

Cleaning the Fires and Working the Wires

From Railroad Engine Watchman to Station Agent-Telegrapher in 1940s Iowa

by Robert L. Dyson

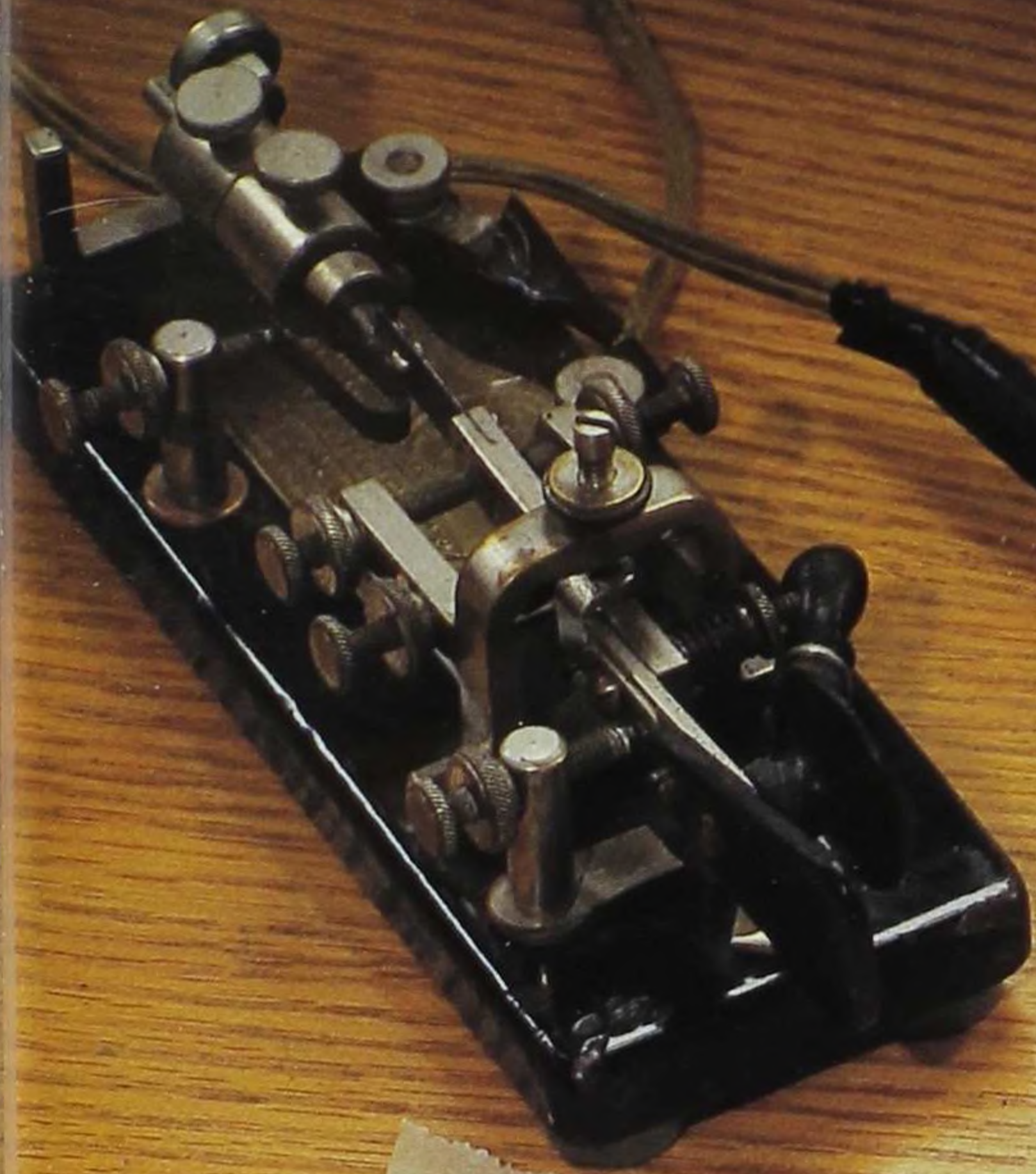
PERHAPS I CAME BY IT naturally—this great love of mine for railroading and telegraphy. I was born in 1922 in a house adjoining the railroad right-of-way and directly across the tracks from the depot at Adel, Iowa. There my father was the “second-trick” (second-shift) telegraph operator for the Milwaukee Railroad, which ran from Des Moines to Spirit Lake and the Iowa Great Lakes Region.

One of my first memories of railroading was of standing on the brick station platform alongside several rotund traveling salesmen with heavy sample cases and trunks. We were watching the passenger train from Des Moines come charging into town, pulled by what seemed to be a monstrous steam locomotive. Huffing and puffing, it belched huge clouds of black smoke and spit out white steam. Its brass bell clanged and its steam whistle shrieked. One of the

salesmen mentioned that locomotives sometimes blow up.

As I was only four years old, this was frightening indeed. Nevertheless, as I grew up, I would become accustomed to monstrous locomotives, and even fond of them. And a depot would seem like a second home to me. In fact, when my father, Harvey Bryan Dyson, was appointed to the position of agent-telegrapher at Spirit Lake in the spring of 1937, our family lived in the depot. As part of his salary, the railroad provided living quarters on the second floor. My parents, we three children (ages sixteen, fifteen, and eight), and within two years a baby sister, all lived in four rooms. The living room, kitchen, and two bedrooms were fairly typical for agents' quarters. The apartment had

Right: Train orders and telegraph equipment dominated the life of station agents and telegraphers.



