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Zenith Company Began As Literal Radio Shack Next To Edgewater Beach Hotel

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The original manufacturing plant and amateur station for Chicago Radio Laboratory at 5525 N. Sheridan Road.

Facebook/Bill Weiss

EDGEWATER — Before Steve Jobs made working out of your garage cool, Ralph H.G. Mathews and Karl Hassel already had made history by helping to transmit the first transcontinental radio message from a two-car garage on the grounds of the former Edgewater Beach Hotel.

The friends were former Navy men stationed at Great Lakes Naval Training station who, after World War I, formed the Chicago Radio Laboratory out of Mathews' Uptown apartment kitchen at 1316 W. Carmen Ave.

In 1919, they developed ideas and equipment, and produced a catalog that sent their parts, along with others, across the country.

Later that year, Chicago Radio Lab expanded into a small shack at 5525 N. Sheridan Road, property owned by the glamorous up-and-coming hotel.

William Dewey, the manager of the hotel at the time, had given the men permission to use the site (http://www.antiqueradio.com/zenithcr1_12-97.html), so long as they surrendered it if the hotel decided to use it, according to *Antique Radio Classified* magazine.

Half of the tiny 250-square-foot building was devoted to manufacturing for the company, while the other hosted a small amateur station called 9ZN. To market the 9ZN brand, the company used the name Z-Nith.

In 1920 the group was joined by veteran-turned-businessman Eugene F. McDonald Jr. and later Hugh Robertson and Paul Klugh. They, along with the founding engineers, would help create the foundation for what would someday become one of the world's largest electronics companies.

From the lakeshore, the group built an antenna with a transmitter, and on Dec. 4, 1919, they were part of the first transcontinental postwar message relay.

Dewey also encouraged the company to begin broadcasting in 1921, and in 1922 the Chicago Radio Lab was granted a broadcast license. The station was included as a featured exhibit during the first National American Radio Relay League Convention, held at the hotel.

Dewey even offered to help finance the operation of the station for the publicity it added to the hotel.

By August, the radio lab was transmitting signals with a range of 1,181 feet under its new name, WJAZ, according to author Marvin R. Bensman of, "The Beginning of Broadcast Regulation in the Twentieth Century."

Over the next few years, ownership and leases of the station came and went quickly (<https://books.google.com/books?id=jYUBpRH3SGEC&pg=PA156&lpg=PA156&dq=zenith+help+the+tribune&source=bl&ots=Qh1hwtqqn&sig=2PIpzkccf33En1h93wHawylkDk48yXy4nUAhXJ4IMKHYE5AgkQ6AEIOzAF#v=onepage&q&f=false>), and its call letters even changed to WGN for a time.

After only two years, Chicago Radio Lab had outgrown its lakefront garage and moved west to a 3,000-square-foot factory and office building at 6433 N. Ravenswood Ave., which remains today as the Chicago Industrial Arts & Design Center.

The Sheridan Road transmitter continued to broadcast and serenade beachgoers for a period, mostly through the hotel's in-house WEBH station, but in 1928 the pink Edgewater Beach Apartments were built atop the site.

Only months after the lab moved into the Ravenswood facility, demand for its products outpaced the ability for workers to churn them out even within the much larger building

The company moved manufacturing operations to 48th Street and Kedzie Avenue on the South Side, where the lab went from putting out five radios a week to 50.

In 1923, the Zenith Radio Corp. was founded as the advertising and marketing arm of the radio company, though eventually the branches would again merge and settle on Zenith as their sole name.

By 1924, the Zenith Radio Corp. had produced the first portable radio, and it would go on in the following years to build a legacy that remains.

Some of its creations are now on display from 1-4 p.m. weekends at the Edgewater Historical Society, 5358 N. Ashland Ave., until April.

Today the company is Zenith Electronics LLC. Based in suburban Lincolnshire, it is a subsidiary of South Korean technology conglomerate LG Electronics.

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