The History of Telegraphy at the University of Michigan:
The First Marriage Proposals Using Morse Code

While researching the origins of the University of Michigan Amateur Radio Club, I came across the name of Professor E. Lowell Kelly. Lowell had many accomplishments during his life having served as a President of the American Psychological Association, Peace Corps Director and Chair of the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan.

His work in psychology focused on job performance and evaluating the training process by standardizing the training, defining the evaluation and assessment process and formulating consistent terminology. Perhaps his most significant observations were of night time military aircraft crashes. Lowell noted that airmen were unable to judge the relative distance of aircraft that they were following due to having only a single tail light; no point of reference for determining distance. His suggestion was to add lights to the wingtip of the planes. Later, while with the Peace Corp, Kelly would devise the multifaceted questionnaire as part of the Peace Corps selection process. The emphasis of the questionnaire was to select those individuals who were best suited to work and teach in a foreign, unstructured, environment.

Another area of interest for Lowell was identifying personality traits. His unpublished autobiography notes his interest in assessing an individuals personality from conversing with them in Morse code. (Photo 1.) This eventually led to his coining the term an "eye-ball contact"; an in-person meeting following a radio conversation with an unknown person. But there was also the interesting story of how Lowell met his wife Lillian. Each morning several amateur radio operators would converse using Morse code. Lowell was in Connecticut at the time and Lillian in Jamaica. The two would eventually meet briefly in New York City during a business trip. Afterwards, they continued communicating with Lowell eventually proposing to Lillian in code. Lillian accepted. Lowell, in his autobiography,[1] said that this was the first ever marriage proposal using Morse code and further said it was witnessed by many radio operators who listened. This same fact was included in a 1985 interview with the Detroit Free Press.[2]



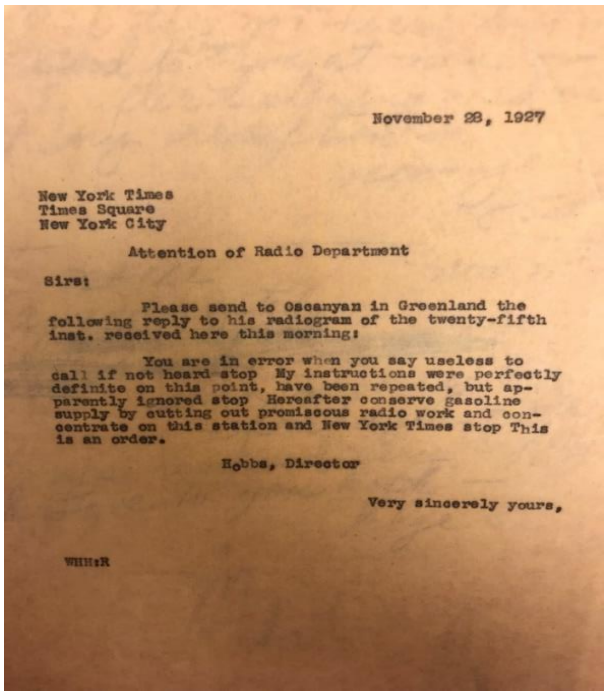
Photo 1. Professor Kelly; 1937

On further investigation of the university callsign, I came across the name of Paul Oscanyan, a "hired" radio operator for the university's wireless station, W8AXZ. During the 1926-1928 exploration of Arctic Greenland, Oscanyan (3CIH), would travel as one of the explorations radio operators in Greenland. Led by UM Professor William Hobbs, their purpose was to study weather and climate changes, national defense strategy and establish air travel routes from the United States to Europe over the arctic circle.

The radio operators on the university campus exchanged frequent radio communications with Oscanyan in Greenland and with the New York Times who were covering the exploration. During these years there were two attempts to cross the Atlantic Ocean by plane over the polar circle; The Greater Rockford plane, from Rockford, IL. and the Untin Bowler amphibious plane, from Chicago. Parker "Shorty" Cramer was the pilot on both attempts while Bob Gast was the co-pilot of the Untin Bowler and Bert "Fish" Hassel on the Greater Rockford. Both attempts failed with their pilots being rescued, in Greenland, by Professor Hobbs

Getting the university's explorers from Copenhagen to Greenland was aboard the Danish vessel Disko. The radio operator of the Disko (0IRA) was a Ms. Astrid Funder (7AO). On the evening prior to their departure from Copenhagen, both Oscanyan and Funder are said to have "danced all-night at a party". Once the researchers were in Greenland, Oscanyan would continue communicating with Astrid, via Morse code. This romance continued despite the stern message sent from Professor Hobbs to Oscanyan (Figure 1). The message said "conserve gasoline supply by cutting out this promiscuous radio work and to concentrate on the stations communications with the New York Times". Oscanyan would later propose in Morse code with Astrid accepting. Their story would be featured in The Michigan Daily (May 12, 1928; Figure 2).[2]

The Michigan Daily link: https://digital.bentley.umich.edu/midaily/mdp.39015071755834/716



November 28, 1927

New York Times
Times Square
New York City

Attention of Radio Department

Sirs:

Please send to Oscanyan in Greenland the following reply to his radiogram of the twenty-fifth inst. received here this morning:

You are in error when you say useless to call if not heard stop My instructions were perfectly definite on this point, have been repeated, but apparently ignored stop Hereafter conserve gasoline supply by cutting out promiscous radio work and concentrate on this station and New York Times stop This is an order.