ROCK ISLAND LINES
 TRAIN ORDER NO. 18 Form C. I. 110

To C & E. Eng 415 Sept 15 1942

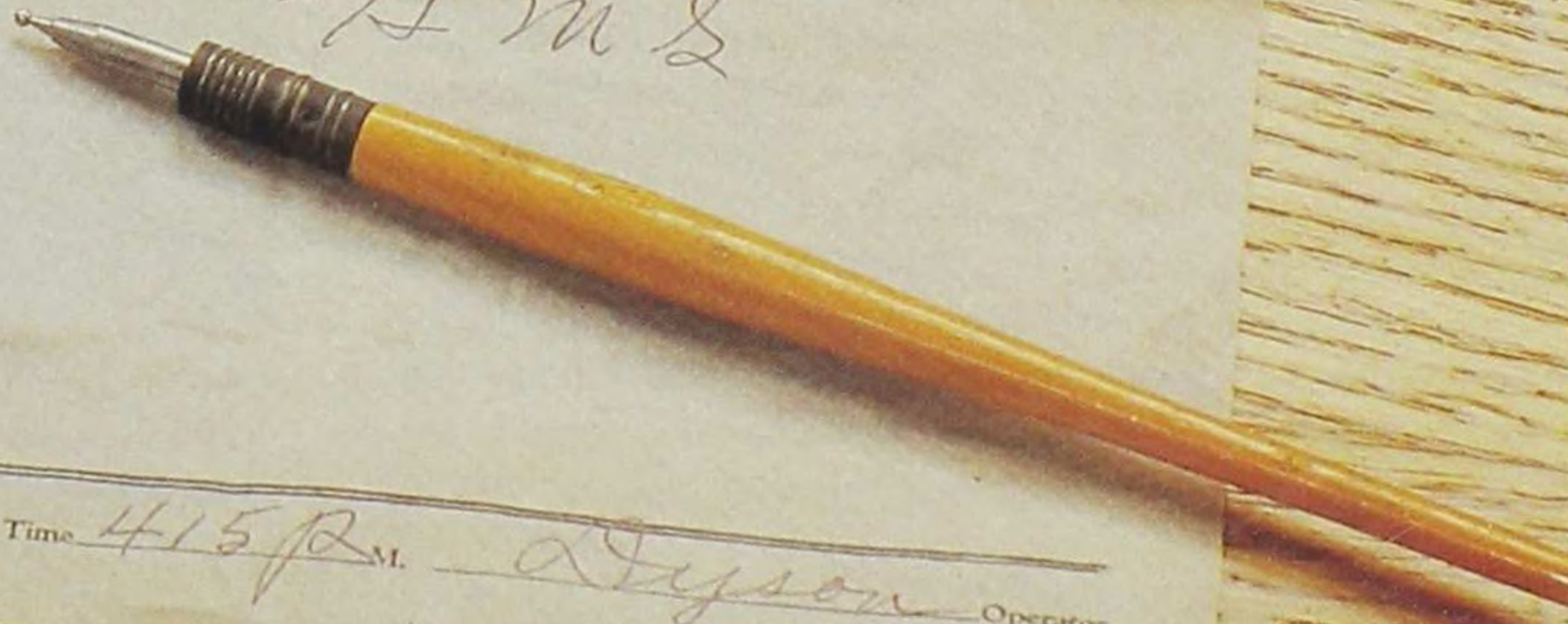
At Estherville

X at _____

Operator _____

*Eng 415 run Extra
 Estherville to Sioux
 Falls.*

H M S



Made Com Time 415 P.M. Dyson Operator



The Milwaukee Railroad depot in Adel in the early 1920s. Author's father, H. B. Dyson (left), was the telegrapher. He poses with station agent Mr. Case (center), and the mail messenger. For a contemporary view of the Adel depot, see back cover.

no running water, and Dad paid out of his pocket to pipe in water and build a bathroom upstairs. He also got permission to partition off half of the big waiting room downstairs, and out of that we fashioned an extra bedroom and a room where my mother, Sylvia Dyson, could do the wash.

Raising a family in a depot could be dangerous and noisy, but our situation wasn't as bad as some. Ours was a small terminal at the end of a line, so there were no high-speed trains going through in the middle of the night. The biggest inconvenience was for my mother on wash day. When a steam engine sat overnight in the station, condensation would build up in the smokestack. Then, when the engine started up, soot and smoke poured out, and particles clung to Mother's wash drying on the line. So her laundry schedule had to concede to the train schedule.

After graduating from high school in 1939—and obviously with no little influence on the part of my father—I was appointed to fill a vacant position of engine watchman. Six days a week, shortly after 1 P.M., the little passenger train from Des Moines pulled into Spirit Lake. Although larger engines were sometimes assigned to pull the two-car train, I was most pleased when one of the small Atlantic-class engines (either Number 25 or 27) proudly charged into town at the head of the train. It

was easy to recognize these smaller locomotives by their tall smokestacks and six-and-a-half-foot driving wheels. They were my favorites.

In fact, during my brief training period as engine watchman, I developed a real affection for all locomotives. They sometimes seemed like living creatures to me. The blazing coals in the firebox gave them the warmth of life; the incessant thumping of the air pump was the heartbeat; and their huffing and puffing while in motion was labored breathing. And at the end of a busy day's work, a locomotive needed rest and attention. That's where I came in.

But first, after the passengers detrained and the mail, baggage, and express were unloaded, the train proceeded another block and a half to the turntable, where the engine would be uncoupled and turned around for its return trip to Des Moines later that day. The turntable was a short stretch of track that bridged over a shallow pit surrounded by a circular wooden catwalk. The locomotive was properly balanced on the turntable, which was then rotated above a center pivot by manually pushing on handles extending over the catwalk at each end. Despite the weight of the locomotive, this could be accomplished by one person alone; more often, two or three manned the handles. Larger terminals used electric motors on the turntable. The mail-baggage-express car and the coach were then switched, end-for-end, so that the coach was in the trailing position. After parking the train on the side track next to the



The two-car passenger train that arrived at Spirit Lake daily was often pulled by Engine No. 25, one of the small Atlantic-class locomotives.

main line, directly in front of the depot, the engine was uncoupled and turned over to me.

