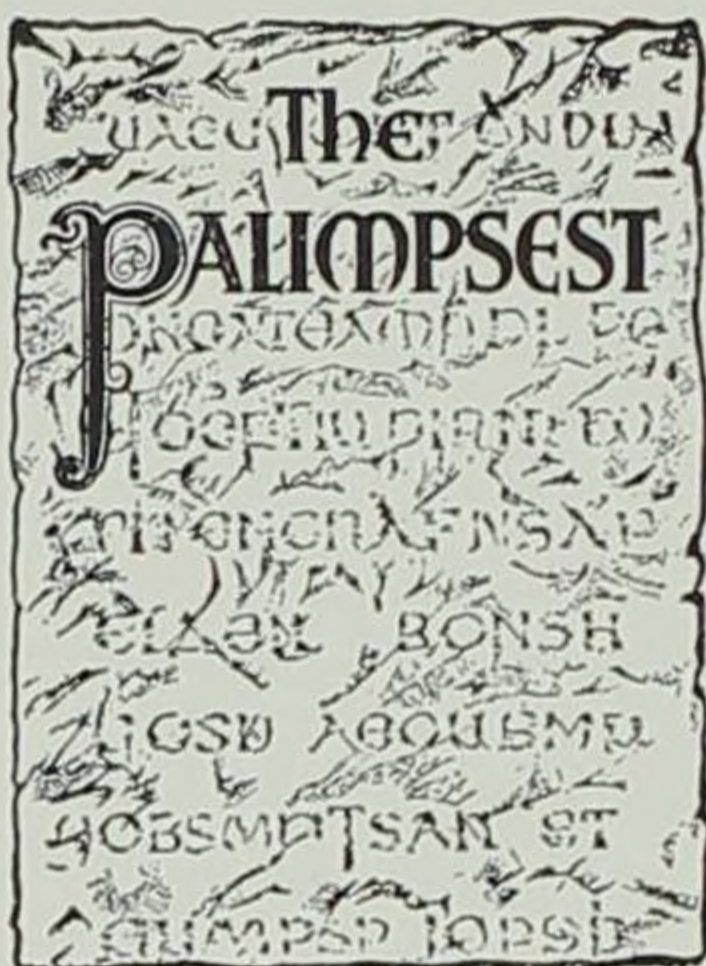


The **PALIMPSEST**



HARRY BEDWELL — RAILROAD RACONTEUR

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The Meaning of Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.

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Illustrations

All illustrations were photographed or procured by Frank P. Donovan, Jr. The map was drawn by Norman F. Podas, Jr., under the direction of Mr. Donovan. The front cover was taken of Harry Bedwell while at work in the Southern Pacific's office at Santa Susana, California.

Author

Frank P. Donovan, Jr., is the author of *Mileposts on the Prairie* and has written articles on the Minneapolis & St. Louis, the Chicago Great Western, Interurbans in Iowa, and the Manchester & Oneida, all appearing in previous issues of THE PALIMPSEST.

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Iowa Boyhood

There is much to be said for putting one's self in the proper setting. It is only fitting then, in assembling material for the life-story of America's last famous writer of railroad short stories, Harry Bedwell, that I visit his Iowa birthplace by train. Furthermore, Bedwell started railroading on the very line I elected to ride.

My odyssey into the "Harry Bedwell Country" began the moment I alighted from the Rock Island's *Twin Star Rocket* at Chariton, Iowa. Going over to the Burlington's station, I found the 5 a.m. mixed train for Kellerton would be very late on account of heavy soybean movements. When the belated train did leave, at 11:45 a.m., I was aboard. Although it was the fall of 1957 and the newspaper headlines were full of Russia's first Sputnik, launched a few days earlier, this branch line retained much of the leisurely pace of Bedwell's day. In wending its unhurried course through the rolling countryside, the local freight is close to nature. Thanks to Conductor L. E. Al-

lan, I was permitted to enjoy the bright autumnal foliage from the cupola high up in the caboose. The line and depots, and even the little red caboose, have changed but little during the half century that has passed since the slim, tow-headed youth from Kellerton "pounded brass" as a telegraph operator.

Humeston, the first major stop, retains the original wooden station of Bedwell's day. Likewise, the bisecting branch running east to the Mississippi below Keokuk is still intact. But its western segment across southern Iowa to Shenandoah is only a memory. Gone, too, are the puffing branch line locals which made Humeston such a busy place at train-time. After our LCL freight was unloaded, waybills checked, and cars set out in the traditional manner, we "highballed" south.

Two stations down the line is Leon, once a throbbing junction, where Bedwell worked as relief operator. In the wooded, hilly region he had one of his most thrilling experiences, which will be mentioned later.

Our train whistled for Davis City, formerly a division point, now identified by the crumbling remains of a roundhouse. The freight sharply reduced speed as the engines climbed to the plateau. At Giles, where there is a sign and a phone-box, the line diverges. One section goes west to Mount Ayr, the other continues south to St. Joseph, Missouri. Here the caboose and much of

the train is set out so as to lighten the load for the long, steep grade to Mount Ayr.

After all hands get aboard the two 1000-h.p. diesels, coupled cab-to-cab Siamese fashion, the bobtailed train starts westward. At Lamoni the engines came to a halt adjacent to the campus of Graceland College. Because of the needs of this school of the Reorganized Church of the Latter Day Saints, the sidings are crowded with box cars. It is nearly dusk when the switching is done and the train gets rolling again through the fields and pasture lands of southwest Iowa.

"We haven't any work to do at Kellerton," observes Allan, "so we'll stop just long enough to let you off."

Presently the engineer shuts off the throttle and the little train slows down for the unattended box-car depot. This is Kellerton (population 483), birthplace and boyhood home of Bedwell.

Harry Chester Bedwell was born on a farm about five miles southwest of Kellerton on January 8, 1888. He was the younger of Chester and Flora (Crow) Bedwell's two children. Harry, along with his older brother, Howard, spent his early childhood on the farm. He helped with the many chores in the farmhouse and showed a great fondness for animals. His love for pets never left him, and to the end of his days there was always a dog or two in the household.

The family later moved into town, which was then a thriving cattle-shipping point. While he was still in school his parents were separated, and it fell to Flora Bedwell's lot to bring up the children. It also meant Harry had to do odd jobs to help his mother meet expenses. Some of the older townsfolk recall the lanky, smiling boy delivering milk from the family cows or taking mail from depot to post office. Of special pride was his Indian-Shetland pony, "Daisy," on which he sometimes rode to school. With that little bay animal Harry was the envy of every kid in the neighborhood.

From contemporary accounts he was a friendly, happy-go-lucky youngster. Whether it was participating in "kick the stick" (a game similar to "hide and seek"), hunting, or playing the alto horn in the Kellerton band, Harry was much in evidence. It is also said he was the youngest of his group to smoke buggy whip, weeds and corn-silk. In short, he was a normal, wholesome young man. The only incident which ever got him into any serious trouble was the firing of his 32-caliber pistol too freely one Halloween. He easily outran the aged town marshal but nevertheless was fined \$7.85 next day for carrying concealed firearms.