Hobbs, Director

Very sincerely yours,

WHH:R

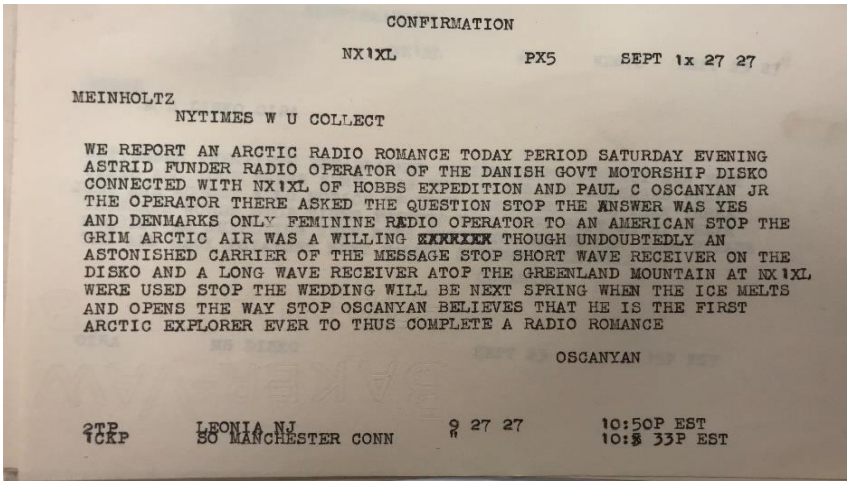
Figure 1. Message from Prof. Hobbs



THE MICHIGAN DAILY

Greenland Expedition Radio Operator Woos And Wins Wife By Aid Of Ether

Figure 2. Ms. Funders and Paul Oscanyan



CONFIRMATION

NX1XL PX5 SEPT 1x 27 27

MEINHOLTZ
NYTIMES W U COLLECT

WE REPORT AN ARCTIC RADIO ROMANCE TODAY PERIOD SATURDAY EVENING ASTRID FUNDER RADIO OPERATOR OF THE DANISH GOVT MOTORSHIP DISKO CONNECTED WITH NX1XL OF HOBBS EXPEDITION AND PAUL C OSCANYAN JR THE OPERATOR THERE ASKED THE QUESTION STOP THE ANSWER WAS YES AND DENMARKS ONLY FEMININE RADIO OPERATOR TO AN AMERICAN STOP THE GRIM ARCTIC AIR WAS A WILLING XXXXXXX THOUGH UNDOUBTEDLY AN ASTONISHED CARRIER OF THE MESSAGE STOP SHORT WAVE RECEIVER ON THE DISKO AND A LONG WAVE RECEIVER ATOP THE GREENLAND MOUNTAIN AT NX1XL WERE USED STOP THE WEDDING WILL BE NEXT SPRING WHEN THE ICE MELTS AND OPENS THE WAY STOP OSCANYAN BELIEVES THAT HE IS THE FIRST ARCTIC EXPLORER EVER TO THUS COMPLETE A RADIO ROMANCE

OSCANYAN

2TP LEONIA NJ 9 27 27 10:50P EST
1CKP 80 MANCHESTER CONN 10:5[illegible] 33P EST

Figure 3. New York Times

In this 1927 message sent from the Greenland Station, NX1XL, to the New York Times, Oscanyan says that he believes that "he is the first Arctic Explorer ever to thus complete a radio romance" (Figure 3).

Finally, an internet search notes that Thomas Edison taught his second wife, Mina Miller, American Morse code so that they could communicate in

private. Edison suffered from a hearing loss and did not want his conversations with Mina overheard. On one night, Edison tapped out his marriage proposal onto Mina's palm. Mina responded "yes". They were married on February 24, 1886.

While Edison's proposal is likely the first marriage proposal using the American Morse Code or the Railroad Morse code, Oscanyan's proposal was probably the first using the more common International or Continental Morse code. Kelly's proposal would occur several years later.

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The University of Michigan Amateur Radio Club / W8UM History Project. 2021

References:

1. E. Lowell Kelly. Bentley Historical Library. The Regents of the University of Michigan.
2. Detroit Free Press, 11-21-1985. Staff Writer, Joel Thurtell, K8PSV.
3. The Michigan Daily. 05-12-1928. Greenland Expedition Radio Operator Woos and Wins Wife By Aid of Ether.

Photo 1: E. Lowell Kelly Family Photo, 1937
Figures 1 and 3: Courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, The Regents of the University of Michigan
Figures 2: The Michigan Daily. May 12, 1928