As a seventeen-year-old, I was exhilarated by its power. As I placed the "Johnson Bar" (reverse lever) in the forward position, released the air brakes, and eased out on the throttle, I could feel the iron behemoth surge forward.

Upon reaching the servicing area I would begin a series of tasks to ready the locomotive for the return trip. First, I would open the ashpan doors, release the accumulated ashes, and shake one or more sections of the grates to dump at least half of the hot coals from the firebox, thus getting rid of the build-up of clinkers and ashes. Then I shoveled a layer of coal onto the bare grates through the hinged "butterfly door," and with a clinker hook pulled hot coals from the old fire onto the fresh coal to make a clean, new fire. I turned on the blower, to force steam up the stack and provide a draft in the firebox. Once the remaining grates were dumped and covered with new coal, and the ashpans cleaned, I pulled the locomotive forward and shoveled the hot ashes from between the rails. I filled the lubricator with oil, to be turned on to provide lubrication for the cylinders and air pump on the return trip. I also greased the side-rod bearings until the heavy grease squished out from around the bearings. Finally, I backed the locomotive across the street, coupled it to the train, and connected the air, signal, and steam hoses to the cars.

One hot summer day I was ready to back the locomotive into the train when my girlfriend, who had borrowed my 1928 Model A Ford coupe, drove up and parked on the street parallel to the tracks, on the fireman's side of the locomotive. Facetiously I suggested that we race the block and a half to the highway. Not one to decline a challenge, she readily accepted. I switched on the air valve so the bell would ring continuously, and the race was on. The car was hidden from my view by the locomotive tender, but I assumed that upon reaching the highway, my girlfriend would stop and wait for me and my charge to cross.

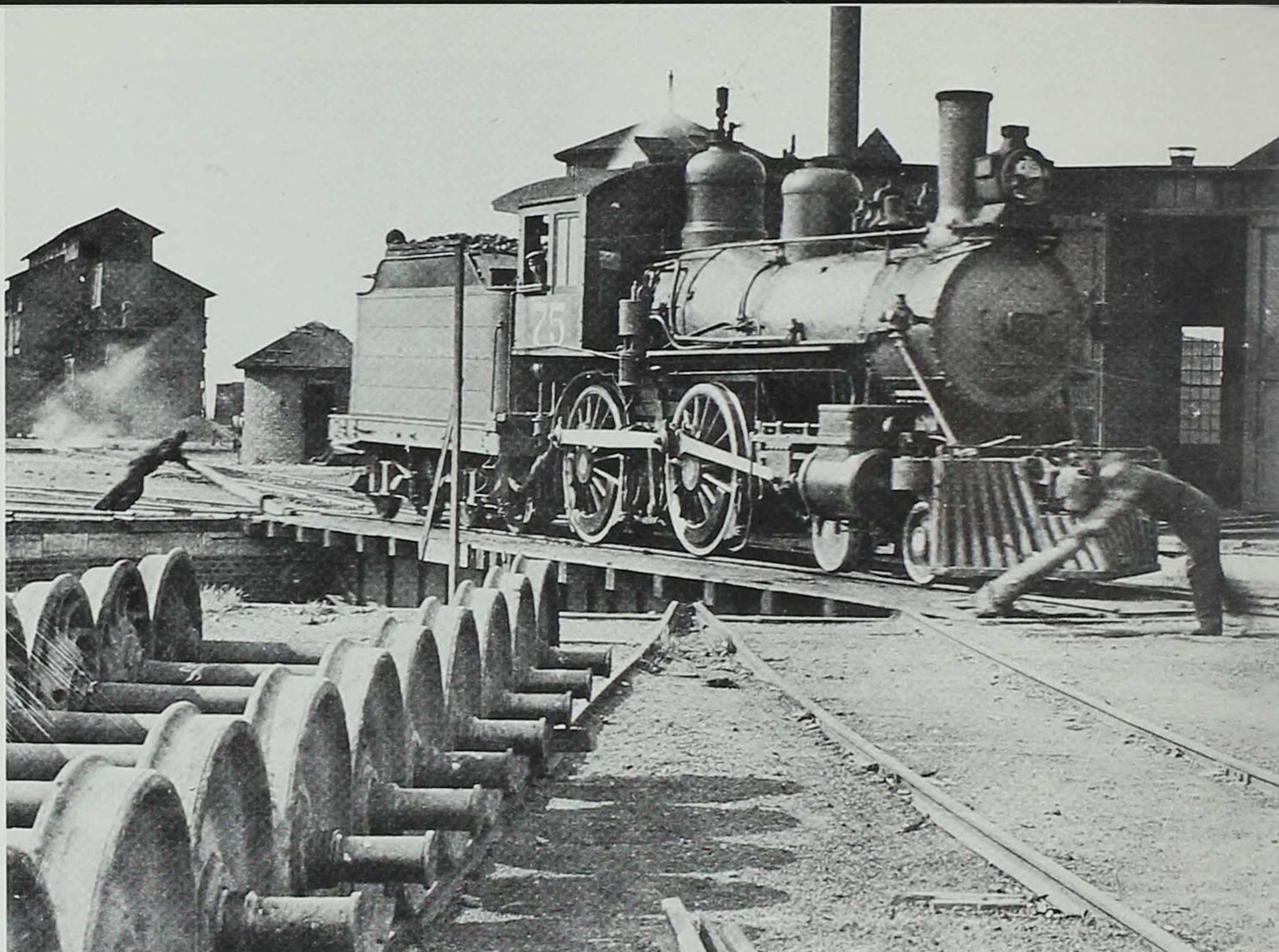
Seeing no approaching cars on the highway, I widened on the throttle and the engine responded magnificently. Imagine my surprise then, when my little automobile and its tri-



