A LOST ART

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Fred C. Merker was the manager of the Wellsville, New York, office of the Western Union Telegraph Company ("Western onions tell on the breath," he once quipped). Mr. Merker was a man of 40 years, perhaps, and was a cripple. He had been a popular local athlete as a youth, but had injured himself in diving from a springboard at Crystal Beach in Buffalo and had been a semi-invalid ever since. His paralysis confined him to a wheelchair, in which his mother brought him to work in the morning and took him home at night, in every kind of weather. He was shriveled in appearance, with sunken cheeks and bony hands; but he had retained a sense of humor and drew upon some inner strength to meet the Wellsville world. I can see him now, sending messages with his "bug" (a semi-automatic key) or typing with two fingers on his "mill" (a typewriter with capital letters only); chuckling over a joke by Mr. Thompson, the operator who manned the other key and sounder; or, with eyes upturned, responding to a question from a customer at the narrow counter just above him.

When Mr. Merker hired me as a messenger, he mentioned other boys who had held the post before me and had later made their mark in the world. He didn't speak of Thomas Edison as a model, but I'm sure I got his meaning. I was given a dark blue uniform and a visored cap with the Western Union emblem. The bicycle that I used was mine. I was provided with a desk and chair in the back room of the office and my duties were described to me.

My job was to deliver telegrams, and to deliver them as quickly as I could; the

reputation of the office and the Company was at stake. As soon as Mr. Merker or Mr. Thompson typed a message, I was to take it to my desk, insert it properly within a windowed envelope, identify it on a printed form for signatures, and deliver it to the addressee; then I was to hurry back to get my next assignment. I could expect, on some of my deliveries, a nickel or a dime from the recipient of the message, but I was not to ask for such, even indirectly. I was only to inquire: "Is there an answer?" I was never, under any circumstance, to divulge a word of anything I read within the messages themselves.

I adjusted quickly to this work and liked it. There was great variety in it daily, hourly even. There was the morning rush of business when the office opened: priority messages (*blacks*) that had piled up in Buffalo overnight; night letters (*NL's*), some of which had been received the day before; day letters (*blues*), to be handled with less urgency; and night messages (*reds*), shorter versions of night letters.

The content of the telegrams varied greatly. Stock market quotations, cipher messages to business houses, sales reports, and price lists meant very little to me and almost never brought a tip. News of illness, accidents, delays, injuries, or death were of greater interest, sometimes painful, as I watched the addressee's reaction. Those who seldom got a telegram were usually alarmed to see me coming. Good news, holiday greetings, congratulations, love trysts, notices of someone's arrival, and marriage or birth announcements often brought gratuities. I learned to estimate, with some success, the likelihood of nickels.

Of special interest were the baseball scores, transmitted from the news department of the company itself. We could know how every game came out before the news reached anyone else in town. At

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World Series time, an inning-by-inning account was posted in our office window for everyone to see. I felt a special privilege when I examined the results as they came off the wire, before I showed them to the world outside the window.

I wasn't with the Western Union very long before my interest in telegraphy developed. Mr. Merker liked this, and I was soon provided with a key and a sounder on my back-room desk, together with a list of dot-and-dash equivalents of the letters, digits, punctuation marks, and procedure signs of American Morse—the code that Samuel F. B. Morse himself invented.

Learning code was not an easy task. The transmissions that I heard from Buffalo and other stations, or from the relay on the shelf in the corner of our office, were impossible to analyze, as meaningless as rain upon the roof. The only help available was Mr. Merker, who would wheel his chair out to my desk at times of slackened traffic and listen to my sending.

The first sounds that I came to recognize were office calls, transmitted in two-letter patterns as a rule. *WV* was ours, and it would be repeated again and again till someone answered, opening the switch, then sending *WV* or simply *I*. If the sender was slow enough, I came to hear the pattern. *Duh-dik-dik duh-duh-duh-dik* was the way it sounded to me—dot-dash-dash dot-dot-dot-dash.

Little by little I picked up other office signs and single letters, at least when they were sent by hand. Once I recognized a signal by ear, I found that soon I was able to *send* the signal reasonably well with little practice. Then, one day, on the “repeater”—the relay in the corner—I heard the word *and*, distinctly and with exultation. Within a few months I could not only send the code respectably, but recognize individual signals when transmitted slowly. Life was full, and I knew that I was on my way.

I was also on my way to Saranac Lake, New York, where my father had found a new position. I hated very much to leave my job and all my Wellsville friends. Especially I hated to say good-bye to Mr.

Merker and Mr. Thompson—even to Bernard Green, the boy who would replace me.

Saranac Lake is in the upper Adirondack region of New York State, 40-odd miles west of the Thruway that runs from New York City to Montreal, Quebec. At the time of which I write, it must have had a population of 5,000 persons, many of whom were sufferers from tuberculosis, “taking the cure” on the verandas of the Trudeau Sanatorium and of many private homes. The mountain air had not yet been polluted by the industries to the west and was thought to have a healing power for persons with “t.b.”—“the bugs” in local parlance.