"Little Blue," as Harry was nicknamed, was an avid reader. Like many of his chums, he read Terry Alcott, Frank Merriwell, and other five-cent

Westerns. He was also a devotee of the old *Youth's Companion*, considered by some as the finest young people's magazine of all time. In school he learned quickly and generally stood at the head of his class. When the examination came around on Friday it was a safe bet Harry was the first one through — and out of school for the weekend.

Fired with adventure from relatively wide reading for a farm boy, and being of a restless nature with an inquiring mind, Harry wanted to go places and see things. No, farming was not for him. In a day before the general use of the automobile, when radio and TV were unheard of, living in a rural community could be singularly provincial. But there was one aspect of town life which spelled romance, far-off places, and the great beyond. That was the arrival and departure of passenger trains. Kellerton was situated on a loop diverging from the Chariton-St. Joseph Branch at Giles (then called Togo) and returning to it at Albany, Missouri. Possibly due to the predominance of cattle on the circuitous route, it was called the "Dirty Side." The shorter line by way of Bethany, Missouri, was referred to as the "Straight Side."

Be that as it may, the little locals meant a lot to Kellerton, particularly the early morning train, which originated at Mount Ayr and went up to the state capital via Leon and Osceola. Its arrival

from Des Moines around supper time was a big event in the town. The other trains, one in either direction, called at Kellerton on their 164-mile run between Chariton and St. Joe.

What brought the railroad even closer to home was the happy coincidence that Dan Cadagan, the local agent, boarded at the Bedwell's. The family by this time had moved to a frame house at the north end of Decatur Street, two blocks from the depot. Besides the romance of belching trains, with passengers from strange and distant points, there was the telegraph. When it came to timely news the railroad telegraph operator was the best posted man in town. Having firsthand knowledge from the cryptic Morse, he was in a position to swagger a bit, being looked up to by the boys and the admiration of many a girl.

It was then that Harry decided railroading was the only form of work worth a grown man's time. He already had the "contract" for delivering mail to the post office at \$8.00 a month. A few more hours at the depot, before and after school, and with Dan's help he could learn to be a real railroader. Carrying coal for the potbellied stove, sweeping the floor, and lending a hand in station accounting would be small pay for lessons in telegraphy. Under Dan's tutelage, with a dummy telegraph set at home, Harry soon got the knack of "sending" and "receiving."

One day when the traveling auditor came for

a periodical check of the agent's books, he asked Dan's protege if he would like to have a station of his own. Harry answered in the affirmative although with misgivings as to his fitness. The delighted youth was forthwith hired and sent to his first assignment on September 7, 1905. It was at Andover, Missouri, a tiny depot three miles below the Iowa state line on the "Straight Side." For a time he worked in dread of the dispatcher, who delighted in frightening "ham" operators. It is related that whenever his call sounded on the wire he would have to go outside and walk around the station to quiet his nerves.

From Andover he was sent to Leon, Iowa, a station of considerable importance. Called "Noel" (Leon spelt backward) in his autobiographical *American Magazine* article, it was the junction of a now-abandoned branch to Des Moines. Two miles south of the town was a register and telephone at a point called Koyle. This marked the junction of another branch, now also retired, running due south to the coal-mining village of Cainsville, Missouri. As converging trains, along with those of the Chariton-St. Joe line proper, were under the jurisdiction of the operator at Leon, it was a busy station.

Sunday, however, there were only two passenger trains, and the chance of seeing a freight was remote. So when the day assistant suggested to Harry that they go down to the next town, he was

willing. His colleague knew a couple of young ladies there, and both men welcomed the break in routine. Using their switch key to unlock a chained handcar, they were soon pumping their way to Davis City. Upon arrival the youthful railroaders were startled to see a headlight with two small white lamps, signifying an extra. Lifting the handcar off the track they cautiously went up to the depot.

Their second surprise came on hearing the dispatcher sending an order for the crewmen of the "extra" to pick up five loads of time-freight at Leon. Then Harry remembered the five waybills he should have left outside the station. If the conductor did not get these bills, the dispatcher would hear about it and there would be a new relief man on the St. Joe Division. There was only one thing to do: get back to Leon before the extra without being seen. But how? Again the day man had an inspiration. Why not hook the handcar onto the freight? In a few minutes (and still without being seen in the dark) they had the handcar back on the rails and were pumping with vigor until the vehicle was switched to the back of the train. They chained and locked the handcar to the caboose in a matter of seconds.

Then the train started with a jerk, dashing their lamp to the ground. Next the handlebars began bobbing up and down faster with each turn of the wheel. To keep from being hit the two lay flat on

their stomachs with heads over one end and feet over the other. When the train took in slack going down the first hill the car buckled and jumped. On the next down-grade the handcar's handles broke off when they rammed the back of the caboose.

Chilled by weather and fright, the two put their hands against the drawbar to keep from running under the caboose. There was no turning back. They were padlocked to their destiny.

Finally the train reached Leon with the handcar still on the track. When the freight stopped they cut off the car and dumped it down an embankment. Then they ran to the depot and put the waybills and register into the box before the conductor arrived. After the train left they lit the lamp and took stock. Both had lost their hats and Harry had a bump on his head. But they came out of the ordeal without losing their jobs or their lives.

Being a relief operator suited Harry's roving disposition, for he was required to "fill in" at many points on the St. Joseph Division. Often this meant closing a station at the end of the day and riding all night on a freight train to his next assignment. (Something of this arduous undertaking, although not without its amenities, was experienced by the writer in leaving Kellerton for St. Joseph. Because of heavy tonnage, engine trouble and a hot box, we did not arrive at the latter point until 2 a.m. But having fresh coffee with the crew

in the snug caboose at midnight had its compensations. And if the site where the Andover depot once stood was scarcely discernible in a driving rain, the frame station at Union Star, also where Bedwell worked, showed up clear and radiant under a full moon.)

Before leaving the Burlington Line in 1906 Bedwell had issued train orders at such other Iowa locals as Shambaugh, on the Nodaway Valley Branch, and Bartlett, on the main line along the Missouri River. Indeed, he "worked" the latter route at many points between Kansas City and Omaha. He had made good in the prairie country. Now he would try the mountains.

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.

Boomer "Op"

Bedwell got a "good going over on the Burlington," as he put it. He learned to handle new problems quickly. A relief operator frequently gets more and a greater diversity of situations thrown at him in a few months than a regular agent does in years. Thanks to S. B. Searsey, the "Q's" traveling auditor, Bedwell was taught to write in a large legible hand so reports would make clearer wet copies for the copying press. He caught on fast, liked railroading and railroaders. The once-naive country boy now had the confidence of one who had mastered his craft.

On top of this it was inevitable that he bump against those restless nomads of the rails called "boomers." In particular he rubbed shoulders with Charles Duffey from Sullivan, Indiana — and from almost every other place. Charley was an ace "lightning slinger." He was a delightful person and had a habit of enjoying each fleeting moment as it came along. While Charley recounted his sagas of the rails Bedwell listened attentively. The boy — he was only eighteen — resolved to follow the boomer trail.

The Rockies beckoned to the gangling telegrapher. They called him, as some three decades

earlier they had called Cy Warman, America's first railroad short story writer of note. Like Warman, too, it was the storied Denver & Rio Grande Western where Bedwell found employment. The country was rough, and those who worked on the Rio Grande were a rugged breed. They came from all over the nation. Many were boomers, some worked under a "flag" (assumed name), but they were all good railroaders or they would not have lasted.

