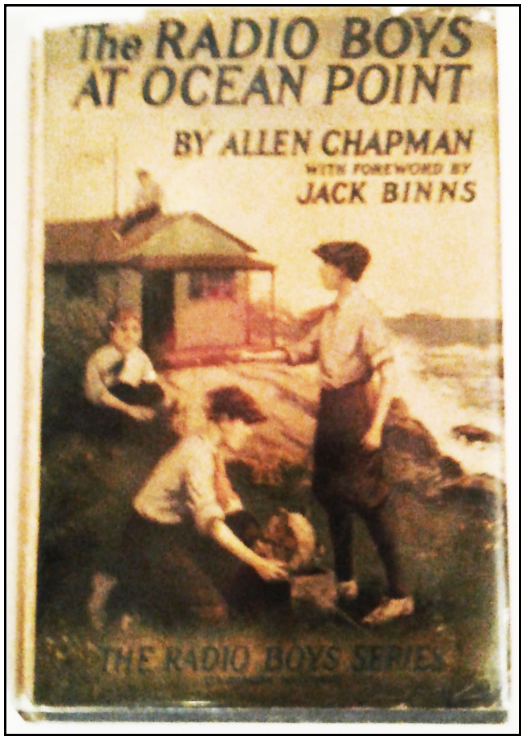
National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

The Radio Boys—Juvenile Fiction



Radio was an exciting new technology in 1922 when Grosset and Dunlap published this work of juvenile fiction. The museum library includes a couple of dozen books in the "Radio Boys" and "Radio Girls" series of the early 1920s, as well as other kid's books dealing with various aspects of radio. (Given gender stereotypes of the time, there were many more Radio Boys than Radio Girls.)

As these books flew off the shelves, Grosset and Dunlap and other publishers rushed to keep them coming. They hired multiple writers who used pen names like Allen Chapman. Jack Binns, who wrote the foreword for this book, was a famous real-life radio hero. He had been the Marconi radio operator on board the White Star passenger liner *Republic* when, in January 1909, it collided with the *Florida*. This was the first well-publicized example of lives saved at sea by a young wireless operator. Binns' foreword reads:

In these days of radio broadcasting, when the country has gone wild over wireless music and entertainment, there is a tendency to overlook the other phases of radio—such as its use as a means of saving lives at sea, and for navigational purposes generally. There is no doubt about the interesting character of broadcasting, and equally, there is no doubt about the importance of radio as a means of life saving. With this thought in mind, I think that the present volume, detailing the adventures of the Radio Boys, serves a very important purpose in that it forcibly portrays the use of wireless to bring aid to a disabled ship on the high seas in a storm. By doing this it will inculcate a desire among boys to learn the wireless code and transmit wireless telegraphy messages themselves, and in doing so, will tend to develop that nucleus of communication experts in the coming generation, which is always an imperative necessity to every nation.

A common theme was that adolescents enthusiastically embraced radio much sooner than their old-fashioned parents. The plots were remarkably similar: A group of neighborhood kids got interested in radio, built the first homemade radio receiver in town (and often a transmitter as well), and became heroes. In this book the boys picked up weak signals from a ship floundering off the coast, alerted the authorities, and saved the lives of those onboard. Or, a plot might involve the boys or girls hearing by radio that a dangerous convict had escaped from prison and was heading towards their town. They warned the police who were able to capture the convict. The clear message was, that by learning about radio, you too, could become a hero. What kid what not be receptive to such a message?

We appreciate your support of the museum so that historical artifacts like this one, and the stories that go with them, can be preserved for future generations. THANKS!