

# The SS Malolo and Captain Dobbsie

*How an early offshore radio station ended up in Hawaii in 1931*

*by Jan van Heeren*

For those who have a feeling for the history of radio and more specifically for the history of the offshore radio stations, it is interesting when something emerges from the distant past that has something to do with it, even if it is sideways. This certainly applies to the broadcasts that were made in 1926 from the ocean steamer SS Malolo. Jan van Heeren tells more about it here.



## **Back in time.**

Already in the twenties and thirties of the last century radio programs were emitted from ships. Hans Knot (1993; 1998) described earlier among others the examples of the HMS Andromeda and the MV Kanimbla. We can now add to that list the SS Malolo - a name that appeared in old radio magazines of 1931, such as Broadcast Weekly (1931a; 1931b; 1931c) and Radio Doings (Nunan, 1931). What's this all to do

with? For an answer to that question we first make a leap back in time to the year 1926. Ocean steamer/ cruise ship SS Malolo is launched in Philadelphia. It is a very luxurious ship that sails the route San Francisco, Los Angeles and Honolulu and contributes to the popularity of Hawaii as a tourist island. Soon after entering service, in 1927, the ship collided with a cargo ship, causing damage similar to that of the Titanic fifteen years earlier. Due to a well-functioning compartment system, the ship was able to safely enter the port under its own power, albeit with 6,000 tons of seawater on board.

It was not only the Malolo that saw the light of day in 1926. The radio programme "Ship of Joy" also started in that year at broadcaster KPO, daily between eight and nine o'clock in the

morning, with the exception of Sunday. It is, apart from KPO, also heard by a large number of other broadcasters in syndicated form on the West Coast of America. "Ship of Joy" is an imitation of an already existing popular program: "Maxwellhouse Show Boat". The new program is presented by Hugh Barrett Dobbs. He already has radio experience, especially as a presenter of a morning gymnastics program. Those gymnastics broadcasts, sponsored by Quaker Oats, were very popular. "Ship of Joy" also became a sponsored program. Initially the company Del Monte was a sponsor, after that it became Shell, which changed the name to "Shell Ship of Joy". The program was broadcast via the NBC Pacific Coast network.

The popularity of the program was shown by the salary Dobbs received. It was said to be more than President Hoover's. (In the period 1929 to 1932 he collected almost a quarter of a million US dollars through Shell). Another indication of his popularity was that Dobbs received almost two million letters from listeners in six years. The listeners of "Ship of Joy" were called "shipmates" or "happytimers" and Dobbs himself became Captain Dobbsie.

### **By ship to Hawaii.**

The two events of 1926, the launching of the SS Malolo and the start of the radio program "Ship of Joy", would come together a few years later. At the beginning of 1930 a top man of Shell,



E.H. Sanders, thought it would be nice to have the programme "Ship of Joy" actually broadcast from a ship for once. It took almost a year and a half before everything was complete in terms of technology, permits and finances. But finally, on Friday July 11, 1931, the SS Malolo left at the Golden Gate of San Francisco in the direction of Honolulu, Hawaii. During this voyage Captain Dobbsie

would take care of his morning program "Shell Ship of Joy" every day from the ship.

The ship was conducted by thousands of listeners. On board were among others Captain Dobbsie, two radio technicians, twenty artists and a large number of fans of the program. A temporary radio studio was set up on the ship. The 200 Watt shortwave transmitter received the call letters WIOXAI and could broadcast on 9670 and 6020 kHz. The transmitter had already been tested during an earlier voyage. The transmissions would be relayed over the entire NBC Pacific Coast network. At the time, the press reported that it was the first time in the history of radio that a seafaring radio station provided regular broadcasts during a voyage across the Pacific Ocean, with these broadcasts being distributed via a network of radio stations.

On July 16th the ship arrived at Hawaii. There the mayor welcomed Captain Dobbsie and handed him the key to the city. From Hawaii the broadcasts continued, but not, as one would have liked, from the Malolo, but simply from land. Yet again, this was not so commonplace, because it was another first: these were the first broadcasts from Hawaii aimed at America. The Friday evening that they stayed in Hawaii, not only the morning program "Shell Ship of Joy" was broadcasted there, but there was also a special evening broadcast with local artists. The 18th of July the return journey was accepted, with the ship again being waved off by thousands. Also on the way back the program "Ship of Joy" was broadcasted daily.



