



His Master's  
**Voice**



MUSÉE DES ONDES EMILE BERLINER

## Early Radio In Montréal



# The History of Broadcasting in Montréal

By Tim Hewlings



## I NTRODUCTION:

Marconi's wireless telegraphy technology had been in use for over a decade, primarily for ship to shore communication. Fessenden had been experimenting with "wireless telephony" (i.e. radio) using voice and music since 1906, so the next step was to make wireless voice communications a reality. All this activity was put on hold during WWI. In 1914, the Canadian government had begun issuing licences to radio "amateurs". This activity had been suspended for the duration of the war. However, with the end of hostilities, all that changed. In the Canada Gazette of April 29, 1919, the government published "...as from April 15, 1919, and that on and after that date the pre-war regulations with respect to the licensing of amateur experimental stations will be resumed..."<sup>1</sup>

Not long after, Marconi received licences for stations in Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal and Glace Bay. The experimental station at the Montreal head office had the call letters XWA, and broadcasting testing began almost immediately.

One of the more important figures in these experiments was a young man named Darby Coats. He became not only, one of Canada's great broadcasting pioneers, but also documented the developments. He came to Canada from England in 1911, and first settled in Montreal. He spent several years working for Marconi and was very involved in the initial work to set up XWA. He was probably Canada's first radio announcer as well, but like all the people of that era, he did everything from building and maintaining and installing equipment to mopping the floors.

He lived and worked in Montreal until 1922 when he moved to Winnipeg, to set up radio station CKY there. He remained in Western Canada for the rest of his life and much of his local legacy has fallen into obscurity. In the 1930s and '40s, he edited a monthly newsletter for the station, called "Manitoba Calling" that contains numerous anecdotes about the beginnings of broadcasting in Montreal. I recently discovered them on-line and have put together some excerpts that bring together much long-forgotten information about the beginnings of radio broadcasting in Montreal.<sup>2</sup>



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D. R. B. "DARBY" COATS (1892 -1973)  
CANADIAN RADIO PIONEER

### EARLY LIFE

Douglas Richard Proctor Coats, was born in Gravesend, England.<sup>4</sup> Fascinated by radio since a demonstration by an associate of Marconi in 1906, in 1910 he enrolled in The British School of Telegraphy. After a year of studies, the school got him a job with the "Pacific Cable Board", a joint Canadian, Australian and New Zealand venture that provided telegraph services. They sent him to Montreal to work as a land-line telegraph operator.<sup>5</sup> He arrived in Halifax aboard the liner Megantic in December 1911 at the tender age of 19 and immediately boarded a train for Montreal, armed with a five-year contract to work as a telegraph operator.

Darby Coats: "My appointment to the staff of The Pacific Cable Board ...was....an indenture of...five years' service. ... I eventually sought release from the monotony of landline operating .... [and was able] to cancel my contract at the end of the first twelve months..."<sup>6</sup>

Because of his interest in "wireless" technology, he went on to work for Marconi, and in the spring of 1913, embarked on a career as a marine radio operator.<sup>7</sup>

## CAREER IN MONTREAL

A year and a half later, after the outbreak of WWI, in September 1914, he volunteered as a wireless operator on the first ship taking a Canadian contingent of soldiers to Europe to fight in the war. It was a converted passenger ship called the *Lakonia* (9). He endured a torpedoing and a shipwreck during this period, and eventually returned to Montreal after the end of the War in 1918 where he worked for Marconi until 1922.

## MANITOBA TELEPHONE SYSTEM AND CKY

In May of 1922, the Manitoba Telephone System decided to become a broadcaster.

They recruited Darby Coats to assemble and operate the station. Radio station CKY went on the air on March 13, 1923, with Coats as "announcer, chief operator and general factotum". [i]

## MANITOBA CALLING [ii]

Manitoba Calling was a magazine published between 1937 and 1948 by the Radio branch of the Manitoba Telephone System. They owned and operated two radio stations - CKY (Winnipeg) and CKX (Brandon). It was a monthly programming guide, and contained other articles of local interest. Its editor and primary author was Darby Coats.