Bedwell first went to Springville, Utah, on the west side of the Wasatch Range, as a telegraph operator. Later he moved to nearby Provo and Lehi, also in the Mormon Country. Then it was Green River, in the scenic Beckwith Plateau. He also worked at Helper, where, as the name indicates, an extra engine or "helper" was added to a train in crossing the lofty ridge of Soldier Summit. Here was mountain railroading in all its glory: short, struggling trains blasting their way up the 4 per cent grade (in that day) on the east side of the Summit, or brake shoes becoming red-hot and smoking in checking their progress on the way down the west side. At other points fruit blocks and silk specials made a race track out of the high desert course.

While at Green River, Bedwell sometimes tended bar at the Mint Saloon. He was not allowed to drink because of his age, but he listened to no end of yarns and met the characters who re-

lated them. Here he became acquainted with Matt Warner, a leader, along with Butch Cassidy, of the notorious Hole-In-Wall gang. Matt had just been released from prison and talked guardedly of his lurid past. What he omitted Bedwell made up in his imagination.

From the Rio Grande, Bedwell went to Riverside, California, on the Santa Fe. But the Santa Fe did not look with favor upon union telegraphers at that time. When it became known that the new operator carried an Order of Railroad Telegraphers' card he was obliged to leave. After that came Bedwell's long association with the Southern Pacific and its subsidiary, the Pacific Electric Railway.

Geographically the young boomer ran the gamut from rolling prairies to snow-peaked mountains. Now he was to experience the "sun and silence" of the desert. His first station on the SP was at Edom, California, an arid locale near Palm Springs. Later he worked at Bertram, alongside the Salton Sea, 199 feet below sea level. Then came Glamis, also on the SP's main line, thirty miles northwest of Yuma. At that desolate post the temperature in the drab, wooden depot reached 127°, the highest his thermometer would go.

When twenty-one, Bedwell shifted to the Pacific Electric, then the world's largest interurban railway. At the busy port of San Pedro he served as assistant agent. Afterward he had his own

station at Whittier, where he stayed until 1927.

During his earlier years in California he brought his mother with him, and she lived in Whittier or the vicinity until her death. About the time he got the Whittier appointment he married Ellen Hart Talbot. The couple enjoyed southern California, and Bedwell's agency proved to be profitable, especially in regard to express commissions.

In 1908 Bedwell's first published story appeared in the *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*. Called "The Lure of the Desert," it brought out the peculiar fascination the dry, barren country had on its author. Another of his publications in the *Times*, titled "The Touch of Genius," chronicled the beginning of the war with Japan — many years before it happened.

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.

Writer - Railroader

Bedwell's success in getting material published in the *Los Angeles Times* prompted him to seek wider outlets for his manuscripts. Quite naturally he turned to *Railroad Man's Magazine*, a publication launched by Frank Munsey, an ex-telegrapher. When his tale "Campbell's Wedding March" appeared in that periodical late in 1909, it marked his first entry into a national publication. Close on its heels came a two-part serial titled "The Mistakes of A Young Railroad Telegraph Operator" in the *American Magazine*. Well illustrated by F. B. Masters, it suggested certain reforms while at the same time giving readers an authentic picture of railroad life.

In 1911 Bedwell "made" *Harper's Weekly* with a short story of a boomer switchman called "The Snake." There was little doubt that he was becoming as competent with the pen as he was with the key. Moreover, his *metier* seemed to be railroading on two counts: that in fiction and in actuality. He showed a decided aptitude in translating his own experiences into gripping stories and novelettes. His earlier work gave indications of promise but lacked the smoothness and polish of later productions. His insight into the char-

acter and philosophy of railroad men was apparent although not emphasized. And yet even his lighter pieces show indubitable authenticity. Bedwell was ever an honest writer, as he was a person, devoid of sham or pretense.

A significant turning point in his writing career occurred when he created a tall, wiry, red-headed telegrapher called Eddie Sand. The first story featuring that genial pilgrim of the rails was "The Lightning That Was Struck," in *Short Stories*, May 10, 1927. In a letter to the writer Bedwell relates how the editor, Harry Maul, "said he liked it fine all right, but it wasn't railroading!"

According to Eddie Sand's originator, the roving boomer with the carrot-top is a composite picture of many peripatetic railroad men — and especially Charley Duffey from Sullivan, Indiana. Those who know Bedwell, nevertheless, insist that there is much of Harry Bedwell in Mr. Sand.

Bedwell's eighteen-year sojourn in Whittier with Pacific Electric was probably the happiest long period in his life. He worked closely with the Southern Pacific ticket seller, Charles Sterling Wallace, in that Quaker community. The two became fast friends. Both had a deep interest in books and literature, and Wallace likewise had marketed short stories. In contrast to the Iowa-born agent, however, the SP man was a stocky five feet five; was a successful amateur wrestler; but was not addicted to reading railroad yarns.



Barn on the "Bedwell Place." Farmhouse where Harry Bedwell was born is no longer standing.

Boyhood home of Bedwell at Kellerton where telegraph operator Dan Cadagan roomed.



Courtesy A. J. Goodell

Kellerton elementary and high school where Harry Bedwell was educated.