### **How did the story end?**

The Malolo was thoroughly rebuilt in 1937. During the Second World War it was requisitioned and later returned to the shipping company. In 1948 the last

trip to Hawaii was made with the ship which came into Italian hands. In 1977, on a Greek shipbreaking yard, the demolition started of the Queen Fredrica, a name that it bore since 1954 and that was named after the then queen of Greece. (Coincidentally, the name of Radio Caroline's first ship, the Fredericia, is often wrongly written as "Frederica").

All the companies that sponsored the programs of Dobbs about ninety years ago still exist today, which is quite remarkable: Quaker, Del Monte and Shell. With Shell there is immediately a Dutch/British connection to the early broadcasts from the sea.

After the broadcasts via the NBC Pacific Coast network, Shell "Ship of Joy" was broadcasted for a period of time by the Columbia West Coast network and then by KOMO Seattle. At the end of each broadcast of "Ship of Joy" Captain Dobbsie asked the listeners to put their hand on the heart and made the following request: "Send out a wish to somebody - somewhere - who may be in sickness or trouble. Everybody - WISH!" Dobbs was concerned about the health of others, but didn't know his own health was bad. It was in 1944 that the at that time perhaps richest radio presenter in the world suddenly died. Captain Dobbsie was only fifty years old at that time.

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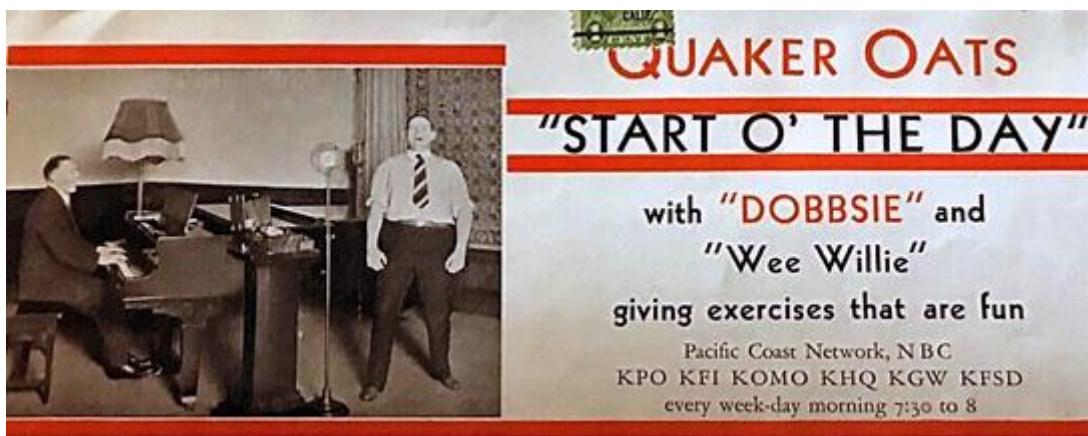
[www.americanradiohistory.com](http://www.americanradiohistory.com)

Photo: Radio presenter Hugh Barrett Dobbs, dressed as his alter ego Captain Dobbsie.

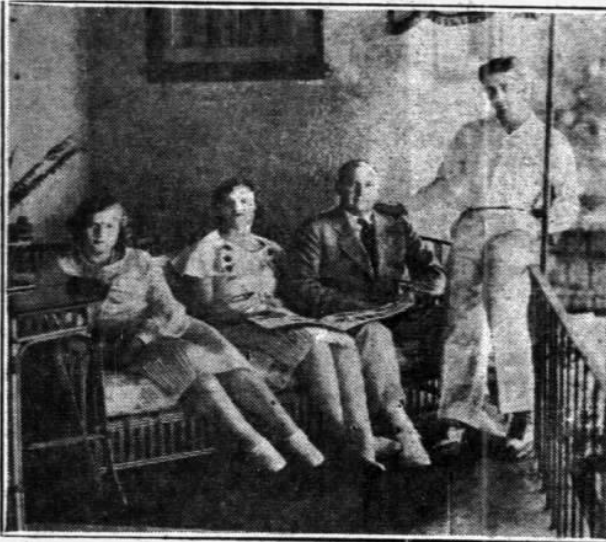
Photo: The luxury ocean liner SS Malolo

Photo: Captain Dobbsie aboard the SS Malolo

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## DOBBSIE'S OWN 'SHIP OF JOY'



Hugh Barrett Dobbs, world's highest paid individual in Radioland, with Mrs. Dobbs and their children at their home. Dobbsie does his "broadcasting" at the studio. Mrs. Dobbs will accompany him on his visit to Hawaii next month.