In it, he published a number of articles called "Adventures in Radio". They recalled the begins of radio (wireless telephony) and described both his experiences as a ship's radio operator, and the beginnings of broadcasting in Montreal.



D.P.R Coats as Marine Wireless Operator in 1915.

The following are excerpts From the Manitoba calling newsletter that describe the beginnings of broadcasting in Montreal. Darby Coats: "From [the Marconi] factory in Chelmsford [Essex, England in 1919] had gone out a number of radio-telephone transmitters.

Some of them finished in solid teak and looking like upright pianos...were packed off to Montreal... These were the transmitters which gave birth to broadcasting in Canada."<sup>10</sup>



Canada's first radio transmitter - Marconi 1919

Describing the Marconi offices on William Street in Montreal, (photo on the cover page) he goes on to say:

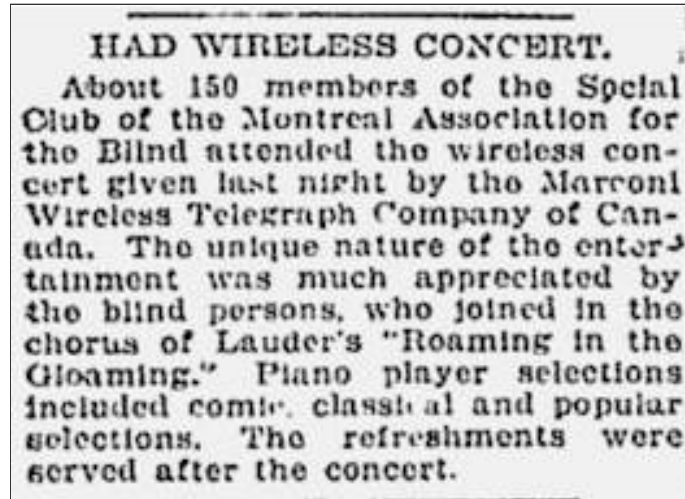
"Actually, this installation is one of a great number developed for the British military signal services during the Great War. With the cessation of hostilities, the manufacturers in England found themselves with many sets on their hands. It occurred to someone that some of them might be shipped to Canada..."<sup>11</sup>  
"...The radio works [on William Street] is a square two-story building. In the basement is a training school for wireless operators. [On the ground floor] there are offices and shipping rooms....Upstairs to the top floor we go. Here are lines of lathes, drills, coil-winding machines, and all the gadgets of a radio factory of that period.... At the front of the building... is a small room in which stands a teak box...From the top...a heavy wire goes to an insulator, connecting...to an aerial on the roof."

"The set we are inspecting in the whitewashed room on William Street is about to be put on the air. Remember that this is 1919. An engineer comes up the stairs from the main floor of the factory where he has started a motor-generator which is to supply current to our wireless telephone. He enters the bare room that is the first Canadian radio studio, and throws a switch....There is a pause to allow the tubes to become thoroughly warmed...Then the engineer picks up the microphone...and speaks: "Hello! Hello! This is wireless telephone station XWA at Montreal"...."<sup>12</sup>

He goes on to describe some of the activities and experiments in which was involved in and around Montreal:

"When we first began broadcasting we were personally acquainted with most of our listeners. Thus, we had an audience of people who were not too hard to please."

"My duties at that time were those of official lecturer, promoter and public relations man for [Marconi] from whose works the broadcasts were being transmitted. It was my job to arrange public demonstrations, at meetings..." 13



Montreal Gazette April 20, 1921

"On the occasion of an international yacht race on Lake St. Louis ... in 1920... a motor boat was equipped with a radio transmitter so that the boat could follow...the yachts on the lake...while the racing vessels were far from shore a running description could be broadcast."

At the bow and the stern ...were poles which...suspended the aerial. Power was [supplied] by a generator operated by a crank. As one man cranked another spoke into a telephone mouthpiece. On shore we had a transmitter and receiver ... [for] communication and special wire connection with the "Montreal Standard" to give them a fast story.