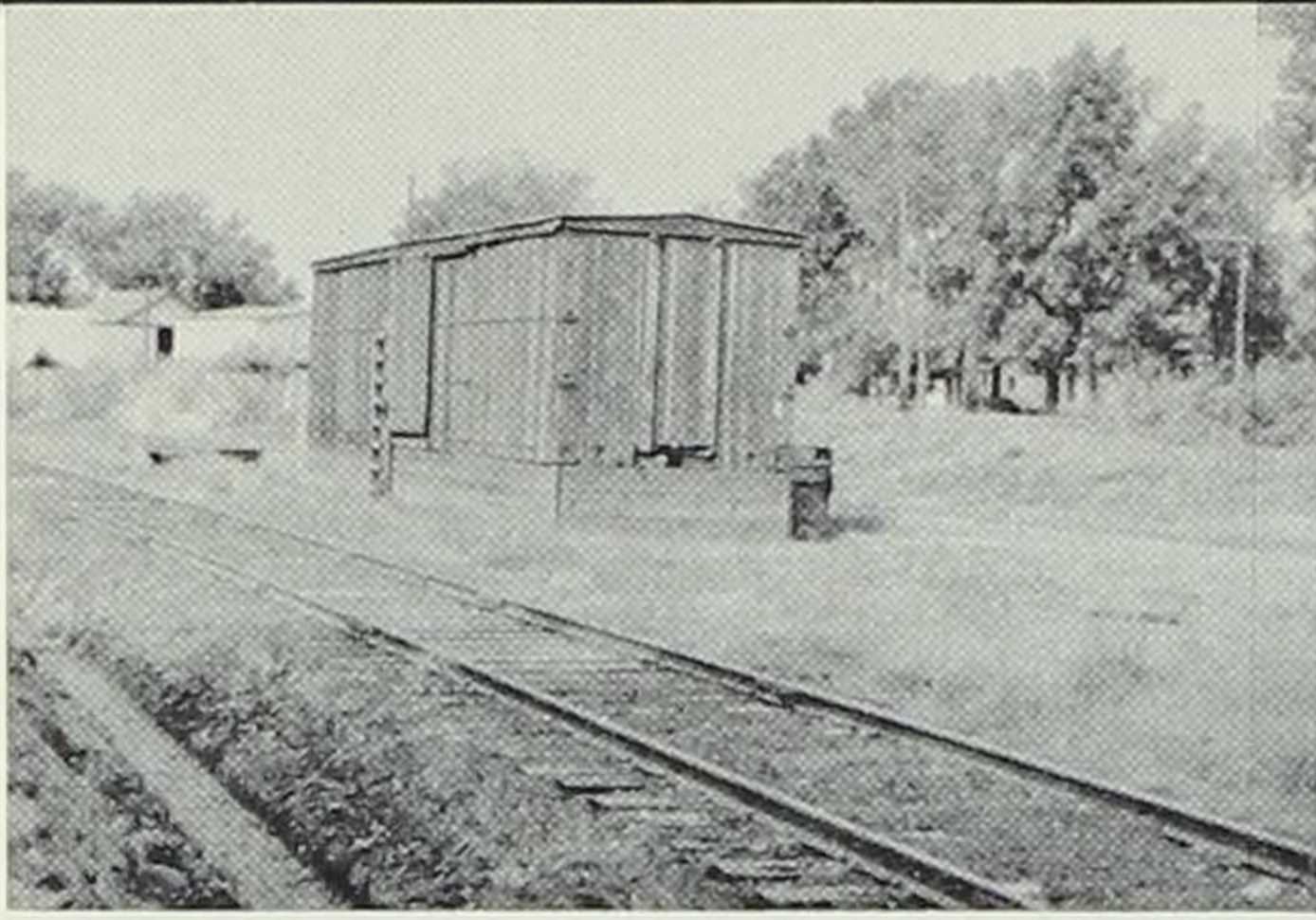


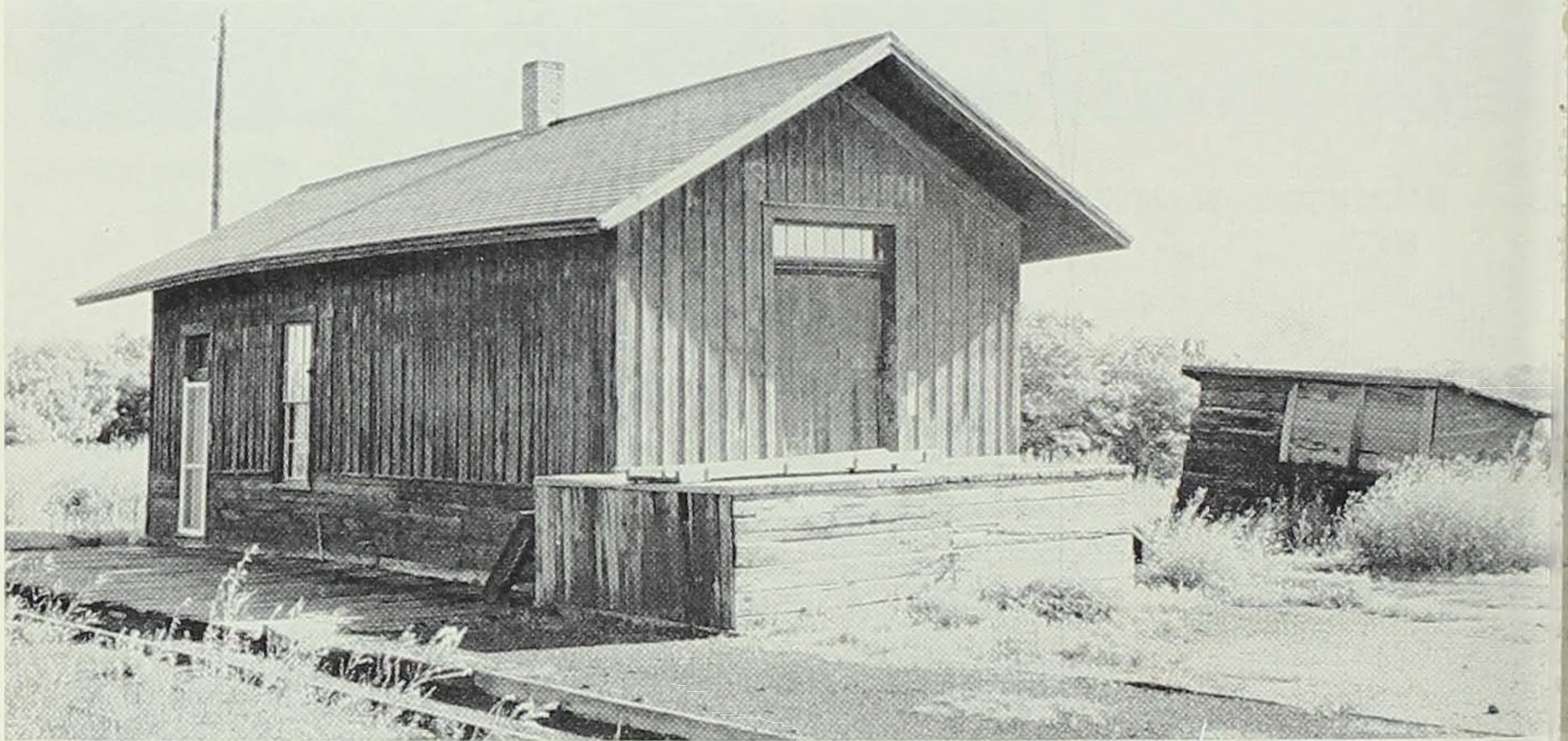
Photo by Frank Donovan

C. B. & Q. Station at Kellerton in October, 1957.



Photo by Frank Donovan

Leon Station where Bedwell served as relief operator.



Burlington Lines Photo

Shambaugh railroad station where Harry Bedwell issued train orders.

Burlington Lines Photo

Bartlett railroad station on Burlington "high iron" between Council Bluffs and Kansas City.

