 23, 1961 – from SJAA 2014 10 16



“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*.”



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



Bill
Kling,
MPR
founder

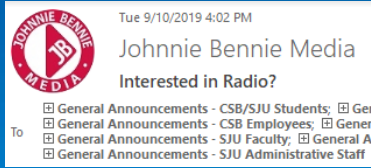
SJU Archives, in folder: Collegeville MPR images from M Fiala

"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



Tue 9/10/2019 4:02 PM

Johnnie Bennie Media

Interested in Radio?

To: General Announcements - CSB/SJU Students; General Announcements - SJU Employees;
 General Announcements - CSB Employees; General Announcements - CSB Faculty;
 General Announcements - SJU Faculty; General Announcements - CSB Administrative Staff;
 General Announcements - SJU Administrative Staff

Interested in having your own podcast? Radio show? Talk show? Here's your chance!



Johnnie Bennie Radio has openings for podcasts, radio shows, sports shows, talk shows and more!

Follow the link to learn more:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1mSG-qxh9scKfwDkDHCKkBXhhESZv0wOgiyhLVLY/edit>

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“Colored by Fr. Alban Gertken.”