In Saranac it was decided that I return to school, at least until I found a way of becoming a telegrapher. So, when classes started at the high school in the Fall, I enrolled in Latin, German, Chemistry, and English. Also, I introduced myself to O. M. Greene, the manager of the local Western Union, and offered to deliver telegrams on a part-time basis without pay, if he would let me work as an apprentice operator whenever I was free to do so.

Mr. Greene was a plump and balding man of middle age, eager to please, but hurried and uncertain in his actions. He would be described today, I guess, as insecure. His wife, a handsome and decisive person, was the other way. She came to the office regularly to straighten out her husband's books and send in his reports. I liked her and I think that she liked me. At any rate, I got the job and was delighted.

The office was a small one. The manager, one operator, and the messenger boy, together with furniture and equipment, were crowded within a working space no more than 12 feet wide and 15 feet in depth. Nevertheless, the working atmosphere was good. Mr. Greene was helpful in mapping out delivery routes for me; Mrs. Greene was kindly; the operator “BZ” Kenyon (I recall him only by his “sign”), soon became my counselor and, to some extent, my model; and the regular messenger boy, John Doty,

made no objection to my presence, possibly because deliveries in the snow, on icy paths and hilly terrain, to widely scattered destinations, were less than coveted excursions when winter weather came.

The first friend that I made in school was Beeman Garwood, who lived in an upstairs flat just around the corner from our own. His first two names were Albert Beeman, and he would one day be called Al, but he was at that time known as Bee. He was almost a year my junior, yet we had similar standing in the school by virtue of my inferior record of achievement, and we got along very well together. I admired his understanding of the internal-combustion engine, his ability to drive his father's Model-T, and his skill in playing "the drums," of which there was an excellent set in the living room of the Garwood flat. The only attribute I had with which to counter his, and excite his imagination, was my acquaintance with Morse code.

1916 was an election year. Charles Evans Hughes, a Republican from Glens Falls, New York, was running for President against Woodrow Wilson, who was seeking his second term of office. This meant nothing much to me, but I did become involved in the election. As voting day approached, the Republicans in Saranac arranged for a torchlight procession on the night before. Bee Garwood's father was involved and Bee was asked to beat a drum for the occasion. He agreed to do so, but said that he would use the snare drum, while I could take the bass. I told him that the only drumming I had ever done was on a stump in Florida, but that didn't stop him. "I'll teach you how," he said. And, after a fashion, that is what he did. We walked together, side by side, at the head of the procession, in a losing cause for Mr. Hughes. Bee was to figure importantly in my life for some years thereafter.

My diligence at the Western Union was finally rewarded. By 1917 I had learned to copy code as heard in routine traffic and could send effectively by hand or with my bug—a Martin Vibroplex, which provided dots at a higher speed than any normal hand could reproduce. In Feb-

ruary I left school and was hired, soon after that, by Mr. Greene, at \$45 per month, as the second operator in the office. I worked the afternoon and evening shift, with time out for a meal at home, just minutes from the office.

BZ Kenyon was a rough-hewn, outdoor type of man, in his early 40s, with close-cropped greying hair, strong features, and a gold-revealing smile. He also chewed tobacco. Before he came to Saranac for his health, he had been a telegrapher for the Pennsylvania Railroad and stationed in New York City.

Every telegrapher has his own peculiar "fist"—his characteristic style of sending—which colleagues come to recognize. BZ's was extreme. He could make a string of dots with a well-controlled fine tremor of his hand that sounded just as fast as many bug adjustments could provide. Also he seemed to have a disregard for the receiving operator's ear, which showed itself in what was often called a "railroad swing"—a carelessness derived from sending messages the form of which is known already by receivers, as in train announcements of arrival or departure. In addition, BZ was left-handed, which sometimes caused him trouble when he had to reach around the back of his mill (the key is always to the right of the typewriter). For these and temperamental reasons, BZ became well known to certain operators in New York and Plattsburgh, not always with affection.

I vividly recall my first days as a full-fledged "op." I can feel the thrill of hearing our office call—HN . . . HN . . . HN—and hurrying to my post, placing the yellow message blank within my mill, pulling the resonator to my left ear, and opening the switch in order to answer, I . . . HN. Then I closed the switch to take the message, knowing that everyone in the office was alert to my performance while seemingly engaged in other matters.

There was a regular procedure for each telegram. The sender always started with HR (Here it comes!), followed by the message number at the sending station, after which came the check (CK)—the number of words in the message proper. Then came the place of origin, together

with the date and hour at which the message had been filed. The name and address of the recipient came next, followed by a period, and then the message itself. The text was typed 10 words to the line, with an extra space between the first 5 and the second, to aid in counting. Another period announced the ending of the message, and SIG announced the signature. Then I opened the switch again, typed the time as shown by our Western Union clock, counted the words in the text, compared them with the number in the CK, asked for a repetition of any word of which I was uncertain, and, finally, okayed the message with my sign, TB. Under good conditions, with a 10-word telegram, all this required about 2 minutes, with the degree of expertise that I then possessed.