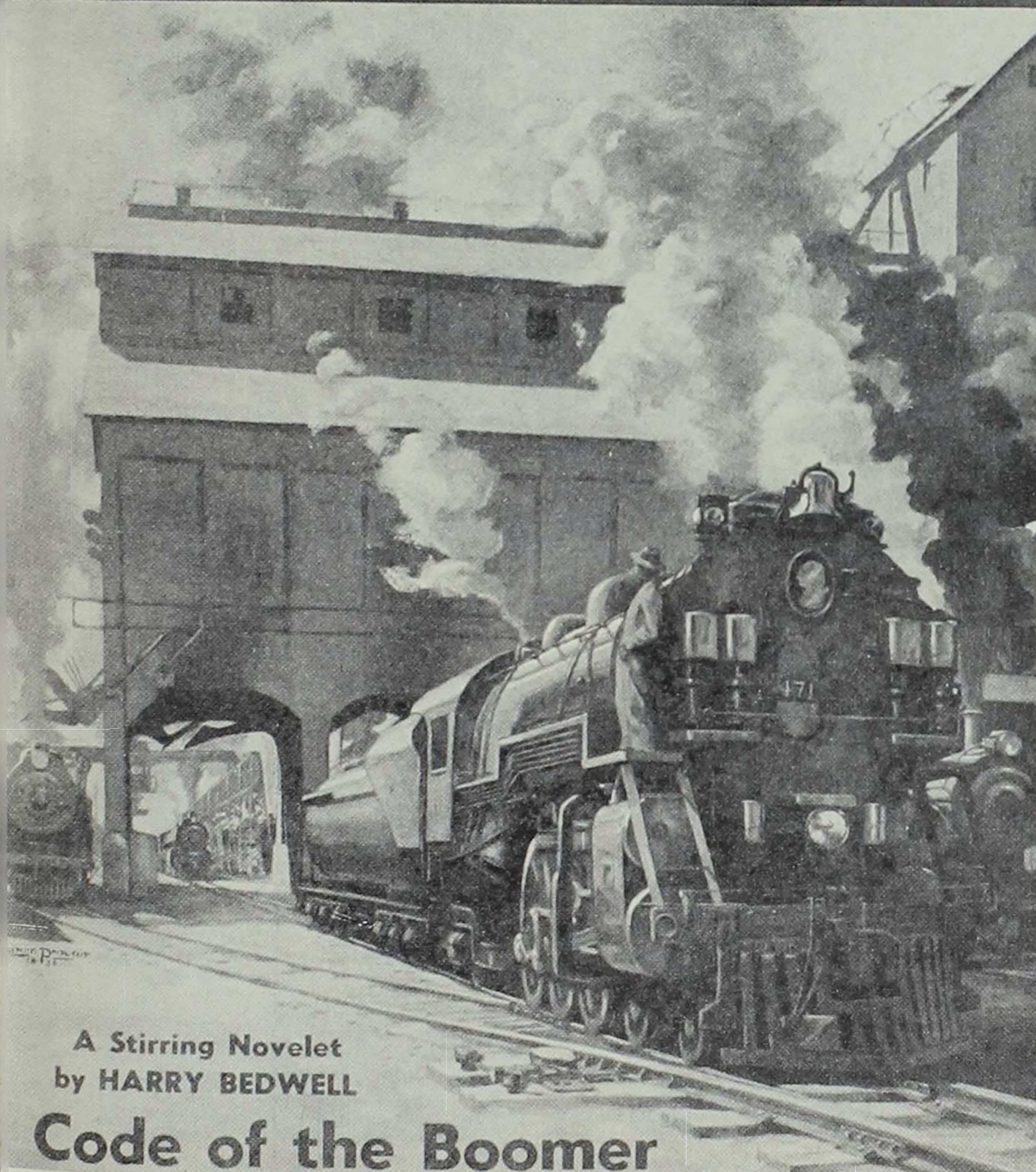


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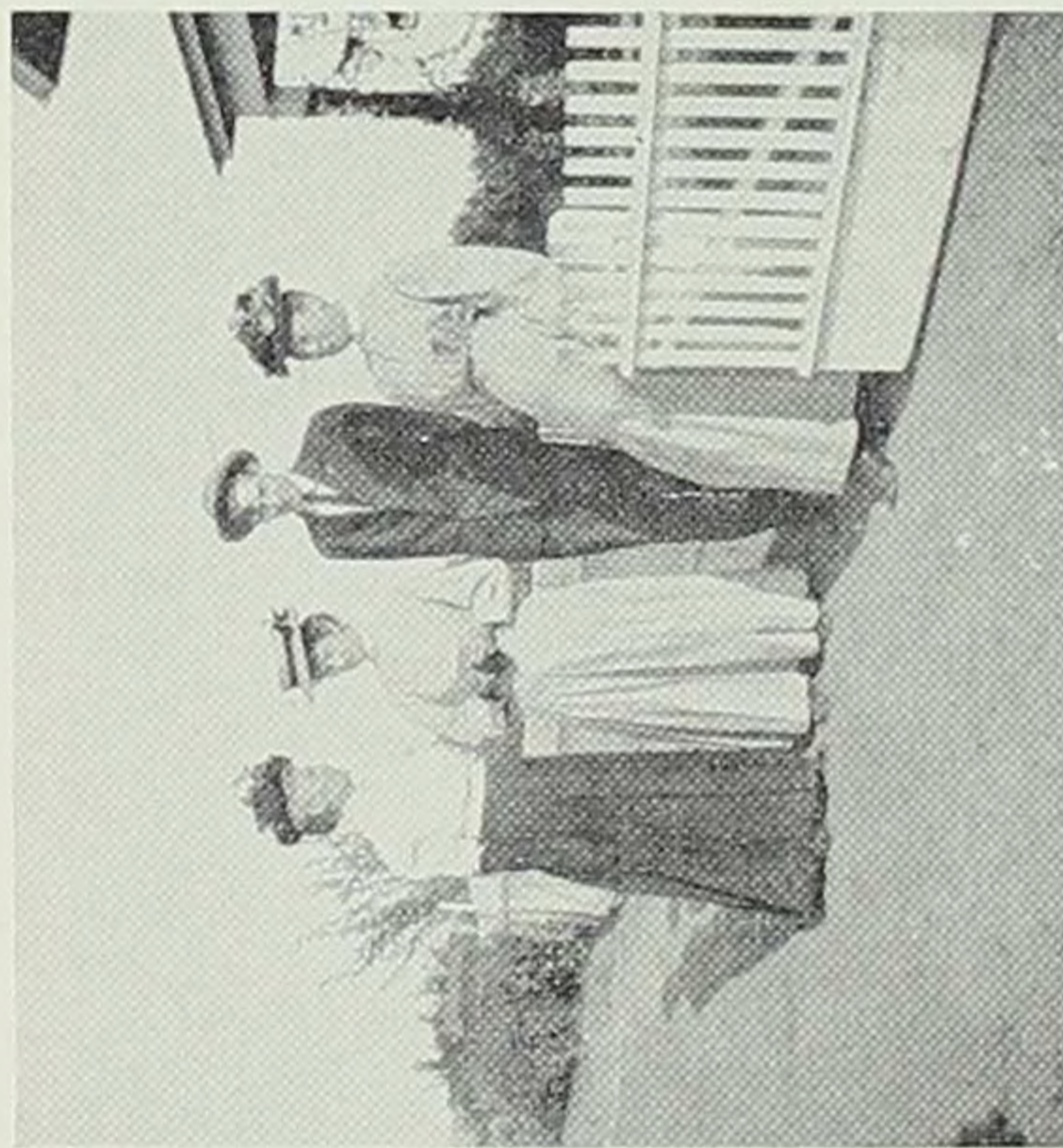
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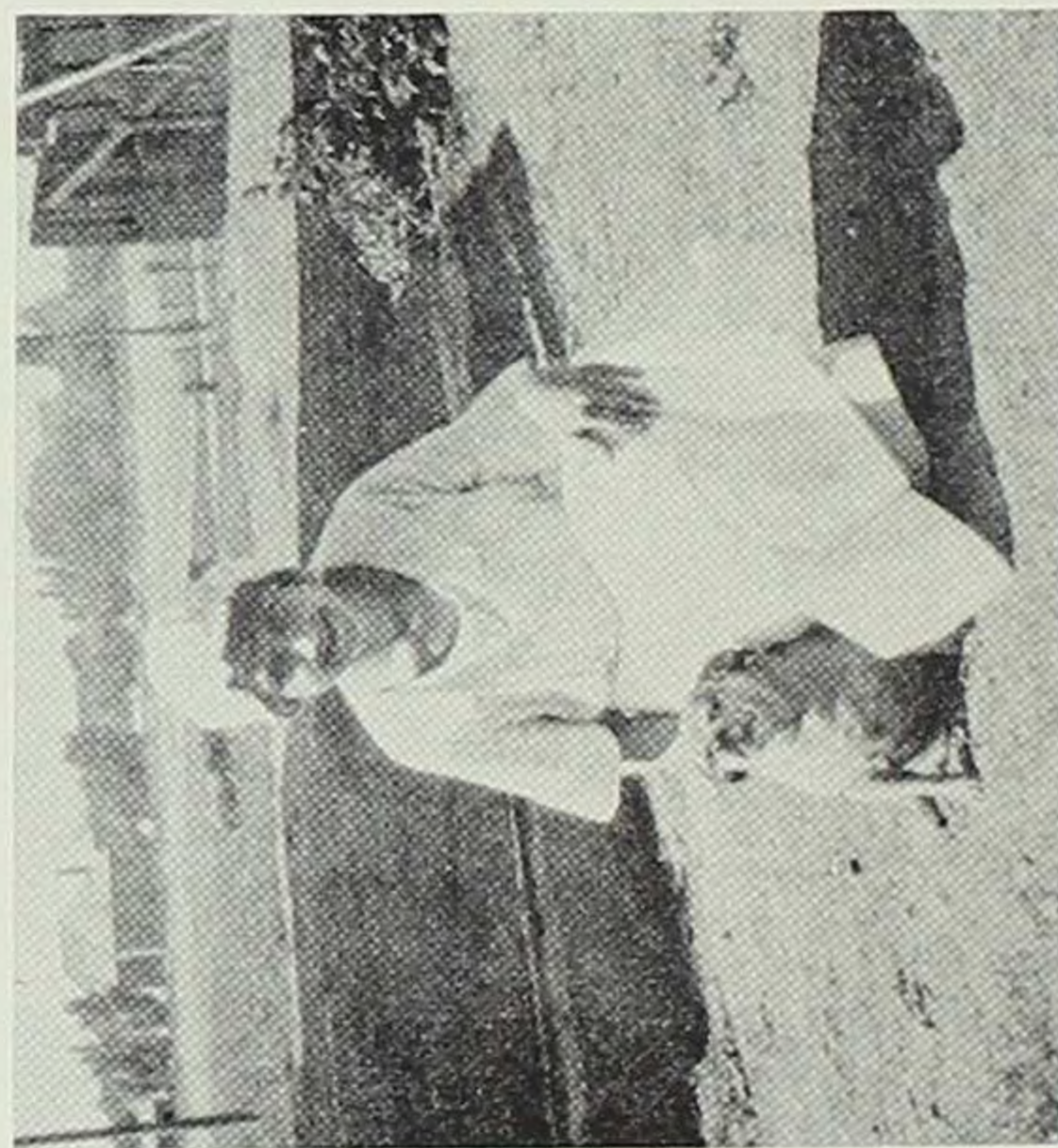
A Stirring Novelet
by HARRY BEDWELL

