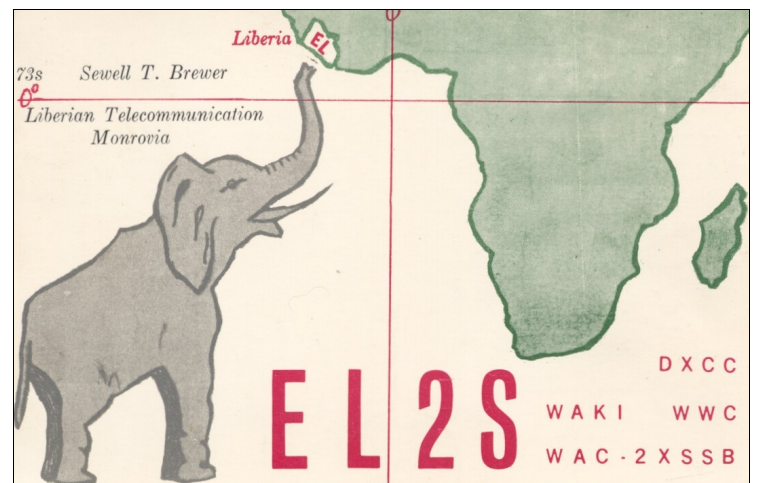


**Sewell T. Brewer, EL2S
and
Early Broadcasting in Liberia**

by
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Amateur radio is not the main focus of www.ontheshortwaves.com, but sometimes ham radio can lead to an interesting shortwave broadcast discovery.

Such is the case with several ham QSLs that caught my eye recently. One dates from 1964. It is from EL2S in Monrovia, Liberia. The name on the card is Sewell Brewer, and what makes it interesting is the reference at the bottom of the card to the Liberian Government Radio Service (LGRS), something I had never heard of. A second card, again from EL2S, Sewell Brewer (now Sewell T. Brewer), this one from 1967, carries a reference to Liberian Telecommunication, Monrovia. And there was a third card (see next page), this one from Sam Butler, EL2L, which also references LGRS.



Who was Sewell T. Brewer, and what relationship might he, the Liberian Government Radio Service, or Liberian Telecommunication have had with regular broadcasting in the country? It turns out that Sewell Brewer was an important person in Liberian communications history, with a direct connection to Liberian broadcasting.

The Liberian Government Radio Service (LGRS) was founded in April 1936 with the mission of establishing radio telegraphy throughout the country. The first stations, which we would think of today as utility stations, were set up outside Monrovia three years later. The exact nature of the LGRS in later years is not completely clear, but it appears to have performed a function similar to that of the FCC. Indeed, the 1951 authorization to establish station ELWA

came from the LGRS.¹ It appears later to have become a national telecom agency, and eventually the Liberia Telecommunications Corporation (Libtelco).

Brewer was an active ham in the 1950s, as was his co-worker at LGRS, Samuel Richelieu Watkins, EL2P. Ham radio in Liberia dates back to 1927 and an employee of the Firestone Rubber Company. It grew over the years, leading in 1962 to the founding of the Liberian Radio Amateur Association, with Brewer and Watkins the key men. Brewer was the first LRAA president.



On the broadcast side of things, the first station, ELBC, was founded circa 1947 by Col. John B. West, a physician serving as the head of the U.S. Public Health Mission in Liberia. He decided to stay on in Liberia, and he operated the station from his home, basically as a hobby affair. The government subsidized ELBC's three-hour daily schedule.

By 1950, now operating as the Liberian Broadcasting Company, ELBC was using both mediumwave (900 kHz., 10 kw.) and shortwave (6025 kHz., 500 watts, known as ELB1). Shortwave power soon increased to 1 kw., mediumwave to 15 kw., and it was operating eight hours a day. It had some advertisers, including Sears Roebuck and RCA International, as well as local Liberian companies, and it also rebroadcast some VOA programs. With its comparatively late sign off of 2345 UTC, ELBC could be heard in North America.²