I remember being...with an engineer and a semi-portable radiophone outfit, participating in some experiments around Montreal and Three Rivers [sic]. Our job was to see if two-way radio telephone conversation could be carried on within a mile of one of the Company's spark [wireless telegraph] stations. We camped at Maisonneuve and the spark ...on the end of the Tarte Pier [ La Jetée Tarte is at the foot of Pie IX. ] completely ruined conversation... with William Street. We moved across to Longueuil ...with no better success. Wherever we went, we provided a sort of miniature circus for the local inhabitants who would crowd around and gape at us as if we were 20th Century medicine men. At Three rivers, we arrived on St. Jean Baptiste Day.... Late in the afternoon we went to the park..for a fireworks display.... Then it began to rain ...the fireworks were rapidly being soaked...Figures in oilskins touched off the fuses they sizzled and sputtered in the downpour...Meanwhile, crowds under the trees cheered with enthusiasm. Altogether a pleasant time was had by all..."

Toward the end of August 1920, we demonstrated radio at the Toronto Exhibition...14

"One of the first historic events in which the apparatus figured was in connection with a meeting of the Royal Society of Canada

at Ottawa, early in 1920, when addresses to the members were broadcast from Montreal and received at the capital city."15

To be continued:

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- (i) Reynolds, George F., Early Wireless and Radio in Manitoba, 1909-1924  
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- (ii) Peel's Prairie Provinces, University of Alberta Library:  
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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Reynolds, George F., Early Wireless and Radio in Manitoba, 1909-1924 MHS Transactions Series 3, Number 35, 1978-79 season
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In the next His Master's Voice

Darby Coats part 2

Studio Six

## A Few Words From Our Director

By Anja Borck



**T**he Partnership with MDA made Great Spring Activities at the MOEB possible.

A little help can go a long way at a museum with a dynamic team! A contribution from Macdonald, Dettwiler and Associate (MDA) this year made it possible for the museum to become a member of the Société des Musées de Montreal and participate in the Montreal Museums Day. We had over 180 visitors on the Sunday. Many people used the bus service provided by the organizers. Our volunteers and students were ready with a warm welcome and were able to share interesting details about our unique collection of historic sound equipment.



Open doors at the Musée des ondes Emile Berliner.

Two weeks after this event, we shared a tent with MDA at the science event Festival Eureka at the Old Port in Montreal. From Friday, June 9th to Sunday, June 11th, our stand offered to young and old a fun quiz designed by Michel Forest. Our thanks are due to MDA, to Beatrice Perier Agostini in particular, for inviting us into MDA's stand. Approximately 50,000 visitors came to this Festival over that sunny weekend, which gave our museum great visibility.



MOEB at the Old Port.

For all those who missed our last exhibition, or who would like to refresh their memory, our free publication "Montreal in Space" is ready to be picked up at the museum in an English and a French version. A young designer, Janie-Claude Ruysen, has given the publication a stunning look. All production costs were covered by MDA.



## The Emile Berliner Sound and Image Archive

The MOEB has received a grant from Library and Archives Canada for the new project: the Emile Berliner Sound and Image Archive. The project includes the digitalization of approximately 500 images and audio objects, including the optical digitization with the Irene System of some unique experimental discs by Emile Berliner. We are pleased to offer the digital files of these unique recordings online at the end of 2017, beginning of 2018 through our internet page to the public as our contribution to Canada's 150th anniversary.

Paramount in achieving this grant for the Musée des ondes was a recent graduate from McGill University, Mary-Catherine Shea, who had offered to dedicate some time to our museum as volunteer. We offered her the chance to gain experience with application processes and the DHCP seemed the most fitting program for us to do this. It was therefore with great joy that we received the news that our proposal has been accepted and we thank Mary-Catherine whole-heartedly for her work on the project.

