



August 31, 2008

From the ship to shore

Station was front and center at Morro Castle wreck

By MAUREEN NEVIN DUFFY
Correspondent

It's the stuff that makes great drama. A giant luxury liner's captain is murdered. The ship ignites at sea and hundreds of lives are lost.

As the station manager of a 500-watt radio station at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean relays the story to listeners, he watches in horror, as the ship, torn from its moorings by gale winds, starts down the shoreline headed directly for the studio.

Fiction? Hardly. It happened to Thomas F. Burley Jr., executive secretary of the city's Chamber and station manager of WCAP — Wonder City of Asbury Park — right here in Convention Hall, when the Morro Castle disaster made headlines on Sept. 8, 1934.

"She's here! The Morro Castle is coming right toward our studio!" Burley was quoted saying as the ship crashed into the sand outside Convention Hall, according to "The Airwaves of New York" (1998, McFarland & Company).

While the Morro Castle story has been retold and analyzed by many over the years, the little radio station in Convention Hall has been largely passed over. The only detailed report of both the station and its role in the Morro Castle disaster turned up in a Google search that highlighted an excerpt of the "Airwaves" book, which, written by Bill Jaker, Frank Sulek, and Peter Kanze, is a great find for any radiophile.

Radio Somewhere learned years ago of WCAP's existence through word of mouth. We heard the little station may have been affiliated with a major network for awhile. Sure enough, that turned out to be WCBS, and the term was brief, just 1932 to 1934.

The Asbury Park Chamber of Commerce brought the station, originally called WDWM for its owner Donald W. May, from the City of Newark, and installed it temporarily at the city's Isolation Hospital, in June of 1927, according to the authors.

Eventually, studios were set up in the chamber's offices at 525 Bangs Avenue. The call letters were changed to WCAP in 1928.

One night in August 1928 featured "Monterey Music," possibly inspired by the city's romantic Monterey Hotel, at 6:45 p.m., the Berkeley-Carteret Orchestra at 7:15 p.m. and Arthur Pryor's Band at 8:30 p.m. The night also included live performances by tenors and sopranos.

We were surprised to find out that there is no record of that dramatic September night on the air, even in the CBS radio archives in New York. Although the station eventually was purchased by this paper, which changed the call letters to WJLK, we haven't been able to find news accounts of the station's role on that fateful night.

Despite the plethora of audiotapes of vintage radio shows, it would seem that not one recording or transcript exists of what the "Airwaves" authors called "the biggest news story of the day." But this could soon change.

The 75th anniversary of the Morro Castle disaster is coming up next year, 2009, and several groups are banding together to hold a solid week of events to commemorate the occasion, from Sept. 8-14. The organizations plan to start raising interest with a press conference at the Paramount Theater on Sept. 8 of this year, followed by some participation in related events throughout the year. Hopefully, a year's worth of attention for the disaster will allow word to spread throughout the community, so that someone somewhere with a transcript or perhaps — should we dare wish — a tape recording of the 1934 broadcast may come forward.

The Asbury Park Library has devoted a whole page on its new site to the history of the Morro Castle disaster with information about participating in the 75th anniversary activities.

The library's site has been beautifully designed and is maintained by Malakia Oglesby, the library's manager of information systems.

"The Asbury Park Public Library has generously developed and donated a Web site for our planned Morro Castle events," says Eileen Chapman, assistant director of performing arts for Monmouth University. "I encourage all participating groups and organizations to link to the site" at www.asburyparklibrary.org/morrocastle/

www.asburyparklibrary.org/morrocastle/

"We are in the process of identifying and inventorying Morro Castle artifacts with their current locations," says Chapman. "If your readers know where any artifacts are located, we hope they will let us know."

The group is also creating an exhibit that will be open to the public, for which they may ask to borrow certain pieces.

Other people and groups involved in the commemoration include Allenhurst author and historian Dr. Richard Fernicola, the City of Asbury Park, the Asbury Park Historical Society, Deal Historical Society, Garden State Film Festival, Morro Castle historian John Alderson, Monmouth County Tourism, Ocean Township Museum, United Coast Guard and Coast Guard Academy of New London Connecticut, and the United States Merchant Marines. For further information call Eileen Chapman, Assistant Director Performing Arts for Monmouth University, at 732 571-3512 or echapman@monmouth.edu, or Don Stine of Antic Hay Books, at (732) 774-4590.

Maureen Nevin Duffy created and hosted "Asbury Radio — The Radio Voice of Asbury Park," a weekly public affairs talk show at the city's WYGG, 88.1FM station, for more than six years. Please send your comments and suggestions regarding Radio Somewhere to AsburyRadio@aol.com or 3 Deal Lake Court., Asbury Park, NJ 07712.