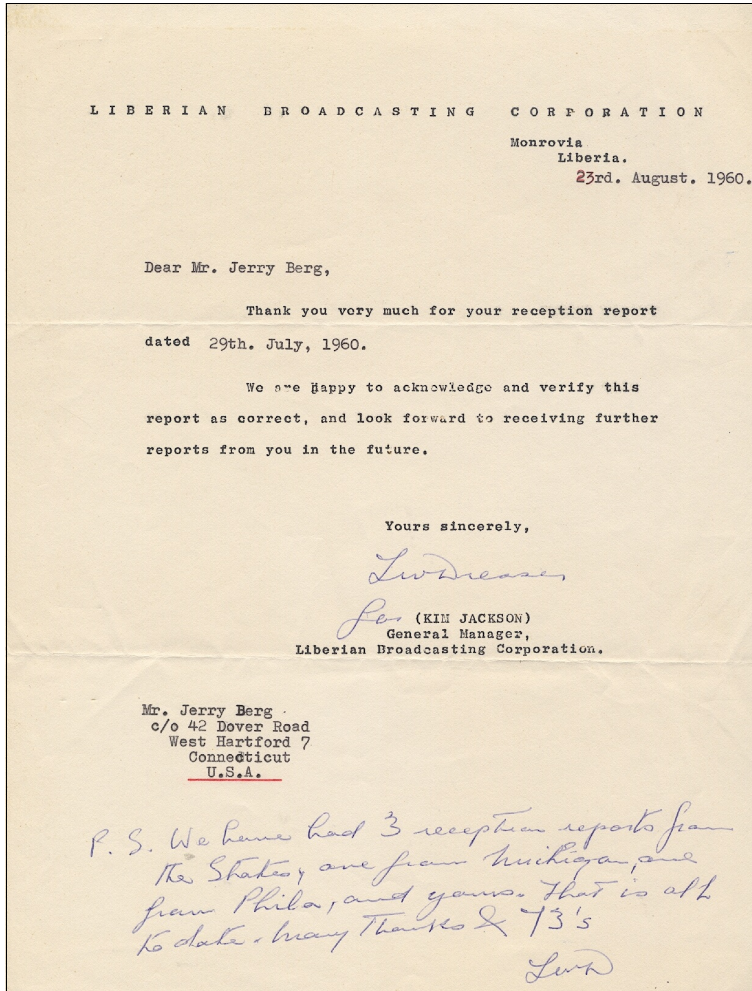
West returned to the U.S. in 1955 and ELBC left the air (this was after the start of ELWA, which came on mediumwave in February 1954, shortwave in March 1955). In July 1956, Samuel Watkins decided to fill the void. He put on the air the first broadcasting service to be operated by Liberians. This was station ELRS, standing for the "Liberian Radio Service." It appears that ELRS operated on both mediumwave and shortwave, for in his book, *Liberia Communication*,³ Watkins says that he was "satisfied with . . . the broadcast transmission reception report from international listeners, the QST report, and short- and medium-wave listeners," and that he was "very pleased with . . . the national and international reception reports of the ELRS broadcast." But I have not found ELRS in any of the station lists of the day.

¹The permit can be seen in William Brock Brentlinger, [*An Introduction to and Survey of the Field of Foreign Missionary Radio Broadcasting*](#) (Master's thesis, Indiana State Teacher's College, July 1951), Fig. 5 (p. 139 in Acrobat). This is an interesting piece of research, which covers many missionary stations that are well known to SWLs.

²*Radio News*, May 1951, p. 63.

³Samuel R. Watkins, *Liberia Communication* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2007).

It is unclear to what extent ELRS was a one-man project of Watkins, or a joint project of Watkins, Sewell Brewer, and later a third man, G. Henry Andrews, but the latter two, as well as others, were, over time, involved in the operation of the station in one way or another. *The Liberian Age* newspaper of October 14, 1969 reported that “two Liberian technicians put the station [meaning ELBC successor ELRS] back into service,” and then enlisted Andrews for programming and production assistance. ELRS soon expanded its broadcast day to seven hours, closing down at midnight.



With obvious pride, Watkins describes the station in *Liberia Communication*. ELRS was built from scrounged parts, a key piece of equipment being a homemade tape recorder that Watkins had built as a school project. ELRS signed on with “Rhapsody in Blue,” and Sam Watkins’ slogan was, “Have no fear, Brother Sam is here.” According to Watkins, the station received wide acclaim and functioned as something of a national broadcasting station. Among its programs were live church broadcasts, coverage of national events, and play-by-play sports events. Around 1958 the station relocated from an area in Monrovia known locally as PHP (“Public Health Pump”) to better space at the Centennial Memorial Building.

The success of ELRS led to more serious government deliberation on the need for a domestic broad-

casting capability in Liberia. In 1959, the government established a new public company, the Liberian Broadcasting Corporation, and invited Overseas Rediffusion Ltd. of London to build and operate a new station in Monrovia. While all this was happening, ELRS remained on the air, and Watkins helped with the technical planning for the new station.

It came on air on January 1, 1960 as the “new” ELBC, still operating commercially but also heavily subsidized by the government. The transmitters were 10 kw., with assigned frequencies of 650 kHz. mediumwave, 3255 and 6090 shortwave. Kim Jackson of Overseas Rediffusion was the first general manager. Jack Knight, also of Rediffusion, took over later, and G. Henry Andrews became assistant general manager (later he served as Director General of the Liberian Broadcasting Corp.). In 1963, ELBC ownership passed to the government, with

Rediffusion continuing to manage and operate it until 1968, when the government assumed full control.

