

CHATHAM — In the heyday of the Marconi/RCA Wireless Receiving Station in the 1950s and 1960s, a blue haze of cigar and cigarette smoke filled a room that resonated with the blips and beeps of Morse Code, said Lewis Masson, a teletype operator who worked there from 1957 to 1992.

The cluster of brick buildings overlooking Ryder Cove was a global center for ship-to-shore communication for decades.

Related Photo Galleries

[Marconi/RCA Campus Tour](#)

Radio station facts

Guglielmo Marconi received the Nobel Prize in 1909 and his name became a household word.

In 1914, Marconi constructed the communications campus on Ryder's Cove in Chatham.

The Marconi site operators during World War II intercepted enemy warship communications and pinpointed locations of enemy ships.

Before satellites and other weather technology, ships from all over the world provided useful information to predict the weather. Ships would send weather updates every four hours to communications centers such as the Marconi site, said Lewis Masson, a teletype operator. The operators would send the weather reports to the National Weather Service in Washington, D.C.

In 1994, the Marconi campus was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Yesterday, a group of volunteers dedicated to turning the now-closed operations center into a museum and education center celebrated completion of the exterior renovations of several of the buildings.

The renovation, funded by \$900,000 in Community Preservation Act funds, included not just a brick operations room but a so-called hotel where the single radio operators once lived.

The next step is fund-raising to turn the gutted operations building into a museum where ham radio communication can be practiced, where children can learn the international language of Morse Code, and where people can see the now-obsolete equipment that once made ship-to-shore communication possible.

"It was a very powerful station," said Masson, one of four former operators and technicians who attended the ceremony yesterday.

Messages came in daily from ships stationed everywhere from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf, he said. Ship captains could speak Spanish or Swahili, it didn't matter. Morse Code is international, so language was never a barrier, Masson added.

In 1999, the town of Chatham bought the 17-acre site from MCI WorldCom. At the time, the property, including its 15 buildings, was assessed at nearly \$3 million. The town paid \$725,000.

Yet the property's history is priceless.

The station was first built by the father of trans-Atlantic wireless communication, Guglielmo Marconi, in 1914. By 1920, it had become the most active marine coastal radio station in the country. It remained as such until 1993, when the owner at the time, MCI WorldCom, shifted all of its communications network to its San Francisco station.

During World War II, special operators at the Chatham spot intercepted encrypted messages from enemy U-boats and transmitted U.S. Naval communications, also encrypted, to Washington D.C., where they were decrypted, said Ed Moxon, secretary of the Chatham Marconi Maritime Center.

"What went on in this building during the war was the best-kept secret in town," he said.

Desks were crammed in the attic above the operations center. This is where some of the secret message interceptions took place. Though much of the station's equipment was lost or sold off, blackout shades, used to conceal the operations center during the war, still collect dust in that attic room.

The site's history is exciting, but yesterday, center board members were cheering for a very recent development.

On Friday, Gov. Deval Patrick signed special legislation allowing the Marconi Maritime Center to be exempt from the prevailing wage law requiring all municipal projects to pay union wages. This means local contractors who don't pay at that wage level, and so generally cost 25 to 30 percent less, can bid on the job, according to Frank Messina, Marconi center vice president.

"It will save us about \$100,000," he said. "And it has great implications for other nonprofits."

State Rep. Sarah Peake, D-Provincetown, sponsored the legislation, which applies only to this project.

It will cost \$200,000 to \$250,000 to turn the old operations center into a museum, Messina said.

Next week, the town will ask the Community Preservation Committee for another \$400,000 to complete outside work on the Marconi campus.

It's not just old equipment and buildings, Messina said. "The site is an artifact."