



The Marconi Wireless transmitting station near Marshall on Tomales Bay, 1914.

Tomales Bay's Link in an Early, World-Wide Communication System

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On a lovely, forested hillside overlooking Tomales Bay, just south of the town of Marshall, sits the 110-year-old Marconi Conference Center. It was gifted to the State of California in 1989 after a purchase made possible by the San Francisco Foundation and Buck Trust Fund financing. Originally built in 1913 to receive wireless telegraph signals from across the Atlantic Ocean, the Center's website boasts that, "Marconi continues in the tradition of communication by providing meeting and retreat services for the Bay Area."

Guglielmo Marconi was an Italian Nobel Prize winning inventor and engineer whose pioneering work in radio wave transmission ushered in the era of long-distance communications and the "radio age." After groundbreaking work in Italy and England, Marconi began working on building transmission stations on both U.S. coastlines that would link North America with Asia and Europe. According to a *San Francisco Call* article: "The Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company purchased 1,114 acres of the Maggetti Ranch on the shore of Tomales Bay for \$75,600." The receiving station was built over the next year and the transmitting station placed further south in Bolinas. The geographically separate "duplex stations" were necessary as the noise from transmitting the signal obscured clear reception at the receiving end. These stations made it possible for messages to be received from New Brunswick, New Jersey, thus connecting Europe and the East Coast of the United States to the Pacific Coast and Hawaii.

The new technology also enabled ship to shore communication and the Marconi wireless system has been credited with saving thousands of lives from shipwrecks, including the 712 survivors of the *Titanic* disaster. The receiving station required a one-mile-long antennae that was supported

by seven 270-foot towers. In the photograph above, the two-story Craftsman style staff and visitors' hotel featured thirty-five rooms, a library, game room, lounge, and dining hall. To the right is the powerhouse that contained the boiler, transformers, storage batteries, and a workshop. Three of the towers supporting the antennae can be seen in the background.

Through World War I, the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company of America was the dominant radio communications company in the United States. However, after the war, pressure from the U.S. government forced the mostly foreign-owned Marconi company to sell its assets to RCA, a subsidiary of General Electric. GE operated the station until 1947. In the early 1960s, the infamous drug and alcohol rehabilitation organization, Synanon (some would say "cult") purchased the property and moved their headquarters to the Tomales site. After many brushes with the law, accusations of violence, and even a murder conviction, all exposed by the Pulitzer Prize-winning work of the *Pt. Reyes Light* newspaper, the site was put up for sale and passed into the hands of the State of California.

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