A LOST LANGUAGE

LeRoy Palmer

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As months and years drift by, the number of us old-time telegraphers in rail service who know the train wire language is dwindling, like the "thin blue line" and the "thin gray line" of Civil War veterans. On practically all the main-line dispatching circuits the telephone has displaced the telegraph. Only the oldest ops can remember the days when the average train dispatcher had a "copier," a fast pen operator who wrote all orders in the order book as the dispatcher issued them and checked as each was repeated.

In this era of telephone dispatching, the work is, of course, done much more quickly. Orders are now repeated in one-fourth the time that was required for even the "gilt-edge" Morse man, although the time and all station names are spelled out, while train and engine numbers are repeated on the telephone. The veteran brass pounder has to admit it, even though he misses the vanishing language. Formerly I could be busy at my desk, or even reading the newspaper, and still hear the train wire with its "OS" reports of trains passing over the district, and thus I kept posted on everything approaching my station. Now I hear nothing unless I sit with the telephone receiver hung over my head. They took some of the romance and fascination away from railroading when they installed telephones on the train wire.

The twelve-hour night shift men were excellent "spotters." That is, they were adept at catching much-needed sleep when opportunity offered and they trained themselves to wake for their call. The old Morse dispatchers knew that Bill or Joe was "in the hay" when they got no answer on the first call and they would slowly repeat "RC RC RC DS" or "ZA ZA ZA DS," or whatever the call was, the repeated chatter bringing the op to life. This was customary and was well understood.

One of the first things the op learned was to arouse from deep slumber for his call.

I remember the first job I ever worked, night operator for the Milwaukee Road at Burlington, Wis., in 1901. I'd been on the job only a few nights when one morning just before daylight, I got mighty sleepy and stretched out on the freight desk, with an "Official Guide" making a soft pillow for my head, and was soon sleeping soundly. I dreamed I was walking along a street, and as I passed a store I heard a telegraph instrument tapping out "BU BU BU BY" which was my office call. I thought, "Gosh! I'd better go in there and answer that. It's my call!" The next thing I knew, I was tumbling off that desk onto my feet as I realized that the Beliot dispatcher was hammering out slowly "BU BU BU BU DS."

I dove for the telegraph desk.

I have had this same dream, or one very much like it, many times since on similar occasions. Other old-time ops report having had identical experience. Seldom would we get deep enough in the hay to fail to recognize the familiar sounder call. There's not much excuse for lightening slingers to drowse on an eight-hour shift nowadays, but should a man working the late night, or third, trick in the heat of Summer, slip off to dreamland between trains, the telephone bell is, perhaps, not the equal of the old repeated Morse call to arouse him from slumber.

Perhaps you have sat in some wayside depot waiting-room and listened to the clatter of the instruments in the telegraph office and wished you could understand what was passing over the wire. But missing now from the chorus of clicking sounders is the loudest one of all, the sounder of the train dispatcher's wire. What you would hear now, if you could read them, would be the message wire and the commercial wire, carrying private telegrams. Gone is the hottest and fastest of them all, the sounder with the mysterious abbreviations and language of its own, which every student aspired to read. When a student could read the train wire his education was complete; he was a full-fledged op.

In 1900 I was an apprentice at the CMStP&P depot in Elkhorn, Wis. George Hayes was the daylight operator there. In addition to his regular duties, he had the job of teaching two students, Bill Jordan and myself. Both of us were green farm hands. I don't

know how dumb I was as a ham[1], but I do remember that Mr. Hayes was in despair over Bill. We both did learn, however. I became a boomer op[2], and the last I heard of Bill Jordan he was the chief dispatcher for some Western pike.

I was given night work with the night man, a short, fat little Irish fellow[3] named Eddie Uinane. Eddie was a prince. He used to send to me faithfully an hour or so every night when he wasn't too busy, but he was a rotten sender. The boys along the line had a hard time reading him. But I got accustomed to the funny twists he put on his Morse, and I had no trouble. Later on, when I was working along the line on the extra board, if some op had to copy Eddie and I was around he'd make me sit in and take Eddie's dots and dashes.

Meanwhile, I put in about six months with Eddie, showing up when he did at six p.m. and quitting at one a.m. I was beginning to get discouraged. I could read words off the Western Union commercial wire pretty well, but I couldn't get used to those "cut" words used by the dispatchers, even though I listened faithfully, trying to separate the characters and make sense of them.

I'll never forget that winter night when I opened the waiting room door, hustled over to the huge coal stove to thaw out, and heard the big train-wire sounder in the office rattling away. I listened a moment, when -- just like that-- I could read the language! Boy, was I tickled! What previously had been a jumble of sounds was now clear to me. When Eddie came in a few minutes later, I had the joyous news for him that I could read the train wire, and he seemed as pleased as I was.