In his first railroad job, the author (left) was engine watchman at Spirit Lake, where his father, H. B. Dyson (right) was the agent-telegrapher. The bay window behind them was a standard feature on many depots, because it provided an unobstructed view of the tracks and incoming trains. The Dyson family lived on the second floor of the depot. For a recent view of the Spirit Lake depot, see the back cover.

umphantly waving driver suddenly shot into view and scooted down the highway just ahead of the approaching tender! The race belonged to my girlfriend that day.

Before the trip back to Des Moines, the locomotive would need only my occasional attention to maintain a low fire and monitor the water level. This last part was vital. If the water level dropped below the boiler crown sheet,



W.L. HEITZER COLLECTION, FROM H. ROGER GRANT, THE CORN BELT ROUTE (1984)

Long levers on hand-powered turntables allowed one or two workers to rotate a locomotive to reverse its direction on the track. Here, the Chicago Great Western turntable and roundhouse, Clarion, Iowa, about 1909.

above the firebox, the metal would heat up quickly. Then when cold water hit the crown sheet, the steam could expand so suddenly that the boiler could explode, taking much of the locomotive with it. By the 1940s such accidents were rare but not unheard of; on August 25, 1873, a locomotive boiler had exploded near Atlantic, Iowa, instantly killing nineteen-year-old head brakeman James Dyson, my great-great uncle. The explosion threw metal fragments a quarter of a mile away.

My other chores included sweeping and cleaning the coach, turning the seats for the return trip, and adding ice to the mail car's drinking-water tank. I also turned the mail hooks so that mail bags could be snatched on the fly from fixtures at wayside stations (the mail would be sorted by clerks on the moving train).

By the time the train crew came back on duty a half-hour before the 6:05 P.M. departure, I had ensured that the fire covered the entire grate area and was just hot enough to keep the steam pressure slightly under the engine's

working pressure so that the safety valve wouldn't continually pop off. Then I went inside the depot, typed freight bills, sold tickets, and checked baggage.

The freight locomotive that arrived in Spirit Lake each afternoon or evening required similar servicing, but because the return trip wasn't until the next morning, either the fire was "knocked" (extinguished), or a low fire maintained through the night, depending upon the temperature. Fortunately, Spirit Lake had built a one-stall "roundhouse," or engine house, just before the devastating blizzard of Armistice Day, 1940. The storm blew in out of the northwest and began with a downpour. As the temperature fell sharply and the wind increased, the rain changed briefly to sleet, and then to snow, resulting in a blinding blizzard. I was at the depot when the full fury of the storm hit. Heavy snow and severe winds blasted and rattled the windows with a vengeance. The sturdy old structure shuddered and groaned.

My job was to care for the freight locomotive two blocks away in the roundhouse, and so I

headed out into the storm. The driven snow stung my face, and the cold wind penetrated my thick clothing. It was impossible to breathe while facing into the wind, or even to see, for that matter. Visibility was absolute zero, with drifts piling up. I turned from the wind and struggled backwards down the tracks, and I was mighty thankful when I finally succeeded in reaching the sanctuary of the roundhouse. In its shelter, the locomotive's fire could be banked through the night so it wouldn't freeze up.

