In the area of wireless telecommunications, or quite simply Radio, Newfoundland is widely known as the site of the first trans-Atlantic wireless transmission. This was initiated and successfully achieved by Guglielmo Marconi of Bologna, Italy, on Signal Hill overlooking St. John’s in 1901. While this was a major feat in both radio and Newfoundland history, it was not the last. Nineteen years later another, albeit less celebrated, feat was achieved by an equally less celebrated man- Mr. James Joseph Collins.

On Signal Hill, July 23, 1920, Mr. Collins became the first person to successfully send a two-way wireless trans-Atlantic voice transmission, thus starting the now multi billion dollar international radio broadcasting industry. The transmitting stage was very crude and the signal was to the SS Victorian, 1250 miles east in the Atlantic Ocean. Newspapers of the day heralded the event as the “Wonder of the Age” and “Scientific Marvel of the Day.”

And this wasn’t just a one-time trick of unique atmospheric conditions. The following day the feat was repeated by Mrs. Collins, a veteran Cape Race telegrapher herself, as well as such noted Newfoundland personages as Prime Minister Sir Richard Squires, Mayor WG Gosling, Sir Michael Cashin and Sir Eric Bowring of the mercantile house of Bowring Bros. Ltd. The SS Victorian was now 650 miles offshore and over the next few hours received and exchanged greetings in real-time.

A newspaper article the following day summed up the mood of all present

A feeling not easily described pervaded those who spoke to and heard men on a ship far out to sea. One can hardly grasp the fact that it has really happened, but the seeming impossible has been accomplished and its potentialities(sic) are beyond present comprehension.

Maybe for most of those present, the possibilities were beyond comprehension, but the significance of the achievement, and James Collins’ part in it, was not so elusive. Sir P.T. McGrath editorialized in his paper The Evening Herald:
In all the recent activities there has been no figure more outstanding than Mr. Collins. He has during the past weeks cheerfully sacrificed personal interests and comforts that none might be dissatisfied with Newfoundland’s share in this epoch-making event, and that he has succeeded despite the difficulty of his task is perhaps the greatest tribute that could be paid to his excellent qualities. Certain it is that on no similar occasion has such trouble been taken to give the citizens generally all the advantages in the circumstances that could be afforded them, and we feel that in thanking all concerned we are voicing the sentiments of the people of this city and Newfoundland generally.

Certainly, James Collins didn’t miss the historical significance, he donated two of the radio tubes used to contact the Victorian to the Newfoundland Museum for posterity. Neither did he miss its commercial potential. Within seven months, Mr. Collins had set up a radio studio in the Canadian Marconi premises in the Pope Bldg. on McBride’s Hill, and in early 1921 began broadcasting its first testing programmes. The transmissions were strong and distinct. Nevertheless, the listening audience was modest as there were no more than a half dozen receiving sets in the whole of St. John’s at that time. However, this would soon change.

In the autumn of 1921, the dozen or so radio enthusiasts in and around St. John’s banded together to form the St. John’s Radio Club. Headed by Ernest Ash, the club also included James Collins and another well known businessman, Mr. Will Meehan. Meehan owned the Royal Stationary Co. on Water Street and was more than willing to allow Collins, in his capacity as manager of the Canadian Marconi Co., to place his latest radio model in the store for advertising. Consequently arrangements were made to have a powerful receiver in place for the first official broadcast of V.O.S., Mr. Collins’ station. On July 29, 1922, the broadcast commenced and included as guests, the majority of the City of St. John’s talent. Two of the most currently recognisable were, Mr. W. J. Herder of the Evening Telegram and Professor Charles Hutton.
Will Meehan had issued invitations to a number of prominent people to be present for the broadcast but the signal was so strong and clear that he opened the doors to The Royal Stationary Co. to enable passers-by to also enjoy the show. Soon the area inside the store was full and a crowd had started to build on the sidewalk outside as people left their homes and offices to witness the spectacle. After this demonstration, V.O.S. broadcast similar concerts twice weekly.

In 1924, Mr. Collins supervised the construction of a radio station for the Wesley United Church. With the call sign 8WMC, but now known as VOWR, the station went on air July 20, 1924, only two years from V.O.S.’s inaugural broadcast. The station became so popular that in 1927, Mr. Collins supplied wireless receiver sets to Newfoundland sealing vessels to enable sealers to listen to 8WMC while at The Front.

It is further interesting to note that James Collins also pioneered the remote broadcast. By 1925, Mr. Collins had established V.O.S., now designated 8JJC, in the Collins residence at 11 Parade Street. On January 26, 1925, Mr. Jack Tobin relayed by telephone the action of a hockey game between the Terra Novas and St. Bon’s at the Prince’s Arena. This was the first of what was to become a regular feature on 8JJC.

Unfortunately, James J. Collins died in 1954 at the early age of 66. However, his contribution to radio and broadcasting remains, not only with the artifacts housed at the Newfoundland Museum, but also in the continuing popularity of both amateur and commercial radio in Newfoundland.

Sources: The Books of Newfoundland
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Interview with James J. Collins Jr.

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