After that, I was more anxious than ever to perfect myself. One day George Hayes said to me: "Kid, I'm going to give you a note to W.H. Melchoir, the chief train dispatcher at Beliot, and send you over to take your examination. Eddie says you have your block rules learned okay and you can read the train wire. They need operators and you are good enough to start out."

Next day I rode the morning local passenger train to Beliot. Mr. Melchoir examined me and sent me to Burlington to work that very night. There was no physical or standard rules examination at that time, but you had to know the block rules. You had to know how to ask the man east of you for a "47" before you let an eastbound train into the block, etc. A "block" was the stretch of track between your office and his, and "47" meant "Will hold all westbound trains until your train arrives."

Because the Morse train dispatcher had to work fast in order to keep his trains moving, there came into use so many abbreviations that if, as you sat in the wayside station waiting-room listening to the sounders, you could have read every letter that was passing over the train wire, you still would have been unable to know what was going on, unless you understood the code. You might have heard the dispatcher and the op converse as follows: "Sa wn x w cmg ma hv 9 r tm." snaps the dispatcher. {Say when extra west train is coming. I may have orders for them.}

"A rt tnk c tr smk no," returns the op. "Es hr ty cm ty in ste nw." {All right. I think I see their smoke now. Yes, here they come. They are in sight now.}

"U gt nytng r em." asks the DS. {Have you got anything for them?}

"Es abt 15 m wk," replies the operator. {Yes, about 15 minutes work.}

"OK 31 cy 3 r em & let me kw hw mch wk ty gt at DR b4 c clr em ma hv to chg tt meet wi 42 No 7s ab 20 mi I'll hnd hm sm ti on tm at DR." {Okay. Make 3 copies on a 31 order for them and let me know how much work they've got at Darien before you clear them. May have to change that meet with number 42. Number 7 is about twenty minutes late. I'll hand him some time on them at Darien.}

1 **In this context, the term "ham" means a new employee, and / or a trainee.**

2 **"Boomer ops" commanded high salaries due to the shortage of trained telegraphers during the era of rapidly expanding rail lines, and these ops jumped from job to job following the "booms" for ever higher pay.**

3 **No Political Correctness in 1940 !!!**

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Hour after hour, with occasional periods of rest, twenty-four hours a day, the sounder rattled on. Few words were spelled out in train movement conversation, as this language -- the "cut" language of the old Morse train wire -- clicked over the line.

All railroad offices with telephone dispatcher's wire equipment have a Morse circuit to fall back on in case of trouble on the phone wire. The young operators dread this. If they happen to be working with an old Morse dispatcher, they are in hot water trying to read his abbreviated instructions. To a veteran, however, it's the old familiar code.

Morse men admit that the telephone, like the typewriter, makes for greater efficiency. It standardizes operations, saves time and work, and diminishes the hazards of the iron trail. But we of the old school miss the romance of the earlier days of rugged individualism when you reached for a brass key instead of a black telephone receiver, and were proud of the bold, rapid, flowing strokes with which you wrote your train orders by hand.

And if a tobacco-chewing boomer op were suddenly yanked out of the dim past and put to work on a teletype machine, his consternation would be equalled only by his profanity. Teletypes are doing their bit to make Morse a dead language. So far, you'll find 'em on only a few of the big roads. The latest pike to install this system is the Erie, which is now using teletype machines for their consist and passing report systems.

As every rail knows the “consist” of a freight train includes all of its car numbers, listed in order, beginning at the head end. For each carload are shown contents, tons, destination, route (including other roads, if any such are needed to take the car to its destination), and sometimes the name of the consignee. Ventilation, refrigeration, or heating instructions are shown for perishable freight, and when livestock was last fed and rested.

All this information, in the case of the Erie, is transmitted by teletype to the company's general offices at Chicago, Cleveland, and New York, and to the district office at Jersey City, NJ, immediately after hotshot freights have left the yards. There, centralized tracing bureaus use the information to answer quickly all shipper and receiver inquiries about the movement of cars -- inquiries that in days gone by were answered with the aid of Morse conversation.

A friend on the Erie tells me that when his company adopted teletypes for its consist and passing report systems, last March, it converted 845 miles of telegraph wire to printer circuits, making a total of 2320 miles of these circuits now in operation on the Erie. Of this total, he says, 2075 miles are equipped with duplex apparatus over which messages or consists can be sent in both directions at the same time.

Morse experts concede that the telephone, the typewriter and the teletype seldom fail and, as I pointed out, do the work more easily and more rapidly. Few train dispatchers and ops would go back to the obsolete system if they could.

But now and then you'll run across a mellow old boomer who sighs for the snappy Morse dialogue on the dispatcher's wire that is fast becoming a lost language.