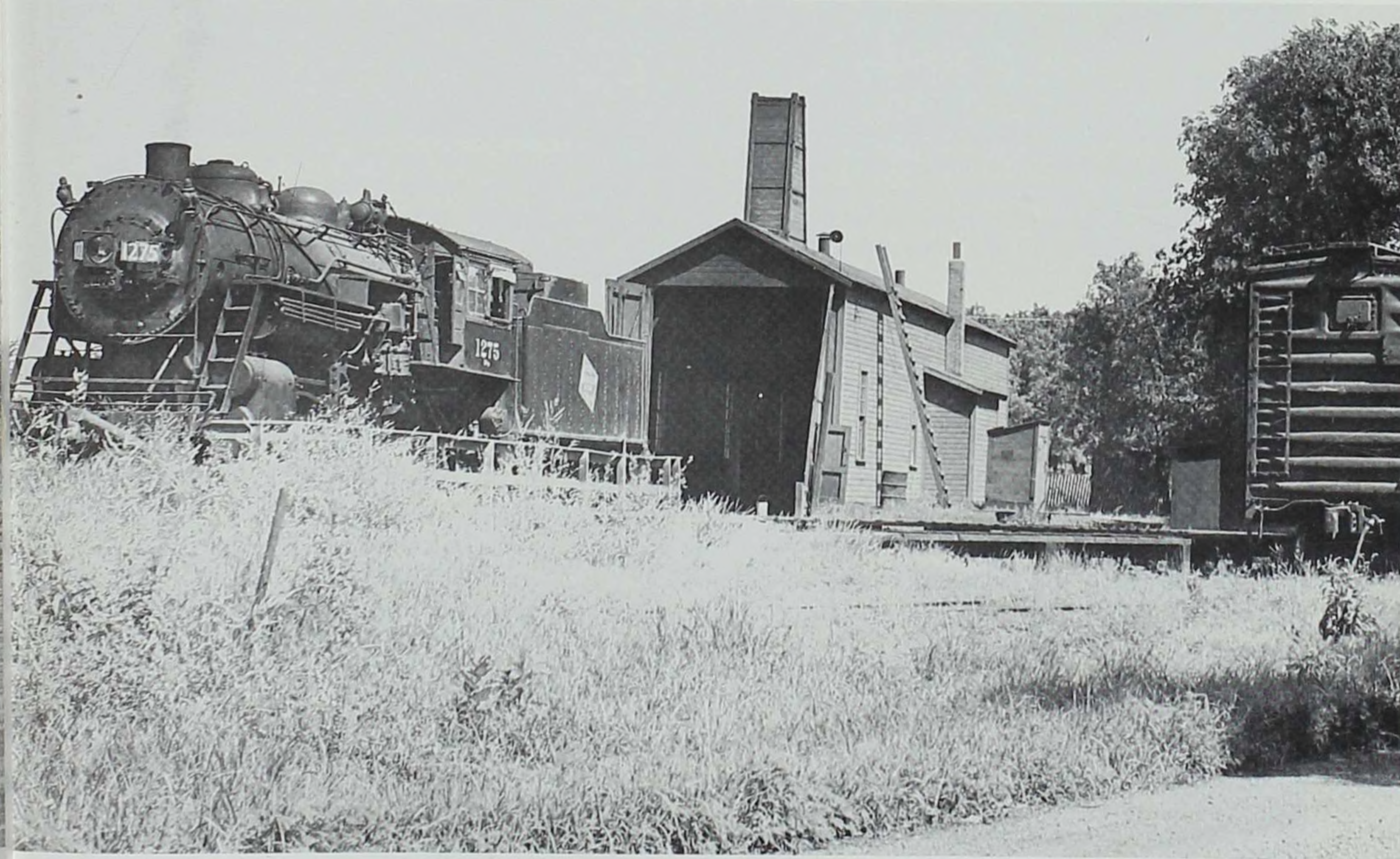
The engine watchman's job was interesting, and the pay was good: \$100 monthly for a six-day work week during the summer, and \$116 in the winter when I added Sundays. I worked from 9:00 A.M. until 9:00 P.M., with two lunch periods. But the job was dirty and sometimes frustrating. In winter, snow would blow into the ashpan, melt, and then congeal with ash into a

huge, frozen clinker that jammed the ashpan. It was a struggle to get the ashpan doors open and to break up the clinker with a large, heavy bar. The time finally arrived when I decided that I should consider another line of work. But what did I want to do?

College, perhaps? I had little incentive to pursue a degree when the country was just emerging from a major depression. Stories abounded of recent college graduates unable to find employment. Of course, there was the question of money, too, and the frequently heard advice to "Learn a trade!"

But something else continued to tug at me—these were still the exciting "romance days" of railroading. The adventure of travel and the camaraderie of railroad workers attracted many Americans. Train engineers had a certain heroic stature, and growing up to be an engineer was still a common childhood dream. I had

COURTESY WM. W. KRATVILLE, OMAHA, NEBRASKA (1952)



Freight locomotive 1275 emerges from the engine house and passes across the manually operated turntable (Spirit Lake, 1952). During Iowa's cold winters, engine houses provided welcome shelter for engine watchmen banking the fires in locomotives.



The clutter of the office in a small-town railroad station is readily apparent in this World War I era photo of station agent in foreground (a Mr. Tounnell), his sons, and a family friend. The image was likely taken in the Chicago Great Western Railway depot at Dunkerton, Iowa. Despite technological changes in the coming decades, the demands on station agents and telegraphers would continue.

served as a temporary locomotive fireman when the regular man had been delayed. Perhaps if I hired out as a fireman, I might some day be promoted to engineer.

On the other hand, the romance associated with being a telegrapher also enticed me. A railroad magazine that I subscribed to carried adventure stories about “boomer” telegraphers, itinerants who worked for short periods for first one railroad, then another. Being single, boomers were willing to trade job security for seeing the country. That sounded exciting. Besides, it seemed only natural to follow in Dad’s footsteps as a telegrapher.

Although many people enrolled in telegraphy schools (which were often connected with business colleges), just as many learned it on their own or by helping out in depots. I had spent much of my childhood in a depot, watching my father work. He had even given me a practice

telegraph set years ago. Now I dug it out and began to learn Morse Code.

The telegraph set consisted of a key and a sounder, mounted on a board and connected to a battery. When the key was depressed, the sounder’s spring-loaded metal bar was magnetically drawn down, making a click. And when it was released a second click was heard, resulting in two clicks each time the key was activated. Of course, this was the very essence of Morse Code, which consisted of dots and dashes. A short interval between the two clicks represented a dot, and a longer interval a dash.

So far, so good. In Morse, the letter “A” consists of a dot and a dash. Simple. Now, put them together on the instrument and listen carefully for the sound of the dot and dash, out of the four clicks. Ha! Easier said than done! What’s more, I knew that experienced telegraphers could transmit forty or more words a minute.

As with any worthwhile endeavor, the operative words were practice, persistence, and more practice. Sending messages was tricky enough; receiving them was even harder. I was elated when I could listen to the sounders at the depot and pick out a letter, and eventually a word. After several months I could "read" most of what was being sent along the line. I was ready to apply for a job as a telegraph operator.

The Milwaukee Railroad wasn't hiring operators at that time, but the local Rock Island agent, Hank Thielke, said they needed operators, so I made an appointment with Assistant Superintendent F. L. Champion at Estherville. Champion handed me a sheet of paper, pulled out a practice telegraph set from his back desk, and proceeded to slowly tap out a simple message. This I decoded with ease, and after passing a brief examination covering the railroad's operating rules, I was hired. The following week I nervously reported to the small north-

western Iowa station in Montgomery to relieve the agent for his vacation.