Code of the Boomer

Front cover of *Railroad Magazine* for May, 1940, featuring Harry Bedwell story.



Courtesy Florence Whitson
Harry Bedwell with his mother (2nd from left) believed taken in Whittier, California.



Courtesy Florence Whitson
Ellen, Bedwell's first wife, shown with their dog in California



Courtesy Railroad Magazine
Bedwell and his wife, Lorraine, looking over the reprint of *The Boomer*. Photo taken in their house-trailer in Santa Susana, California in 1947

This sidelight is germane in that Eddie Sand's most admired friend was an "op" named "Wallace Sterling." All that was fine and grand, not to say mischievous, is imputed in the "fictional" Walley. In passing it may be added that Charles S. Wallace wrote a book-length story which won honorable mention in a Mary Roberts Rinehart Mystery Novel Contest. Embodied in a volume called *Three Prize Murders*, the novel centers on bus operation with much the same fidelity to detail that Bedwell bestowed on railroading.

The Bedwells later moved from Whittier to Rivera, and their front gate opened onto the Pacific Electric right-of-way. By taking one of the Big Red Cars, as the interurbans were called, he could be at work in the Whittier depot in a matter of minutes. From all accounts the PE agent made friends easily, seldom lost his temper, and never seemed impatient or harried. He appeared poised and relaxed whatever the company — in section house, night club, or drawing room. He could talk with equal ease to track men, farmers, or millionaires, and he had friends in all three categories. Meticulous in dress and personal appearance, the slender, well-groomed interurban representative became a familiar figure in the college town.

Meanwhile, the Talbots, Bedwell's in-laws, had been wanting him to go into business. With his knowledge of bookkeeping and managerial abil-

ity they felt he would make a competent executive. Although he disliked the idea of working with relatives and really enjoyed railroading, their offer was tempting. In the end he capitulated. He was made general manager of a fair-sized bottling works in Los Angeles, called Dorado Club Beverages. The firm had been losing money, but under Bedwell's management it was soon in the black.

The depression, however, knocked the whole picture out of focus. Richfield Oil, which one of the Talbots headed, went into receivership, as did other interests of the family, including Dorado Club. And Bedwell was out of a job. He had also lost heavily in mortgaging real estate to help his relatives stave off disaster. On top of this his wife died. The couple never had any children.

In desperation he turned to his pen for a livelihood. By a twist of fate, made possible by painstaking work, Bedwell placed a short story in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The selection, titled "Imperial Pass," appeared January 13, 1934. It was the first of nine railroad stories under his by-line in that popular weekly.

He likewise continued to write for *Railroad Man's Magazine* and its successors. All told, Bedwell had 35 selections, of which only three were non-fiction, in that unique periodical. Written and read primarily by those who run trains, line tracks, and issue train orders, *Railroad* is a

Carl Sandburg type of magazine. Because of its singular contribution to the folkways of railroading, in which Bedwell played a leading role, a brief sketch of the publication is in order.

Founded in October, 1906, its bright red cover was familiar to railroad men until it merged with *Argosy* in January, 1919. Revived in December, 1929, the name was changed to *Railroad Stories* with the March, 1932 issue, and again to *Railroad Magazine* in September, 1937. When Bedwell started writing for it, J. E. Smith's philosophical-fiction series on the "Observations of A Country Station Agent" and Emmet F. Harte's "Honk and Horace" tales were very popular. In addition Rupert Fulkerson Hoffman contributed many short stories, and there were features of varying merit along with railroad verse.

