An *Illinois Central* Telegrapher

By John Robertson

In 1947 I took a NROTC exam and had a chance to get four years of college free. I had completed a year and a half starting at Western and transferring to Murray. I did not register for the Spring term at Murray while waiting. It turned out that I was accepted as a "stand by" candidate. Nothing happened. In the mean time, my uncle, Charles Robertson, got me a job on the Illinois Central Railroad in Paducah as a cub telegrapher. We attended sessions on the "Rules of the Road" and began practice on Morse code. Others got their seniority started by working as operators. I went to "SA" office in Paducah to become proficient in telegraphy first and then start my seniority. This put me under the direct observation of the Superintendant, Train Master and Chief Dispatcher of the Kentucky Division which ran from Oak Street Yard in Louisville to Millington just north of Memphis and from Henderson to Hopkinsville and a branch to Owensboro. The IC also participated in the operation of the Paducah & Illinois RR that ran from Metropolis Junction, Ill. to Paducah over the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Bridge over the Ohio River and connected with the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis yard in Paducah.

Upon arrival, the SA operator would check all the telegraph and telephone lines used exclusively by the Kentucky Division. A telegraph line carried about 160 volts of direct current. A switchboard allowed the operator plug a voltmeter into each

line to check its status. This also included a line owned by Postal Telegraph that ran from Paducah to Louisville. A telephone circuit required two lines each. Any anomaly had to be located and instructions given to various linemen to repair. A telephone pair also could carry one "phantom" telegraph line that allowed high speed long distance contact between key points. The daily check was vital to the operation of the Division. Once completed, the operator could focus on sending and receiving messages from all points in the division and relay to Chicago, New Orleans, and elsewhere. The office employed three shifts lasting eight hours each. Each operator worked forty hours each week; therefore, a forth regular job worked Relief days on Saturday and Sunday, evenings on Monday and Tuesday, and third trick on Wednesday. The Extra Board picked up the other day.

The first trick operator, Jim Tom Campbell, sent beautiful Morse code. His telegraph "bug" was old but reliable. The operator who still used only his "hand" to send was rare, especially in relay sites like "SA." "X" office in Chicago received long reports from all over the railroad and sent material from the home office of the railroad. Often they employed specialists who worked on the stock market during the day and also doubled over to handle railroad traffic. They were masters. It was said one of them could stop and roll a cigarette and catch up with the fastest sender on line. The Phillips variant of the American Morse code had perhaps as many as 16,000 abbreviations. An example was to send PN pause, send the text, and add PY to close the parenthesis. When just chatting, operators sent parts

of words such as "gg" for going and "u" for you. Thus, "where are you going" would be "wr u gg dn" [dn = ?] This is like texting today.

Changing shifts at 4:00 p.m. also marked the change in personalities. Oliver Gregson was the local head of the Order of Railroad Telegraphers and was a markedly different personality from Jim Tom. Large and imposing Oliver brought his own typewriter with him. His bug was newer and personality was much more expansive. In fact, he had a memory that allowed him to send Shakespeare by the page. When he sent me material to help me learn code, he was a perfectionist. One could not anticipate what was coming over the wire but had to concentrate on the transmission. Cub operators cringed when confronted with Oliver. His presence was most useful to telegraphers when Oliver represented them with management to resolve disputes regarding performance and pay.

A daily ritual in the "SA" office was the appearance of the custodian, usually an ancient black man. Each desk had its own spittoon (chewing tobacco was wide-spread at that time). Wearing long black rubber gloves that reached to the elbow, the porter would make the rounds and return to sweep and dust. Custom demanded that greetings were exchanged briefly and then no further noticed was taken of the porter. A female custodian also was in the building on the second floor where the telephone operators and the female clerks (all white) worked. Jim Tom and I were surprised one morning when a new young black man came in with a cheerful smile and efficient