The museum is well prepared for the project. During the winter, an information studies student, also from McGill, developed an evaluation system to select items qualifying for the digitalization process, and since June, a UQAM museology student started to work on The Emile Berliner Sound and Image Archive.



### Would you like to volunteer at the MOEB?

The Musée des ondes Emile Berliner is looking for weekend guides. You need to be comfortable in French and English. We provide you with a guiding kit and practical training. Expected engagement: One to two days a month from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m., year around. You can contact us: [info@moeb.ca](mailto:info@moeb.ca).

**Volunteers needed! Come and join our great team.**



Treasures for the ears and eyes from the museum's collection

### Instagram

Adelia Demeusy, our most recent intern from France, put us on Instagram and we have lots of fun with it. You can follow us. We leave this medium mostly to the younger generation of our students and volunteers. It is refreshing to see them exploring Montreal's history of sound. We love their take on our museum and our collection.



# At the MOEB

## News from the Exec:

**H**ello everyone,  
I take great pleasure in announcing that two new people have joined our board of directors.



Léa Gamache: Some of you already know Léa. She has been a very active member of our volunteer team for nearly two years, working on several projects for the Musée including videos, a social-financing project, as a weekend guide, etc). Léa is a scientific counselor at the national public health institute of Québec (INSPQ) and works with issues such as birthing, conjugal violence and smoking prevention. She has a degree in political science and economics from the University of Ottawa and also did graduate studies at the University of Victoria in political science, where her thesis was "Cultural, Social and Political Thought". While in university, she was the vice-president of external affairs for her student association and is presently her union delegate of the INSPQ. She also is a member of the board of directors of a group called Force Jeunesse that advocates for equal opportunities for young Quebec francophone workers. This year she was named vice-president responsible for "content". (Source: Website Force Jeunesse).



Michel Dumais: Michel has been a journalist specializing in new technologies for the last 15 years. He is a veteran observer, and his reflections have been published in numerous newspapers and magazines such as Le Devoir, le Soleil, Le Droit, Voir, l'Actualité and Les Affaires among other Quebec publications. He has also been editor-in-chief of the business news website Bénéfice.net for the last 2 years. As well, his expertise is called upon regularly in the electronic media. He has been part of the team on many radio programs including: Radionet, Demain la veille and Clair et Net. Writer for the prestigious magazine Forces, blogging about information technology at MediaBiz and on the radio news program "La presse dans tous ses états", Michel Dumais is particularly interested in the social and economic impact of technologies. He has also been associated with the development of the Eureka platform from Cedrom-Sni as well as Cybersciences, from Québec-Science. Before concentrating on writing and radio, Michel worked in professional audio and was interested in digital audio from its beginnings. He grew up in a graphic arts milieu, and knows "good old days" where he began as a linotype operator in a printing house. Presently, he is the host, producer and director of a daily radio show called CitoyenNumérique.com that airs on radio station de CIBL 101.5 FM. It is the only program dedicated to the socio-economic impact of technologies. As well, he contributes to several news websites. Grumpy, Marxist (with grouch tendencies), Michel Dumais considers himself to be the perfect immigrant to technology. He is also an avid music-lover and audio recording technology freak.

Pierre M. Valiquette

# A Recent Acquisition of the Musée des ondes Emile Berliner



Photos by Maurice McDuff

by Laval Rhainds










**A**n Edison phonograph. It is a model LU-37 which went into production in 1922. The machine is still completely functional, and came with a bundle of 25 Edison disks. It belonged to the family of the Québécois artist Marcelle Ferron GOC.