Ease of copying depended on the skill of the receiver, the quality of the signals, and the speed at which they were transmitted. If the receiver failed to understand a word, he could open the circuit, break into the sending (with BK), and repeat the word before the missed one, or he could wait until the end to make repairs. The former was the more annoying to the sender, but any interruption of the operation was unwanted. Hence the concentration and the tension on the part of the receiver, especially the novice.

There were many tricks to learn, which varied with the sender's speed and style. One copied well behind the signals heard, but not too far behind; one was careful not to guess the word to come, or the end of the word because of the beginning; one stayed up close with cipher (GNGIO, for example), but relaxed with ordinary text (GOING); and so forth and so on.

Sending was a simpler task, with fewer problems. The guiding principle was: *Consider the receiver*. Handwritten messages were checked beforehand, for readability or for any special problems. Variability in speed or clarity of signals sent, or any break in operation, was to be avoided. One slowed down for unusual words, sometimes repeated them, to facilitate reception. During each transmission, the sender wrote upon the telegram

with his free hand the number of the message, the sign of the receiving station and the receiving operator, adding finally the time at which the reception was acknowledged.

Informal chatting on the wires with other operators was against the rule, but one learned to know his colleagues nonetheless, when working with them on a regular basis. A pleasant *Good Morning* (GM), a well-placed laugh (HA or HI), a string of angry dots, a sarcastic spacing out of letters in the requested repetition of a word, even the style of sending was enough to tell one something about the person on the other end of the line. PO, in NY, was testy in the morning, resenting interruptions, but was almost genial in the afternoons; MA, whom I found to be a lady, had an even disposition and a sense of humor. Sometimes, when traffic wasn't heavy, brief exchanges would take place. U BN AWA? would tell one that his absence had been noted; TMP 99 HR was a sad note on the weather in an office where there was no air conditioning.

Operators in large centers like New York were closely supervised in the interest of production records, but those in towns like Saranac were freer to engage in conversation. I met several persons through this freedom. One was Dorothy Hoxie, who worked at Lyon Mountain; we had long chats together and became good friends. Her brother, X, who worked in Plattsburgh, sent the finest code that I have ever copied. The way in which he used his bug was music to my ear.

The routine of my days in Saranac was simple, and I was probably as happy as I've ever been. In the morning I could breakfast leisurely, lounge about the house, read a book, go for a swim, take a boat ride, or do whatever caught my fancy. My work was satisfactory and I could see improvement in my skills. I began to think of working for some city paper and I started to memorize the Phillips Code: "A thoroughly tested method of shorthand arranged for telegraphic purposes, and contemplating the rapid transmission of press reports. . . ." I learned that POTUS meant *President of*

the United States, that COP meant *Chief of Police*, KGNS was *Congratulations*, BOB was *Base on Balls*. Progress here would finally depend upon improvement in my speed of typing.

Such thoughts were set aside, however, with U.S. entrance into World War I. In the early stages of that war, opinion had been divided among the people whom I knew as to the side we should be on, that of the Allies or of the Central Powers. Germany was represented well in the United States, and well respected. Many of our families were of German blood, at least in part. This was true of mine; *Keller* is the German word for *cellar*, and my first nickname was *Fritz*. Our country's ties with England and with France, however, were even closer and, with the sinking of the *Lusitania*, with Americans aboard, and the continued sinking of our ships by German U-boats, there was no doubt concerning our affiliation.

The Selective Service draft was soon at work in Saranac, and little groups of men were presently departing from the New York Central railroad station, accompanied by cheers and tears. A Home Guard Company was formed of older men, or men rejected for more active service, and began to train. BZ joined the group, as did my father. Women knitted sweaters and helmets to be worn by "our boys in the trenches overseas." Men in uniform were treated with special favor; and everywhere was heard the sound of

patriotic songs. The war was popular in Saranac and elsewhere in our land.

One result of all this public fervor could easily have been predicted; Bee and I decided to join the Army, along with one of our friends, Jack Charlton. Bee was just 18; I was nearly 19; and Jack was 19. (Eighteen was the lower limit for volunteer enlistment.) When I told my parents of my desire, they were not surprised, but asked me to wait until my 19th birthday, which I agreed to do. This would only be fair to Mr. Greene in getting my replacement. Jack failed his physical examination (he had suffered from tuberculosis, which was thought to be arrested); Bee obtained permission from his parents, and the two of us decided to enlist together, hoping to remain so in the Service. At the Western Union office, BZ offered gruff approval, Mrs. Greene was proud of my decision, and Mr. Greene seemed worried at the thought of my departure.

Then began a round of farewell parties, congratulations from our friends, and expressions of regret from those who couldn't follow our example. My birthday came on January 2nd. Three days later, after warm goodbyes, Bee and I, with vacation money in our pockets, took the train to Lake Clear Junction and on to New York City, to join the Army.

I did not "pound brass" for some time after that, but telegraphy was my first love as an occupation. Today it is a lost art.