The revival of the magazine at the onset of the depression did much to provide a market for writers specializing in rail fiction. Indeed, after World War I, authentic short stories on the industry, barring a few notable exceptions, were almost nonexistent. *Railroad*, however, gave encouragement to such "fictioneers" as E. S. Dellinger, probably America's most prolific rail short-story writer, and to Charles W. Tyler, John Johns, James W. Earp, Don Waters, and others. It also featured rich local color reminiscences of yesteryear's railroading as seen through the eyes of Harry K. McClintock and William F. Knapke. And it, of course,

fostered the work of Harry Bedwell, by all odds the most gifted railroad short-story author to appear regularly in its pages.

Bedwell made his re-entry into *Railroad* with "A Man Who Could Handle Trains" in November, 1936. Freeman H. Hubbard, editor of the magazine, quickly realized the potential literary merit of the newcomer and from that time on actively solicited his stories. This led to as high as eight short stories or novelettes appearing in a year by the Iowan. Among them was "Sun and Silence," a graphic picture of the desert life which Bedwell came to love so well. His experiences in interurban railroading are reflected in "Pacific Electric" and "Tower Man." While not his best work, the two titles have the virtue of being among the very few stories concerning electric railways.

To write many of these short stories, Bedwell went into semi-retirement following untoward events during the depression. He lived in an old house with a few acres that had once been an olive grove in El Cajon, near San Diego. But like John Milton's retreat to Horton, it was temporary and served to give him renewed vitality and a fuller life for the years to come.

During the depression he kept in contact with his friend Wallace, who was then employed by Pacific Greyhound in the Modesto bus station. When an opening occurred, Wallace notified Bedwell and the two were again working side by

side. Later Bedwell became Greyhound's assistant agent at Modesto and subsequently agent at Santa Cruz. But he was a railroader at heart and afterwards resigned. He longed to get back on the "high iron."

The opportunity came when war was declared on Japan and the country desperately needed skilled railroad men regardless of age or seniority. Meanwhile Bedwell had married Lorraine Richardson on May 13, 1940; he had marketed thirty stories since his PE days and was receiving acclaim as a railroad author.

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.

Soft Metal Man

Early in 1942 Harry Bedwell was back on the railroad, one of the old Soft Metal Gang. These men, with "silver in their hair, gold in their teeth and lead in their pants," as he put it, came out of retirement. They gladly pitched in during the manpower shortage to keep the trains moving while the nation was at war.

Bedwell's first assignment was at Norwalk, near Los Angeles, on a branch line of the Southern Pacific. There was plenty of work to do but no train orders to copy. Next he went to Glamis, where he had issued his last train order thirty-five years before. He sat down at the same telegraph table and began "sending" over the Morse wire exactly where he had left off at age nineteen. You get a nostalgic picture of him as one of the old Soft Metal Gang in his novelette "Desert Job."

He afterward worked at numerous stations on the main line of the SP between Los Angeles and Yuma, also at Calexico. At the latter town, on the Mexican boundary line, he saw many "wetbacks" or "border jumpers," so vividly described in "Night of Plunder." When that two-part serial ran in the *Post* Bedwell commented, "It looked for

a time as if it were going to cause an international incident." The *Post* editors boiled down his eighty-page manuscript, taking out some of the "purple passages," which had tended to give the Mexican "wetbacks" better treatment. Bedwell related that he received threatening letters from Mexico and "one from a conspirator" who tried to ring him in on a revolution that was brewing down there at that time. "But I ducked out of that one," he reflected in a letter to the writer.

Later Bedwell saw duty on the SP's coast line between Los Angeles and San Francisco. While living in Ventura he was only a few feet from the blue Pacific. Here he loved to watch the red-and-yellow *Daylights* speed by, making the setting, at least for him, worthy of a Rembrandt. In "protecting" these assignments he and his wife generally lived in a trailer.

In 1952 he traded his rights on the Los Angeles Division for those of the Portland Division and worked on several freight-only lines in Oregon. His last post was at Seghers, an out-of-the-way lumber mill in the dense timber country between Portland and the Pacific Ocean. Bedwell retired from the Southern Pacific on April 29, 1955, after 32 years with that road or its allied Pacific Electric.

Shortly after he went back to railroading in 1942, he had his first and only book published. Titled *The Boomer*, the novel is actually seven

short stories rewritten and tied together to make one harmonious whole. It received most favorable reviews. The *New York Times* hailed the book's hero, Eddie Sand, as "an upstanding, lovable fellow, a legend among railroad men" and called the novel "A pleasant, readable story, dealing knowledgeably with a world one knows little about, and not without thrill and adventure." The *Herald Tribune* exuberantly proclaimed it "an exciting yarn in sinewy prose about brakemen and engineers and telegraphers. . . . Eddie Sand is a genuine and winning character. . . . It has almost everything except sound effects by Richard Gardiner."

The novel was reprinted (106,000 copies) in a pocket-sized overseas edition for the armed forces. Bedwell was proud of his Iowa background, and the volume has many flashbacks to his early years in Iowa and Missouri. Consider, for example:

Eddie had come out of the prairies, learned the trade "hamming" about a country station, and was being moved from station to station as relief man on the line along the Missouri River, a green boy of sixteen who had arbitrarily added two years to his age to get a job, a rebel kid who would fight for his rights with impatient, willful alacrity, wide-eyed at all the world; a good operator, lacking only seasoning, when they shoved him into the St. Joe yard office, a hot telegraph job. The pressure here was intense, you worked with the fastest in the craft, and a kid might have fallen down for lack of confidence.

That's Harry Bedwell mirrored in Eddie Sand.

Again, his homespun description of a caboose ride is tip-top Americana if not "Iowana."

The busy speed and the stubborn, muffled rumble of the moving train made you feel tucked-in. You felt at home in a caboose, the way you do in a farmhouse kitchen. The ghosts of a thousand sturdy meals, ingeniously cooked by trainmen on the small round top of the drum-bellied heating stove, were faintly there among the shadows. There were smells of a dozen brands of tobacco, some of them with a range of forty yards, but all mellowed by time and the milder mixtures of old leather upholstery and signal oil. It was a snug, tight feeling, with the wash of the rain at the little windows and the brisk rhythm of wheels clicking at the rail-joints. Dim lamps in brackets and lanterns, red and white, by the back door. Above, in the cupola, the faint outline of the rear brakeman, lounging there on lookout. The high wail of the engine's whistle trickled back, a thin challenge.

It is hard to liken Bedwell to other Hawkeye writers, simply because he wrote entirely on railroads. One can, however, point out certain regional characteristics common to Phil Stong's *Village Tale*. Stong's "Kaydee" moseying along the 166-mile Rock Island line between Keokuk and Des Moines has the local color of a Bedwell setting. Indeed, the "Six-Forty-Five" meant as much to the folks of "Brunswick" as the old depot and local trains did to Bedwell and other Keller-tonians at the beginning of the century. But the salty, carefree railroaders, craftsmen in their own right, bear a much stronger resemblance to the lusty railroad linemen in William Wister Haines's

Slim and *High Tension*. Des Moines-born Haines's pole-climbing individualists have the same clear ring as Eddie Sand, Hi Wheeler, Mel Hatch, Walley Sterling, to mention a few of the characters in Bedwell's yarns. This is not surprising, for both authors participated in the work they portray, and have the happy faculty of putting their experiences into story. Their expressions are pat, pertinent, and genuine. Their nomenclature is dictionary-clear to those in the industry and is part of the woof and weave of their calling.

