



RCA Ranch and Station KPH



There was a special bond between us...group of people who still believed in making beautiful music, using international Morse code. We continued in the spirit of service to the customer and of helping safeguard souls at sea...

—Retired KPH CW Operator William F. Gibbons

Introduction

This quiet yet windswept landscape has long been shaped by a myriad of people drawn to its rich soil and beaches. Coast Miwok, farmers, military, and communication workers, and scientists have all walked the dunes and grasslands of this site. These buildings were once in the forefront of

communication technology—a wireless telegraph station where operators tapped out Morse code messages across the Pacific Ocean. The land surrounding the building has been known as the RCA Ranch since the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) acquired it in 1929.

Human History

The story begins with Coast Miwok camping along Drakes Estero, digging for shellfish and leaving behind middens of clam shells. Native bunchgrasses supported herds of elk on treeless plains, which were swept by the prevailing northwestern winds. The cattle of Mexican ranchers succeeded the elk, grazing throughout the Rancho Punta de Los Reyes. Eventually, the Shafter, Shafter, Park, and Heydenfeldt law firm emerged as owners of almost the entire peninsula. This firm mapped out a series of more than thirty ranches run by tenant

farmers, labelling the various holdings by letters of the alphabet. This site is part of the original “G Ranch,” though it would also be known as “Flat Ranch” and “McClures Ranch” over the years. G Ranch, similar to the other tenant run dairies, raised cows to provide butter for a growing San Francisco population. Milkers, many of whom were Portuguese and Irish immigrants, worked for about \$30 a month plus room and board, milking a string of about twenty-five cows twice each day, wind or rain.

Transitions

How did the peaceful sound of grazing of cows give way to the tapping sound of Morse code? The early 1900s was an exciting time of innovations in communications. Wireless transmission and ship to shore communication were rapidly growing enterprises.

In 1901, Guglielmo Marconi heard the first tap of his wireless telegraph system—the letter “S” in Morse code across the Atlantic Ocean. In 1912, the wreck of *RMS Titanic* highlighted how wireless telegraph systems could safeguard lives and property at sea. Wireless operators could tap out messages at about fifteen words per minute, calling other ships and shore stations for aid more quickly than earlier technology allowed.

In 1914, the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company of America (aka American Marconi) built and operated an overseas transmitting station in Bolinas and a receiving station in Marshall to better communicate across the Pacific. RCA acquired American Marconi in 1920 and, by 1929, was seeking to purchase the G ranch because of its proximity to the ocean for a third station to receive signals transmitted from across the north Pacific.

The Art Deco-style receiving station was built between 1929 and 1931. Saplings of Monterey cypress, one of the few tree species adaptable to wind and

ocean weather conditions, were planted lining the station’s access road.

During World War II, RCA Ranch was used by military and Coast Guard personnel who were stationed on the ranch to patrol nearby beaches.

At some time during the past few decades, an urban legend began circulating among many in West Marin that the RCA facility on the Point Reyes peninsula was the first radio station on the mainland USA to receive news of the attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. However, there are no records from the station that it received direct word from Hawai’i on that day, although the stations in the Point Reyes area did help relay the news to ships across the north Pacific.

World War II spurred even more developments in communications, such as LORAN (long range aid to navigation) and GPS (global positioning systems), which ultimately replaced the need for Morse code operators and ocean-front technical stations.

This receiving station has used the KPH call sign since 1946. The original PH call sign, from which KPH was derived, was first used when a radio station was established in the Palace Hotel (PH) in San Francisco.

Today

The National Park Service acquired the property in 1999 and established a partnership with the Maritime Radio Historical Society (MRHS) to protect and maintain facility and the equipment. Most Saturdays throughout the year, MRHS members welcome visitors and provide guided tours of the Historic KPH Receiving Station. Visit nps.gov/pore or radiomarine.org for more information.

Today, the line of cypress trees offers a welcome waypoint for migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway. Hawks like to settle along the topmost branches to scan for rabbits in the nearby fields and warblers hide in the thick branches to rest as they head south. The structures are maintained as part of the long human chain of history on the Point Reyes peninsula.



NPS PHOTO

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