There were two telegraph wires in the Montgomery station, one for the train dispatcher and the other for railroad messages and Western Union telegrams (Western Union usually leased lines from the railroads). Each wire operated a relay, which picked up electrical impulses and transmitted them to the battery-run sounder, which then resonated the sound so the telegrapher could distinguish the clicks. To my dismay, the Montgomery agent had not found it necessary to maintain the battery to operate the sounders. Relays, by themselves, were not designed for use in copying code, although by listening carefully an experienced telegrapher could "read" the transmission without the sounder.

I knew I wasn't an experienced telegrapher, and that I needed all the help I could get. After my initial panic had subsided, my first order of

Small-town depots of the early 1940s differed little from this 1966 view of the Rock Island depot in Marengo, with agent-operator Earl C. Berry.

PHOTO BY PHILIP R. HASTINGS, IN HIS REMEMBER THE ROCK (1987), COURTESY OF ED CRIST





Sign for east- and west-bound trains flanks window and Marengo agent-operator Earl C. Berry.

business was to find copper, blue vitriol crystals, and a "crow's foot" (a three-pronged piece of zinc), and to assemble all of these in a glass jar filled with water. Fortunately I found all of these items in a cabinet under the bay-window telegraph table; railroads routinely furnished battery supplies to depot agents. The zinc and copper would serve as positive and negative terminals, and the blue vitriol (copper sulfate) in the water would allow a transfer of ions.

Before my battery had built up a charge, however, the morning passenger train arrived and departed, leaving in its wake a broken rail directly in front of the depot. So, instead of simply having to telegraph the actual arrival and departure times to the division dispatcher in Cedar Rapids, I also had to alert him to the broken rail and the possibility of an accident, and to "discuss" over the telegraph what to do.

Without the battery-run sounder, I could barely hear the dispatcher's responses and instructions. Eventually, with an ear nestled up to the wire, I managed to convey and receive all the information needed, but it was a stressful way to start a job.

Needless to say, I was mighty happy later in the day when my battery had built up a charge and the sounders burst into life. I had survived my first day as a telegrapher. I was elated that my name and starting date (March 10, 1942) would now be added to the telegrapher's roster, and I would begin to build up seniority, which was crucial in the world of railroad employment.

To an operator, the telegraph was good company because the sound of the instrument was audible throughout the office. I could perform my normal office duties yet almost subcon-

sciously be kept informed of the progress of approaching trains (as reports were made to the dispatcher in division headquarters) as well as catch other items of interest from stations along the line.

I made many friends among fellow telegraphers, most of whom I never actually met face to face. I could generally tell who was "talking" on the wire, because each person had his or her own "swing," or manner of sending. There were always slight variations in letter spacing and speed. Some telegraphers still "sent with their fists," using the regulation telegraph key furnished by the railroad and mounted to the desk. Others used a "bug," a semi-automatic speed key sold by the Vibroplex Company. Mounted on a sturdy metal base, the bug was a spring-loaded, upright arm with an electrical contact point on each side, actuated by the operator pushing an insulated paddle to the right with the thumb to produce a series of dots (the number determined by the operator's release of the paddle). Pressure from the index-finger side produced dashes. A telegrapher with a bug could work a lot faster and therefore move more business through the depot. A bug was also a lot easier on the wrist; using a standard key could result in an awfully tired wrist for those who worked in the busier stations.

Iowa's larger stations certainly had enough business to occupy one or more telegraphers, especially during the war when railroad usage grew. The telegraph was used largely to convey orders from the dispatcher to trains throughout the division, to ensure their safe and efficient operation. But it was also used for many other purposes, such as agents ordering freight cars for their local shippers, and for freight and passenger rate requests from the railroad's traffic department. During World War II the telegraph was often used to obtain seat reservations, such as for a woman wanting to travel to the coast to visit a son, husband, or sweetheart before he was sent overseas. And, of course, Western Union telegrams were used to convey news of family crises. Most people were still reluctant to use telephones for long-distance phone calls and sent telegrams instead. In small stations, a telegrapher who received such a message might phone the family or hire someone to deliver the message, or sometimes even

leave the station briefly during quiet times to make the delivery. I remember well the anxiety and apprehension written on someone's face when I delivered a Western Union telegram.

I never became the boomer telegrapher of my earlier aspirations, but I did manage to travel a fair bit. Because the Cedar Rapids Division of the Rock Island included trackage of the former Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern Railway, our territory extended north from Burlington to Minneapolis, and northwest from Vinton to Sioux Falls and Watertown, South Dakota. This meant that as an operator on the "extra board," I worked in many different stations in a variety of jobs.

I traveled by train from one job to another, often filling in during an operator's two-week vacation. Few of the small towns had hotels or cafes, so the local agent usually arranged with some local family to "board" me. The room in a widow's home in Brandt, South Dakota, was typical of several where I stayed. My cold upstairs bedroom had a large white pitcher and bowl on a commode for washing and shaving. The woman didn't serve meals, but another home near the depot had a restaurant booth in a corner of the living room. On my first visit there, I cautiously entered and was cheerfully waved toward the booth. "We're having roast beef," the man said. "What'll you have?" Now, presumably they would have prepared a hamburger or a cheese sandwich just because I requested it, but I didn't ask. Somehow I got the impression that what they were having would be the best bet, so I had the roast beef, and for all future meals I went along with the house special.