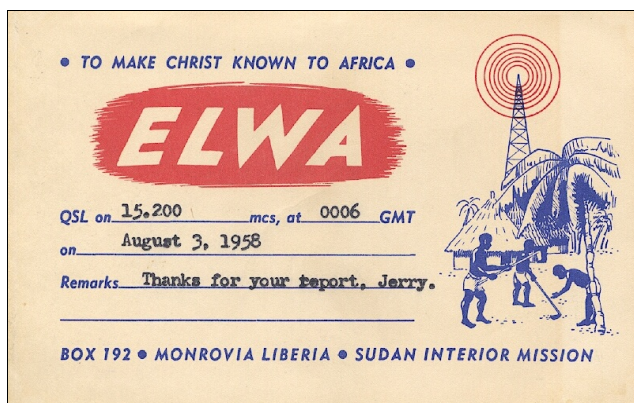
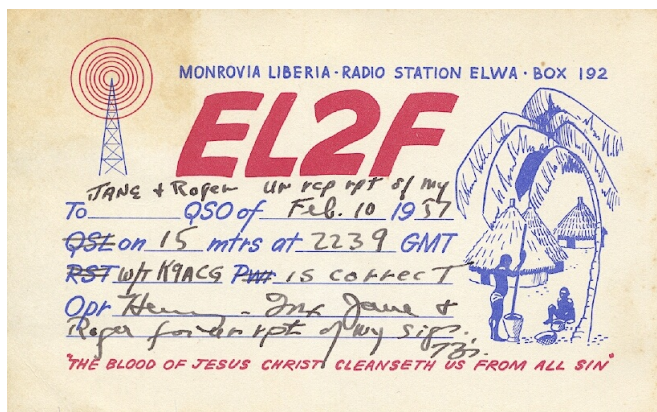
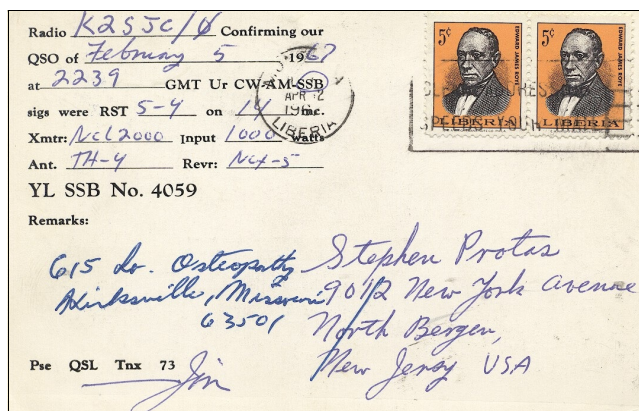
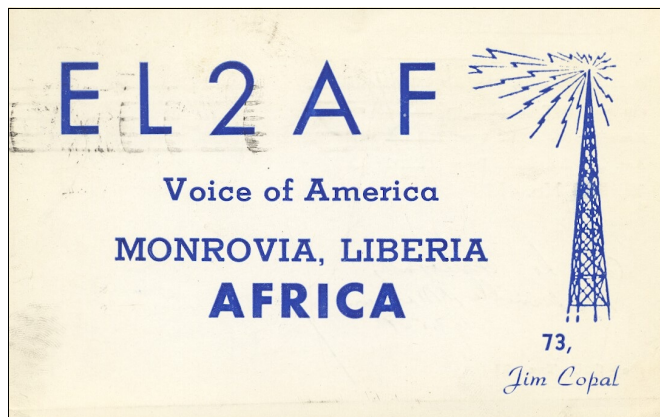


Sewell Telford Prout Brewer died on April 21, 2008 at age 77. He was remembered by a great many people (see these [photos](#)). After a humble start at ELRS he had spent most of his career at LGRS/ Libtelco, eventually serving as Libtelco's Chief Engineer. Samuel Watkins served as Assistant Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, and Managing Director of Libtelco. We have been unable to trace Sam Butler, who must have been a colleague of the other men at LGRS.

Sewell T. Brewer, 1931-2008

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It looks like the same hand was behind these EL2F and ELWA designs. The "Jane + Roger" on the EL2F card were Jane and Roger Legge. Roger was an active ham band listener in those days.



## SOURCES:

William Brock Brentlinger, [\*An Introduction to and Survey of the Field of Foreign Missionary Radio Broadcasting\*](#) (Master's thesis, Dept. of Education, Indiana State Teacher's College, July 1951), Fig. 5 (p. 139 in Acrobat).

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