## Captain Dobbsie Points For Navy, Lands Aboard Shell's Radio Joy Craft

After making daily imaginary cruises every week-day morning for the delight of "shut-ins" among the radio fans, Captain Dobbsie (Hugh Barrett Dobbs), commander of the Shell "Ship of Joy," and his merry crew are to make a real voyage across the blue Pacific to Hawaii next month, when they make air communication history with the first world-wide broadcast from a ship at sea.

The voyage, arranged by the Shell Oil company in cooperation with The Advertiser broadcasting station, KGU, the Matson Navigation company, the Radio Corporation of America and the National Broadcasting company, will be made on the Matson express liner Malolo. The ship is being equipped with special radio appliances that will enable the broadcasting and rebroadcasting of Captain Dobbsie's programs to all parts of the world.

### USE KGU STUDIO

During the stay of the Shell Ship of Joy and its crew in Hawaii the world broadcasts will be made from KGU studio in The Advertiser building.

Captain Dobbsie, Skipper of the Shell Ship of Joy and conductor of the Shell Happytime, is a versatile man. His record proves that. From an embryonic United States naval officer to a position in front of a radio microphone where he has established himself as one of the leading personalities "on the air" is a long jump; but Dobbsie has made it, with room to spare.

The length of time necessary for this jump was twenty-five years and there were many stops before he finally landed. After his short term at Annapolis he entered Johns Hopkins Medical School to prepare for the work of instructor of physical education. After completing his course there he traveled to New York where he was employed as a physical education instructor and later became supervisor for the whole city. One of his innovations was the installation of open-air gymnasium equipment in the playgrounds. At the invitation of Judge Ben B. Lindsay he built similar playgrounds for Denver. He later performed a like service for Seattle.

Joining the United States Survey party, then establishing the boundary

lines between Canada and Alaska, Dobbsie spent four years in Alaska. Listed as a surveyor in the party his main job, he says, was to supply the government camps with food. He hunted and fished and became acquainted with the hardships one must endure in the wilds of Alaska. Among these were the times that the party was shut in by storms, and the work he is now doing is the result of observations during those periods; for his radiocasts are directed primarily at the shut-ins and bring to them a cargo of hope and good cheer.

Captain Dobbsie has been broadcasting since 1925. His success on the air brought him to the attention of the Shell Oil Company, under whose supervision he is now working.

### GETS BIG SALARY

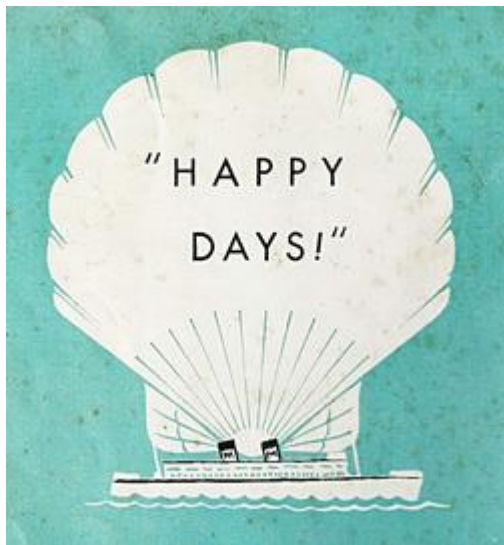
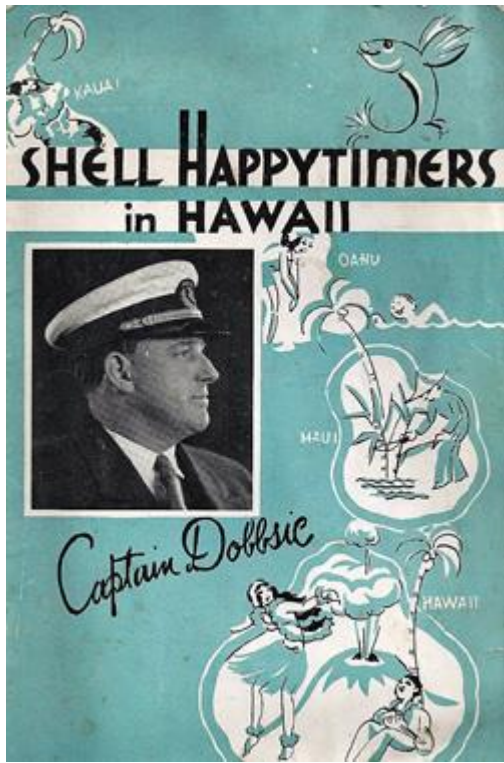
Receiving a salary said to be greater than President Hoover's, Captain Dobbsie is heard daily, except Sunday, by an average number of well over a million and a quarter. He has received almost a million letters in five years, from all parts of the world. Happytimers on world tours, reminded by Shell Oil signs, write Dobbsie to inform him that they miss his programs and hope to enjoy them again when they return to this country.