I soon learned that the "romance" of travel was balanced by the "amenities" of various accommodations. In Manly, Iowa, I received the landlady's wrath when I accidentally used up all her hot wash water for a bath for myself. In West Liberty I stayed in a typical two-story wood-frame hotel near the depot, where the fire escape was nothing more than a coil of rope tied to the radiator near my bedroom window. My room at Goldfield was directly above a local tavern; on some nights the jukebox was turned up high to match the exuberance of the singing, foot-stomping patrons well into the early morning hours. At Conesville, in south-



Union Station in Cedar Rapids. Serving both Rock Island and North Western passenger trains during World War II, the depot in these postwar views is empty and quiet.

SHSI



eastern Iowa, I had a nice room with a very pleasant family. But I never fully developed an appreciation for a frequent delicacy, turtle stew.

I remember well the agent at the Conesville depot. He sent code in an erratic manner; other operators said he had "telegrapher's paralysis," meaning a nervous disorder, perhaps caused by the stress of the job. When I checked in to relieve him, he made two requests: First, I should always wear his ancient, black station-agent's cap whenever trains were expected. And, second, I should meet the evening train after supper, to prepare billings and see that daily shipments of cream in ten-gallon cans and any express shipments were properly loaded on the passenger train. I complied with the second request, but not the first. Except for him, agents no longer wore uniforms or the caps with personalized metal nameplates, which had once signified the local stature of a station agent.

For most of one winter I lived in the Cedar Rapids YMCA. My room was typically YMCA—very small and narrow, with an open closet and one window. The transom over the door provided badly needed cross-ventilation, but it also carried in any noise from the hallway. I worked from 2:45 A.M. until 10:45 A.M. or noon. Therefore I was still in bed during the noisy evening hours when other young people were apparently having a hilarious time in the hallway.

The job at Cedar Rapids was as telegrapher-ticket clerk for both the North Western and Rock Island railroads in the station located at Fourth Street and Fourth Avenue. I received quite a thrill one morning when R.L. Williams, the president of the North Western and a former telegrapher himself, called on the wire from Chicago, exchanged greetings, then asked me to telephone a personal message to his mother in a nearby town.

The Cedar Rapids station was a busy one, especially now that the United States had entered World War II and railroad usage had increased. I was the only person in the office during the early morning hours; the two ticket clerks and the agent didn't come on duty until 8:00 A.M. But well before that, by 5:50 A.M., the "City of Denver" Streamliner had arrived and departed. The Streamliner was a popular train

because it connected with points in the East and Southeast, and because shoppers and business people could arrive in Chicago by 9:15, spend the day there, and return home yet that night. I was usually very busy at the ticket window or on the telephone the hour before train time. Understandably, people often became quite short-tempered if I was unable to serve them promptly.

One such morning is still etched in my mind. The "City of Denver" was running about thirty-five minutes late, and an irate woman came to the ticket window. "Why don't you answer your phone?" she demanded. "Since I couldn't reach you, I had to rush down here, only to have to sit and wait for the train!"

"Lady," I replied with as much calm as I could muster, "at this very moment, while I'm talking to you, both of my city telephone lines are ringing, and that clicking of the telegraph instrument is the train dispatcher calling me on the wire." Of course, this explanation didn't really satisfy her, but for station employees it was a typical morning during the early months of the war.

Many of the trains on the high-speed main line running from Minneapolis to Kansas City and Dallas were for the military. We called them "Mains," and they certainly were given the main line all to themselves! I remember all too well standing within inches of these and other mile-a-minute passenger and freight trains to hold up "hoops" from which the crew would grab train orders. First, I would hold up the engineer's hoop; he would grab the bundle of paper as he passed. Then quickly—before the middle of the train passed—I'd drop the first hoop and pick up the second one for the conductor. After he grabbed it and before the last car passed, I would switch to the rear flagman's hoop. Of course, for freight trains only two hoops were required, one for the engineer and one for the conductor in the caboose.

My job in Albert Lea, Minnesota, was to operate a centralized traffic-control board, which controlled the trains of three different railroads on a single-track main line coursing with war-time traffic. Operating it was much like playing with model trains, except that this was real life. Outlined on the board in front of me was a large map of the main line between