performance of the daily routine. The regular porter was on vacation. After a few days, the porter paused by my seat and told me what I was laboriously sending in code. It seems he had just returned from a tour in the Air Force and knew some international code. I was glad to chat with him as he was about my age and we had a common topic. Later that day, I got a terse lecture from Jim Tom about proper protocol concerning porters in particular and blacks in general. The latter were to keep in their *place*. At that time this was commonly the rule on the southern lines of the railroad. I was shocked but could not say so . I appreciated Fred's help and resented the entire incident. Needless to say, Fred did not last long. He got a much better job "up there" in Illinois. On more than one occasion I was confronted with racism. The only jobs open to blacks were on section gangs, maintaining the track, and other menial work. Porters on passenger trains were not railroad employees but worked for the Pullman Company. No exceptions. This status began to crumble slowly and grudgingly afterward. In fact, when I went as relief Agent-operator at Hopkinsville I could not believe how the white office personnel there treated their porter they called "Rags" a very old black man. The clerk would say, "Rags, how can you tell when you're clean?" With a smile, Rags would say "When I squeaks when I rubs my hand." And so it went. Usually Rags would just laugh and say, "Mister Bud, when you gets to heaben you gonna have to kiss me and call me brother." I hope they did.

To get my seniority stated, I was sent to Beaver Dam on the Louisville District. At that time, this

station had four passenger trains a day plus four high- class, regularly scheduled freight trains. Operators had to sell tickets, handle freight, and sort mail and baggage. The station had an Agent, various clerks and three trick operators of eight hours per day plus a relief operator. A large strip mine nearby produced nearly a hundred car loads of coal a day which entailed way billing for each car. The arrival of a passenger train saw the operator deliver any new orders to the crew, position huge four-wheeled carts to receive mail, baggage, and freight. Periodically, the operator faced all of this plus mail order catalogs in sacks weighing up to hundred pounds. On one occasion, an operator had been seriously injured trying to move one such loaded wagon only to have him cut the tongue of the wagon too sharply and the load shifted and overturned on top of him. He suffered serious damage [but gained favor with management as he did not sue.] First class mail later had to be sorted by the operator into various star routes. This could take time but the operator was required to be vigilant and not miss calls from the dispatcher to take train orders and messages.

One duty I despised was to accept large containers of milk for delivery to Louisville. Often these needed washing and smelled grossly. Still they had to shifted and moved on several occasions. One man earned our revulsion as having the worst of the lot. He also shipped live dogs without supplying water, etc. I refused acceptance on one occasion and he was surprised. His excuse was that the animals were to be killed on arrival. Why

bother? His personal hygiene must have been based upon the same reasoning.

Operators at Beaver Dam also handled Western Union traffic. Upon receipt, the operator had to see to delivery. For this they received a pittance from Western Union. If the message was the notice of death of military personnel, one had to affirm delivery. This proved hard during the Korean War. Later, after I graduated from Murray State and went into the Marine Corps, I received a check from Western Union for a bit over one dollar for such an event.

I boarded with a widow several blocks from the station. The regular second trick operator also stayed there. "Hogjaw" was also interested in model railroading, hand building a large scale model of an IC steam engine. While at work, Hogjaw was proud of his ability to deliver messages to trains while passing at about forty to fifty miles an hour. He carefully explained the necessary steps to achieve this. One used a "Y" shaped stick about five feet in length and attached the folded messages and train orders and clearance cards in a slip knot and strung it over the notch in each of the two uprights and pulled the cord down into a spring loaded catch at the base of the "Y." Then measured from to the platform to the rail and took a stand. As the engine roared down upon you, you raised the stick up and did not waver. The engineer or fireman at the controls would lean out and put his arm through the "V." Then the operator had to restring the stick and offer the second copy to the caboose. In the meantime, the passing 120 ton engine seemed to pull you into its path and hot

sparks from the smoke stack might hit your eye (and adhere so that one had to take a wood match and touch the ember to remove later.) One could not flinch and had to resist the vacuum. Usually I was successful in this also. One never felt comfortable.

The Kentucky Division ran from Oak Street Yards in Louisville to just outside Memphis when I started. The most southern part, from Fulton to Millington was transferred early on and I never worked there. I did work on the branch running from Hopkinsville to Henderson. It remained primitive. Telegraphy was still vital for an operator, especially at Hopkinsville. Trains ran from Princeton Yard to Hopkinsville and interchanged there with the Tennessee Central. The latter was without telephones and relied on Morse code. The line went through the military base at Fort Campbell which had women operators. It ended at Nashville. Along the way, the IC interchanged with the unique Cadiz Railroad at Gracey. The Cadiz was privately owned by William Cleland White and had one engine operated by members of the owner's family. The ten mile line did not have stations but stopped where needed. Local legend claims that Mr. White of the Cadiz line offered to exchange passes with the B&O railroad. The latter laughed and gave a scathing response saying that their line had thousands of miles of rails while the Cadiz line only had ten. The Cadiz president responded that it was true that his line only ran ten miles but it was the same width as the B&O. The retort amused the B&O and the passes were exchanged.