Although Bedwell has some aspects of realism, he is primarily a romanticist. Railroading to him was not a job; it was an adventure. He, like the late Edward Hungerford, saw trains and all that goes with them in rosy-tinted perspective. More than anything else Bedwell lamented the passing of the boomers. "They were a restless breed," he soliloquizes in his writings, "and their lives were high adventure. They were the glory of railroading. They'd split their last dime with you, or bust your nose if they thought you needed it."

In one significant respect (and there were others) Bedwell was like Frank H. Spearman, dean of railroad fiction writers. He had the ability to listen. He seldom talked about himself, preferring to let others do the speaking. Apropos of this Charles Wallace comments:

There was something uncanny about the way he seemed

to attract the hard-of-hearing and the way he could talk to them. I never met so many hard-of-hearing people as when I was with Harry. Just one example. At a get-together of some Hollywood top talent Harry was seated almost instinctively next to Rupert Hughes and spent the evening relaying witticisms to him. Hughes is very hard-of-hearing.

Another characteristic was his modesty. He was ever willing to give other people credit. However well versed an operator may be, there are a lot of little things he cannot possibly know about the running of trains. For details in this phase of railroading Bedwell turned to his friend William F. Knapke, a former Southern Pacific conductor. Bill Knapke is a man of parts, a boomer with a service record from 32 railroads. He has twisted brake-wheels, pulled throttles, punched tickets, and flagged trains all over the nation and in Mexico, the Philippines, and Cuba. And he is a writer, too, having had almost as many true tales published as the number of "pikes" on which he rail-roaded.

Finally, Bedwell took untold pains to revise and rewrite his manuscripts. He would sometimes redo a paragraph a dozen times to bring out the proper meaning, color, or setting. Experience taught him, as it does all writers, that one cannot be too careful in checking for accuracy. Once he omitted a three-word phrase "through the siding" from a *Post* story, and he received over 70 letters of protest from readers.

Besides his long list of published works, Bedwell had one story issued as a radio broadcast. This was "Priority Special," which appeared on the air June 6, 1945. It described the careful movement of a hospital train on the Southern Pacific up and over the mountains into desert country with never a stop or jar. The selection, along with his "Smart Boomer," is reprinted in *Headlights and Markers, An Anthology of Railroad Stories*. That tale of mountain railroading, in the words of Robert Selph Henry, "depicts extraordinarily well the curious mixture of group loyalty and loyalty to the job which runs through the whole business of keeping the trains moving." It originally appeared in the *Post*.

When Harry Bedwell retired he and his wife bought a home in Nevada City, California. But the Great Dispatcher was soon to give the sixty-seven-year-old railroader his last orders. In working about his new home he slipped on a rock and was injured. Complications later developed, and he took a turn for the worse. While he was critically ill he confided to his loyal friend Wallace, "I wanted to have this place all fixed up so you could come up here and live and we could get busy on a novel."

That was as far as the joint-novel ever progressed. He died on October 4, 1955.

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.

Bedwell in Railroad Literature

Railroading never had a prominent role in American literature, nor in world letters. Compared to the sea, for example, there are no *Moby Dicks* or works like *Two Years Before The Mast*. Global-wise the industry has yet to produce a Joseph Conrad. It is only in the United States that railroads play even a significant minor part. For want of a better name we can call this thin slice of literature, the Railroad School. Harry Bedwell's role is important because he is the last of its "graduates." The Golden Age of railroad fiction is past. Whereas books on rail history are on the increase, you can count on one hand authors who write short stories or novels on the industry. A brief resume of the Railroad School, then, is necessary to assess Bedwell's contribution to specialized writing and to Americana.

Railroad fiction enjoyed its greatest popularity from about 1895 to 1915. World War I diverted attention from the subject, and after the conflict the automobile usurped the role of trains in short-haul travel. The interest in railroad stories never regained anything like its pristine glory. Bedwell came in at the tag-end of the era. He later carried on the tradition of the "old masters," if we can

call them that, to the mid-century.

The best known of the earlier "fictioneers" was Cy Warman, author of some ten books on rail themes, most of them being collections of short stories. He also wrote fair verse and penned the lyrics of that once-popular song, "Sweet Marie." The dean of railroad novelists and short story writers, however, was Frank H. Spearman. Oddly enough he was the only exponent of the School who never worked for a railroad. Spearman's *Held For Orders*, a volume of short stories, is a classic in its field. His *Whispering Smith* may well have set a peak in the sale of a rail novel. This "Western" was twice filmed in the silent pictures and in recent years appeared in technicolor.

Other representatives of the School include Herbert E. Hamblen, who made his niche in writing authentic railroad stories along with those of the sea and of fire-fighting. His *The General Manager's Story* is outstanding in its genre. Frank L. Packard, best known for his Jimmie Dale mysteries, also penned some fine stories on the industry. Among them are *Running Special* and *The Night Operator*. Finally, there's Francis Lynde, whose long list of romances frequently concerned railroad building.

By the twenties and early thirties the "top" railroad short story writers had thinned out. Bedwell was in the breach, but had not yet risen to his full stature. This period, nevertheless, did fea-

ture the remarkable yarns of A. W. Somerville, mostly confined to the *Saturday Evening Post*. William E. Hayes likewise wrote some creditable tales, as did one or two others. When these men ceased their story-writing the only rising star in the limited galaxy of rail fiction authors was the ex-boomer from Iowa.

That's how the picture looked when the forties rolled around, and it has not changed much since. To bring the record up-to-date, mention should be made of Albert B. Cunningham, prolific author of the Jess Roden "whodunits." Under the pen name of Garth Hale, the ex-railroad telegrapher wrote *This Pounding Wheel* and *Legacy For Our Sons*, both having high-fidelity depot settings. More recently James McCague produced *The Big Ivy*, a lusty novel of turn-of-the-century railroading; and Hollister Noble in his *One Way to Eldorado* had honest railroad realism in an otherwise hyper-melodramatic plot. As for short stories in periodicals, the heritage of the old Railroad School is virtually a memory. The only two writers in this category contributing tales with any regularity are Jack Clinton McLarn and John Rhodes Sturdy, the latter a Canadian.

Bedwell, then, is the end of the line of specialized writers who put the railroad into story. As David P. Morgan, editor of *Trains*, put it: "he was as capable a practitioner in the art of good railroad writing as lived in our times." Many of

his tales rank with the best the Railroad School produced. True, his cumulative writings may not come up to the standards of Spearman, but his finest can hardly be said to take second place to any of the "classic" railroad writers.

The Iowa storyteller, however, is at his best in presenting that colorful pilgrim of the rails — the boomer. Throughout his writings are shrewd bits of the itinerant's philosophy, pungent pages of the past, a nostalgic picture of a way of life — and of railroading — that was and can never be again. The day which Bedwell so fondly delineates is a time when man and beast, and the products of farm, forest, mine, and factory went almost exclusively by rail. Today the highway, airway, and, to a limited extent, the waterway, have taken their toll. The branch-line passenger train is practically extinct. Centralized Traffic Control, push-button yards, and diesel motive power make for efficiency but not for individuality. Harry Bedwell is one with the steam locomotive. May his memory live as a page of Americana which is turned forever.

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.

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