

24 Hours May 89

ONE of the most fascinating characters in the very early history of the radio industry in Australia was the man known as the "Wireless Priest", Father Archibald Shaw. The story of how this priest, responsible for raising funds for the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in the South Pacific, came to be the first Australian radio entrepreneur is interesting enough. However, it becomes a tale of national political intrigue.

Father Shaw's wireless works in suburban Randwick was the centre of a scandal which eventually resulted in the resignation of a senator and the sacking of the Navy Minister. This followed a Royal Commission held two years after Father Shaw's death in mysterious circumstances in the Coffee Palace Hotel in Melbourne, days after withdrawing large amounts of money. The coroner's verdict concluded "indefinite". The administrator of St Patrick's Cathedral was convinced that Father Shaw had been murdered. And a large amount of money was missing.

Father Archibald Shaw was responsible for establishing in 1910 the first factory to make wireless equipment in Australia. At its peak it employed over 170 workers and was the only place the people interested in the new and mysterious art of radio could learn the basics of the trade.

One of the most famous of Shaw's students was Ray Allsop, the talented young engineer who built the country's



Staff at the Wireless Works in 1911. Father Shaw is arrowed. Photo, from the Sydney Daily Telegraph, is by courtesy of the State Library of NSW.

BRIGHT SPARKS

By Stephen Rapley

first official broadcasting transmitter for 2BL, and who in 1938 was the first to demonstrate in Australia the practicality of stereophonic sound.

When Father Shaw set up his Wireless Works, radio broadcasting was a long way away. He was an unusual radio pioneer, having grown up in Adelong and Tumut in NSW — quite a long way from Marconi's Bologna and the family villa where the inventor carried out his first experiments.

While Marconi's mother's family was the famous whisky distiller, the Jamiesons, Archibald Shaw's father ran the Adelong Hotel. His father's interests extended to the local racecourse where he was a steward, and he owned a horse called Scandal!

One of the young Shaw's first jobs in the early 1890s was as a telegraphist at the Goulburn Post Office. After being turned down by one order, the Passionist Fathers, in 1894 he found his way to Yule Island in then British New Guinea, where he worked as a lay missionary for the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. As Brother Placid he returned to Sydney three years later and was ordained as a priest by Cardinal Moran in 1900.

After acting as a chaplain to the troops camped on Kensington racecourse waiting to sail away to the Boer War, he was made assistant Procurator of the Missions. His job was to manage the large amounts of money sent from France and Rome needed to establish the three missions across the South Pacific and to raise extra money to keep them supplied.

One of his first attempts involved selling large religious paintings, but this gave very slow returns and was frowned on by his fellow priests.

His next attempt at fund-raising inspired even more resentment. He had a basic understanding of electricity and fascination with wireless. Another Catholic priest in Bathurst, Father Slattery, had only a few years before replicated many of Marconi's earliest experiments and established morse code communications over three miles. But he had used the techniques mainly as a demonstration for science classes. In those early days there were few other people to contact over the ether.

Together with a local engineer called Kirkby, Shaw spent his evenings after work designing radio equipment and building a large radio station in the backyard of the large church property where he lived.

"It's often 2am in the morning before I get to bed and turn out at 5, but I'm not doing it for myself but for the Procure."

As well as intending to earn money

for the missions fund by making wireless apparatus, Shaw wanted a wireless station to maintain contact with the Order's distant missions in the islands. Kirkby eventually established a factory on the church land where electrical and wireless equipment to Father Shaw's designs was built.

By 1911 they had formed the Maritime Wireless Company and business was brisk. Prior to the First World War radio's main use was in ships.

Shaw had a great sense of public relations and was quick to build on his reputation as the Wireless Priest. The local media supported the venture proudly printing photos of his station's 250 foot high transmitting mast.

Shaw's help with wireless communications was sought by the South Pole Expedition of 1911, and when the Governor Stanford Smith was feared lost in New Guinea, he was quick to volunteer his services as were a team of his apprentices.

He also established a wireless station on King Island linking it to Tasmania.

When his fellow priests' disapproval of all this industry grew too loud, Shaw went to see Cardinal Moran.

"He was delighted and gave me his blessing saying that if I needed a little financial help his secretary would assist me. He also hoped I would make it a life study as he wished all his priests to be leaders in science to help in every way the working classes."

The Wireless Works boomed. As well as supplying the government and shipping companies with wireless gear, they worked on a prototype of an electric car, erected a windmill to generate electricity and even drew up plans for aeroplanes and designed a remotely controlled submarine torpedo.

However, as the profits came in they were invested in further equipment and, when the government delayed payments, Shaw turned to the Missions fund to tide the company over. Concerned at the chaotic state of the finances of the mission and the company, the Order sent out a special Visitor to investigate. He found that Shaw had used almost £10,000 and directed him to sell the factory to repay the debt.

When the PMG decided against buying the factory, Shaw turned to a friend and fellow race-goer, Senator Long from Tasmania, whose son worked at the Wireless Works. Long drafted a letter from Shaw to the Navy Minister, Senator Jensen, offering to sell the Works to the Government. Shaw spent many months then in Melbourne negotiating the sale price, which in mid

1916 was finally set at £55,000.

A subsequent Royal Commission into the administration of the Navy investigated the circumstances of this sale and concluded that the price was far too high and that much of the equipment was obsolete.

Jensen was apparently keen to have a state-owned wireless factory, and it has been argued that he wasn't supporting Shaw so much as resisting the mastery of the industry by AWA.

Soon after the deal was finally approved, Shaw made a number of withdrawals from his bank on Saturday, 19 August 1916, returned to his hotel where he met Senator Long and handed him £1,290 (according to Long's own admission in the subsequent Royal Commission).

Shaw was found unconscious on the Monday morning and he died five days later. He was only 43.

Some of the money was missing.

There had already been widespread opposition in the press to the sale of the Wireless Works. Shaw enjoyed the support of the federal Labor government who preferred to buy wireless gear from an Australian firm rather than the bigger international concerns. The Labor government even guaranteed to protect Shaw from any litigation over patents, which had stalled the early development of the industry.

The Maritime Wireless Company's boom days ended when Joseph Cook's anti-Labor party was elected to government and orders were placed with AWA, who were the representatives of the major firms, Marconi and Telefunken.

The Royal Commission couldn't solve the mystery of Father Archibald Shaw's death. But it did hear from Miss Evie Hoad, the manageress of the Jenolan Caves House, who testified that Shaw had asked her to marry him and go to America where he wanted to work as a radio engineer.

While Senator Long resigned, the Navy Minister, Jens August Jensen refused and was sacked over involvement of public funds.

The factory remained with the Navy and after the war the equipment was transferred to Garden Island. The site is now an Army depot, and the large house where Shaw lived and operated his radio station is still standing in Randwick.

Bright Sparks, eight Social History Unit features on the early technical history of the Australian radio industry commence on Sunday, May 7, at 1.30pm on Radio National and Thursday, May 11, at 7.30pm on Regional Radio. Stephen Rapley is the producer.