I bid in a job at Oak Street yard in Louisville. The yard office was in a neighborhood heavily

populated by blacks. I stayed in a boarding house on Fourth Street and could catch a bus right up to the entry of the yard office. However, it would be cheaper if I walked. When I arrived, I took No 104 to Union Station and walked from there to Fourth and Oak Street on a Sunday and felt unease much of the way. I had never traveled through so dark a neighborhood, carrying one large [cheap] suitcase and my telegraph bug. Louisville would continue to surprise me the longer I stayed and the better I knew it. While working the 2nd trick 330pm to 1130pm, I found I could enroll at the University of Louisville and take graduate courses. I also found myself becoming more and more isolated. I felt I was getting away from my comfort zone. A craving for change grew and matured.

While working at Oak Street I ran across some interesting people. The second trick operator was Jewish. I have never encountered one of his faith before. I relieved him and gained both a friend and a broader appreciation of mankind. The yard master was known as a tyrant, especially to young telegraphers. On one occasion he and I crossed. I ordered him out of the telegraph office and told him he was keeping me from my principal duties responding to the dispatcher. After that, we got along just fine and respected each other. The yard policeman was recently out of the military police and would lay in wait at night out in the yards to protect carloads of whiskey and cigarettes. He collared several black boys one night and presumed to tell me to watch them while he called in to his superior. At the time I was busy copying off the telegraph and could or would not have tried to

stop their escape. He told them I was an ex Marine [true] and would literally tear them limb from limb if they gave me the least bit of trouble, and left. I tried to look fierce while copying the identities, contents, and destination of the eighty-five cars coming north on ML-4. It worked. We agreed not to put me in that situation again.

While working the extra board, one might be in Louisville one day and North Yard in Paducah next. The Paducah District ran from Paducah to Central City, approximately a hundred miles. The Louisville District ran from Central City to Oak Street Yard in Louisville, about 126 miles of single track. There were two tracks on the Paducah District as far as Dawson Springs and passenger trains and other high class freight went via St. Charles and Nortonville on the main line to Central City. The New Line went via Madisonville and West Yard and on into Central City. This line had many large coal mines and required crews to place empty hoppers at West Yard and proceed on to Central City. The yard switched out the loaded cars and sorted them for movement either north or south. There they were sorted into trains for movement to their various locations. The Old Line also had mines but they were smaller and were served by a local train. As business picked up near St. Charles, the need for an operator to take orders for the local so that it could stay out of the way of through traffic became apparent. I was sent to re-open the station. I took No. 102 passenger train to Dawson Springs and meet the Old Line section crew who took me by motor car on to St. Charles. They helped me unlock the station, build a fire in the ancient stove, and get

ready to work that evening. Operational stations had to have a working train order board. If displayed, no train could pass without a clearance issued to the operator by the dispatcher. To my surprise I found that the signal was an antique without electricity. I climbed up the tower and opened the signal. The section crew chief had brought coal oil. In filling the tank, the glass chimney broke. Until another antique chimney was found, the dispatcher protected the office by train orders.

Going to work at 8:30 PM and working for eight hours proved to be a shock to my system. The town closed at about 9:00. It had one place I could get food [canned!]. I did not have a car. I stayed with the family that owned the grocery and went to work about 8:00 AM. To me, I felt marooned in a town with less than a hundred people. In fact, I doubt if saw more than ten or fifteen residents. At first, the village dogs questioned my right to trespass on their night domain. I was glad to be recalled to Paducah even though it meant less money. On return, I found out that some individuals were Teflon coated.

The regular second trick dispatcher on the Paducah District was having difficulty with his hand and that made writing painful. I was assigned to assist him. In doing so, I would help him while learning the ins and outs of coping with an entire district. He would explain the train order to me and I would call the operators on the telephone, dictate the order, writing it out as I spoke, and check each operator to see that they had the wording perfect. Since this order often contained directions involving

life or death, one had to be vigilant at all cost. Once the orders were delivered to the crews and they started to their destination, the dispatcher assured that all was proceeding safely. Operators reported the progress of the trains and the dispatcher recorded the information on the district train sheet in permanent ink. There were lulls. The Train Master at West Yard on the New Line just beyond Dawson Springs kept in close contact with the dispatcher since the principal function of the District to assure that the coal mines near Madisonville were kept supplied with empties and that the loaded cars were moved quickly to their destinations. Much of the time The Train Master was on line to assure that all functioned as it should.