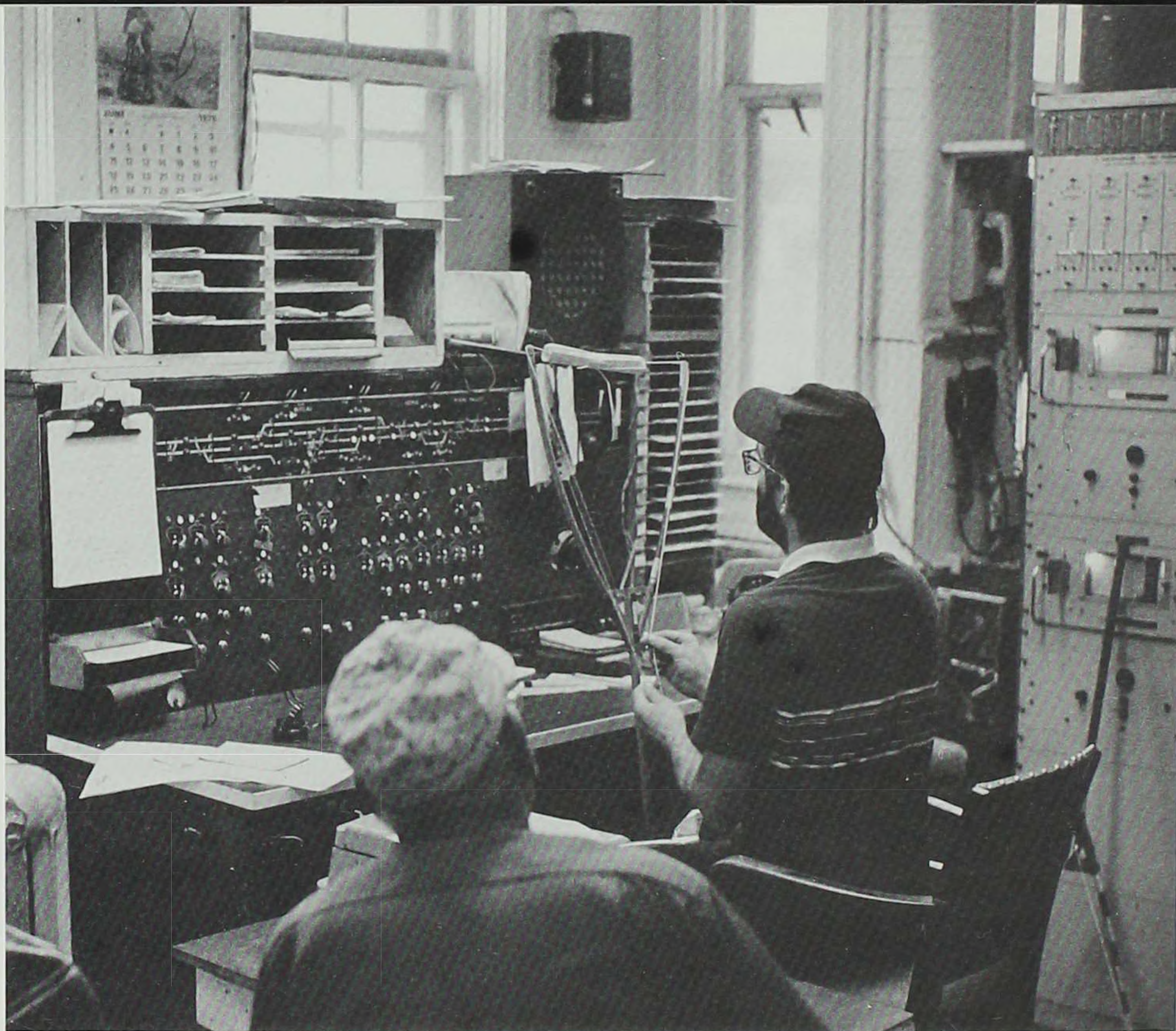


PHOTO BY PHILIP R. HASTINGS. IN HIS REMEMBER THE ROCK (1987); COURTESY OF ED CRIST. PHOTO TAKEN IN ILLINOIS, 1978

Centralized traffic-control (CTC) boards showed locations of trains and switches and helped coordinate traffic.

Albert Lea and Manly, along with passing tracks and other sidings. Small lights on the map indicated the location of all trains and the position of switches and signals that were controlled with small levers on the board. Long passing tracks and remote-controlled, power-operated switches allowed trains going both directions on a single-track main line to have four-fifths the efficiency of what double tracks could have carried.

The well-equipped relay office in Estherville, Iowa, was equally busy during these years. There I felt immersed in telegraphy. By now I had more experience as a telegrapher, and had the satisfaction of "working the wire" with some of the nation's most proficient railroad and Western Union relay operators, male and female. In this relay office, several sets of automatic repeaters picked up weak signals from

long-distance wires and retransmitted them to other wires in a strengthened condition. Each repeater circuit consisted of four instruments that were as loud as telegraph sounders. When all circuits came alive, a great crescendo of sound filled the room.

Lake Park, another northern Iowa station, had such a high volume of business that a station helper was on the payroll. His name was Kenny Rowe, a recent high school graduate. He was a likable young man and a good worker. Seeing that he was eager to learn to telegraph, I sent practice code to him after work and at other odd moments during the day. But during my second week at Lake Park, Kenny took a day off and went to Des Moines for an enlistment physical.

Within two years, I, too, had enlisted and graduated from the Naval Radio Training

School at Northwestern University. In January 1945, I reported to Terminal Island, San Pedro, California, for assignment aboard the attack transport USS *Elkhart* (APA-80). While meeting other members of the ship's company, I noticed a radioman 2/C who looked strangely familiar. Sure enough, it was Kenny! He had just recently returned from several amphibious landings in the South Pacific and was being reassigned to the *Elkhart*. As I reported to the ship's radio shack, I realized the tables had turned: Kenny would be my shift supervisor.

After the war, I attended college and eventually became the General Mechanical Engineer for Union Pacific, with several engineers on my staff. By the time I retired in 1982, I had witnessed many changes in railroading since my youth. Yet I still remember from the 1920s and 1930s the pot-bellied coal stove in the middle

Below: Holding up successive hoops with train orders for the engineer, conductor, and flagman tested a station agent's speed, dexterity, and nerve when trains (unlike this one) barreled by at top speed.

of depot waiting rooms. On the wall would hang a Chicle machine that dispensed gum and chocolates for pennies. And every morning at exactly eleven o'clock, telegraphers and station agents across the Midwest would adjust their clocks and pocket watches to the correct railroad time, which was transmitted over telegraph lines.

It has been said that at one time a person could stand anywhere in Iowa and not be more than ten miles from railroad tracks, giving Iowa the distinction of having had one of the most dense rail networks of any state. Much of that vast network has been abandoned. Gone with it are the agent-telegraphers, as well as most small-town depots that were once vital centers of community life and technological wonder when the great locomotives roared in and the telegraph keys clicked steadily. After almost a century and a half of active service, all telegraph lines in the United States are now silent. Yet sometimes in quiet reverie I can still hear the beautiful, crisp staccato sounds of perfect Morse drifting across the years. □

PHOTO BY PHILIP R. HASTINGS, IN HIS *REMEMBER THE ROCK* (1987), COURTESY OF ED CRIST