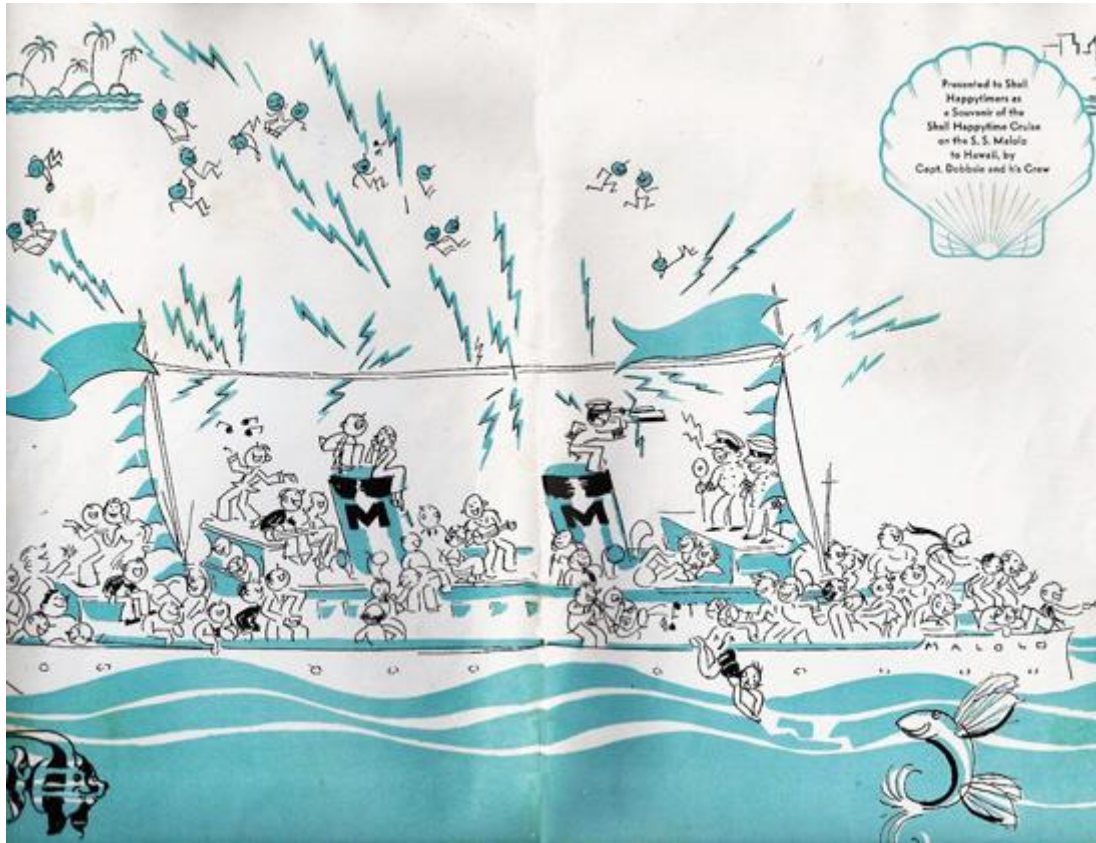
Every day Captain Dobbsie presents a new program during Shell Happytime. While his officers on the Shell Ship of Joy may be the same entertainers they provide a different program every time the imaginary ship leaves port. Nationally and internationally known entertainers sail with the Skipper, who is very careful to select officers who will satisfy the thousands of Happytimers, known as shipmates.

### A WONDERFUL CREW

It is a wonderful crew over which Captain Dobbsie has command; as the ship sails each week-day morning its officers radiocast to thousands programs that bring happiness and joy.

The Mainland Shell Happytime programs originate in the studios of KFO, San Francisco. It is hooked up with KFI, Los Angeles; KOMO, Seattle; KGW, Portland; KSL, Salt Lake City, and KHQ, Spokane. The radiocast is heard every week-day morning from 8 to 9 (Pacific Standard time).





Presented to Shell  
Happytimers as a  
Souvenir of the  
Shell Happytime Cruise  
on the S. S. Malolo  
to Hawaii, by  
Capt. Dobbie and his Crew