A couple of weeks passed without incident. Then, about two hours on the job, the dispatcher told me he had to go to the toilet. Naturally, I was not authorized to make any independent decisions. As trains passed stations I took the "OS" by operators and carefully entered the data on the train order sheet. Before passing Dawson Springs each northbound train had to receive train orders on how to proceed – either via the new West Yard or through Nortonville on the Old Line. This had to be done in time to inform any other train to assure the safe passage of all traffic. Soon it was apparent that we must act but the dispatcher had not returned. At this time the chief dispatcher had gone home and the night chief dispatcher had not arrived [there was a gap of three of four hours as there were only two acting in a day as chief dispatcher, not three]. I had no authority. Nevertheless we managed. Later, much later, the

dispatcher was found dead drunk. He must have drained a half pint of 100 proof and went numb. Nothing dire happened. I was not fired [or complimented] over the incident. The dispatcher was not fired; his brother was the Division Superintendent. I did start my seniority as a dispatcher soon after this incident.

The Paducah and Illinois Railroad is only about ten miles long. The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy built a bridge across then Ohio River in 1917 and connected with the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis at Paducah. The IC used a ferry to transfer from Paducah to Brookport, and that sank in an ice storm. They asked the CB&Q to use their new bridge. This was granted. All traffic on this line was CTC controlled; that is, a board had a picture of the Paducah & Illinois Railroad showed all the signals and switches on the line. The operator would select a switch and push a button. The switch would move. Then the operator would select a signal, push a button, and the signal responded. It was all controlled remotely. In fact, the P&I was one of the first railroads in the nation to configure in this fashion. When I started working on this line, the first trick trail controller was from the NC&StL. The second trick was CB&Q. The IC supplied the third trick and the vast majority of traffic. I also became eligible to work this railroad. The Train Controller could issue orders to the crews of the three railroads that applied while they were on the P&I. In short, we were the dispatchers for the P&I. We also had to take orders from the IC, CB&Q and NC&St.L that applied to trains leaving the P&I. The IC supervised

the P&I. Later, the Louisville and Nashville took over the NC&St.L.

The office of the P&I was at Metropolis Junction. The line had its own section crew and signal man, Harry Auen. To qualify to work on the P&I, Harry and his assistant took me on a motor car tour over the entire road so that I would know every switch, signal, structure, and weakness of the railroad. There was a shack on the bridge manned by a CB&Q employee to assure that no damage to the rails had occurred. He walked the bridge after every passing train. He had a telephone to the train controller.

While watching a north bound train pass the office I heard the telephone ring. It was the bridge watchman. I could barely hear him over the noise of the passing train but I heard excitement in his voice. "Something is wrong with this train!!! Couldn't see what. Be careful!" I ran back out in time to see a cloud of dust emerge from the darkness as the train passed the section house just to the left of the office. I saw what appeared to be cardboard caught around the drawbar connecting two cars. I made a split second decision that I would not risk derailing the train by an emergence stop but allow it to pass and warn the dispatcher in Carbondale to have the operator at Reevesville deny the train a clear signal. This would cause the train to stop at a siding and call in that we could inform him to perform an inspection on the suspect car. The track just north of my office went over a highway at the edge of town before entering a long stretch of flat terrain to the siding. Big mistake!!! The axle actually had broken in two and was dragging in the space between the

rails, cutting the ties as it passed. God smiled on me. Although my snap decision was wrong, no one was killed or injured and the damage was minimal. I got a reprimand letter.

Railroading ceased to be an adventure after I married. Working nights and odd hours did not make for a "normal" family environment. I began to feel boxed in. Dr. Robert Gordon Matheson, the Dean of Paducah Junior College needed someone to teach American History. At that time I had completed several graduate courses in history at the University of Louisville while working second trick at Oak Street Yards. The Dean offered me two classes, back to back, meeting on Tuesday and Thursday for an hour and a half each day. I accepted. This was so enjoyable that later I gave up my seniority and began teaching full time.

Railroading continued to contribute to my everyday events. When I retired I chose to take Railroad Retirement benefits as they exceeded Social Security benefits. That's 30.

About the Author:

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