Marconi Museum Keeps Chatham's Wireless History Alive

by Debra Lawless The six-month "Treasures in Our Midst" series developed by Eldredge Public Library Assistant Director Amy Andreasson proved that Chatham's museums are vibrant, flourishing places well worth a visit this summer. In the final talk of the series, Chuck Bartlett, president of the Chatham Marconi Maritime Center (CMMC), said that this summer a walking path will be developed behind the museum's operations building so that visitors can easily view the antenna towers behind the museum. In addition, renovations will be completed on the "Hotel" building on the 11-acre CMMC site at 847 Orleans Rd. Renovations will expand exhibit space, classrooms and offices. When Chatham Radio WCC was in operation the hotel, referred to as Hotel Nautilus, made ideal housing for the single male wireless radio operators. Bartlett said he first came to Chatham as a summer visitor in 1942, during World War II. In 2001 he and his wife Stephanie retired here. "All this time we'd drive by this group of buildings and wonder what in the world went on there," he said, referring to the 10 brick buildings that were vacant by 2001. In a 60-minute Power Point presentation given to about 25 people in the library's Forgeron Room, Bartlett offered a brief history of wireless transmission's history in Chatham and how the CMMC became a museum. The non-profit CMMC was formed in 2002, and a year later the operations building was opened to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first trans-Atlantic wireless message. The unheated building was open for eight days that January, and when 1,600 visitors and 600 students marched through, the group behind the CMMC knew "we've got something here that people are interested in," Bartlett said. Long-distance communication is the technology we're talking about here, and to back up a bit, it began with cable messages. A 3,200mile long underwater cable connected Orleans and France in 1898, enabling the sending of trans-Atlantic messages, according to the French Cable Station Museum website. Wireless transmissions followed a little over a decade later. The father of wireless cable was the Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi. "His job and his purpose in life was to create messages that could be sent across the ocean and then further," Bartlett said. Marconi's daughter, Princess Elettra Marconi, "a real character," has twice come to Chatham to help raise funds for and celebrate the CMMC. Marconi developed his own system to compete with cable, and "that was a hard market to compete with. It was mature," Bartlett noted. In 1914 Marconi built the station in Chatham to transmit messages to Europe. "The station is exactly the way it was built by the Marconi Company in 1914," Bartlett said. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The station originally boasted six 350-foot-tall masts that extended for one mile from the station. Chatham was paired with a transmitter in Stavanger, Norway. Telegrams could go around the world in three minutes. But World War I came all too quickly for Marconi, and in 1918 the station was closed and five of the six towers were removed in 1919. Because it was then felt that the station "could not be in the hands of a foreign corporation," RCA, formed in 1919, bought the Marconi's company's assets. By 1923 RCA realized that the true market for wireless was with ships at sea—cables could not be run to those ships. Chatham Radio WCC became "the busiest ship-to-shore radio station in the U.S.," Bartlett said. When World War II rolled around, the U.S. Navy stepped in and took over Chatham Station C, building rhombic antennas, some of which pointed to Berlin. Through these, naval staff listened to submarines and the chatter of the German high command in Morse Code. One section of the museum is devoted to the station's

fascinating, top-secret World War II work. After the war, the station resumed its civilian duties, regaining its position as the busiest ship-to-shore radio station in the country, Bartlett said. The station was automated in 1993 and finally closed in 1997. One volunteer at the museum, Louis Masson, worked for RCA at the site for 35 years. The operations building was renovated in 2009-2010. Many exhibits are handson – you can send an actual ship-to-shore telegram in Morse Code. Another exhibit features a ship's radio. In 2008, when the group learned the radio was for sale on Craig's List, it successfully purchased it and volunteer Bob Ryder drove a truck to Pennsylvania to retrieve it. Although it remains a mystery what ship the large radio came from, it appears that it came from the hospital ship "Hope," decommissioned in 1973. A photograph of the radio from the "Hope" seems to match scuffs on the base of the CMMC radio. "We're proud of what we've got here," Bartlett said. This summer the group will expand its outreach to schoolchildren through the Massachusetts "science/technology/ engineering/math" or the STEM program. Various courses will be offered for students grades three through nine. For more information on visiting the CMMC see www.chathammarconi.org or call 508-945-8889. CMMC summer hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m. Admission is $5, with children under 10 free.

www.chathammarconi.org
cmmcsummerstem@gmail.com