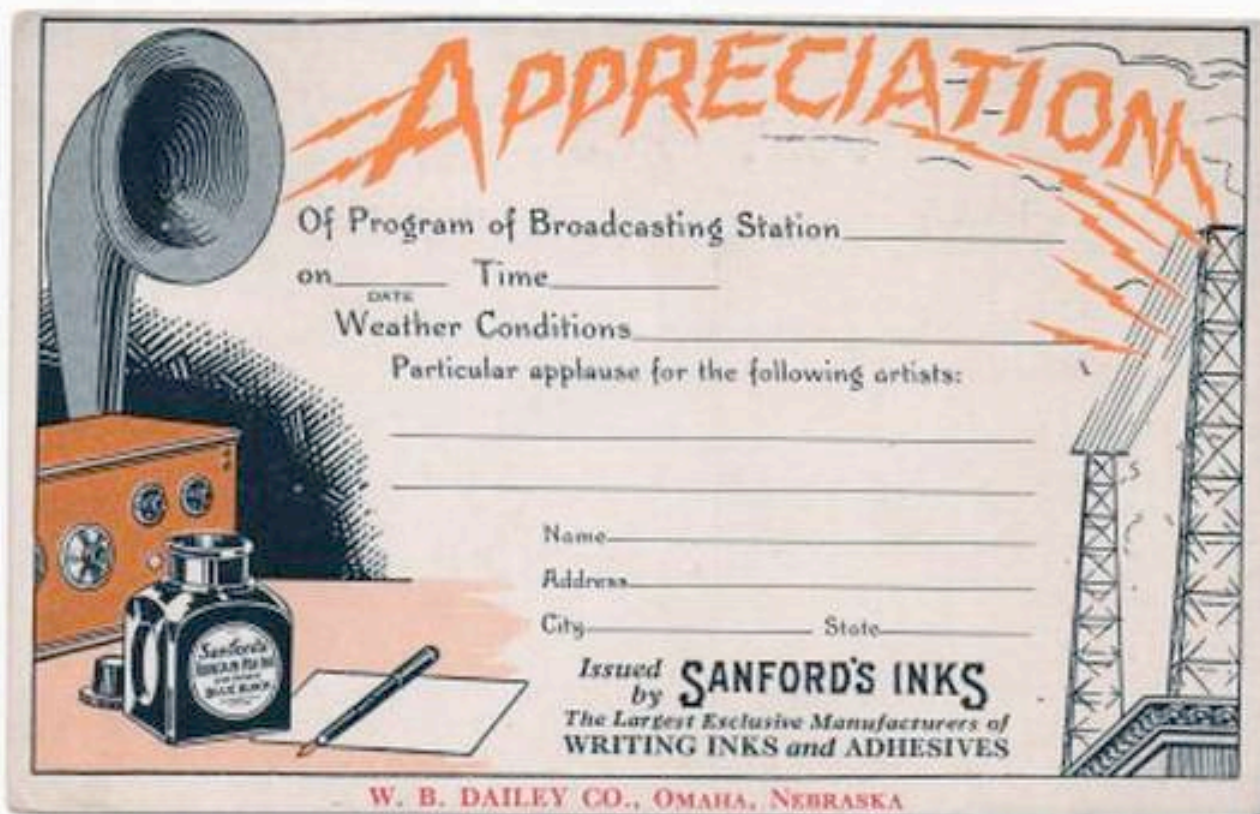
Edison disks were made using a diamond stylus to create a vertically cut groove (also known as hill and dale) as opposed to the lateral cut process of his competitor Émile Berliner where the stylus moves from side to side. In 1912, Edison stopped manufacturing cylinder phonographs and switched production to the disk phonograph. The vertical cut allowed Edison to cut finer grooves on a disk, up to 150 per inch. This gave his disks a longer playing time than Berliner's (4 - 5 minutes). Groove density was increased over the years and by 1924 Edison was producing disks at a density of 450 per inch that boasted a 12 minute playing time. This was a costly mistake. The walls between the grooves were too fragile and tended to break down, causing the records to skip. In 1928, Edison finally gave up and began producing lateral-cut records. However, it was too late and this venture lasted for just a few months. In 1929, he stopped producing records altogether. This setback was caused primarily by the higher production cost of the Edison disks and a relatively small and uninteresting catalogue, rather than by the quality of the recordings themselves.





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An Early Radio Survey

Postcard from the collection of Joseph Pereira

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from all at  
Le Musée des ondes Emile Berliner

