

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.

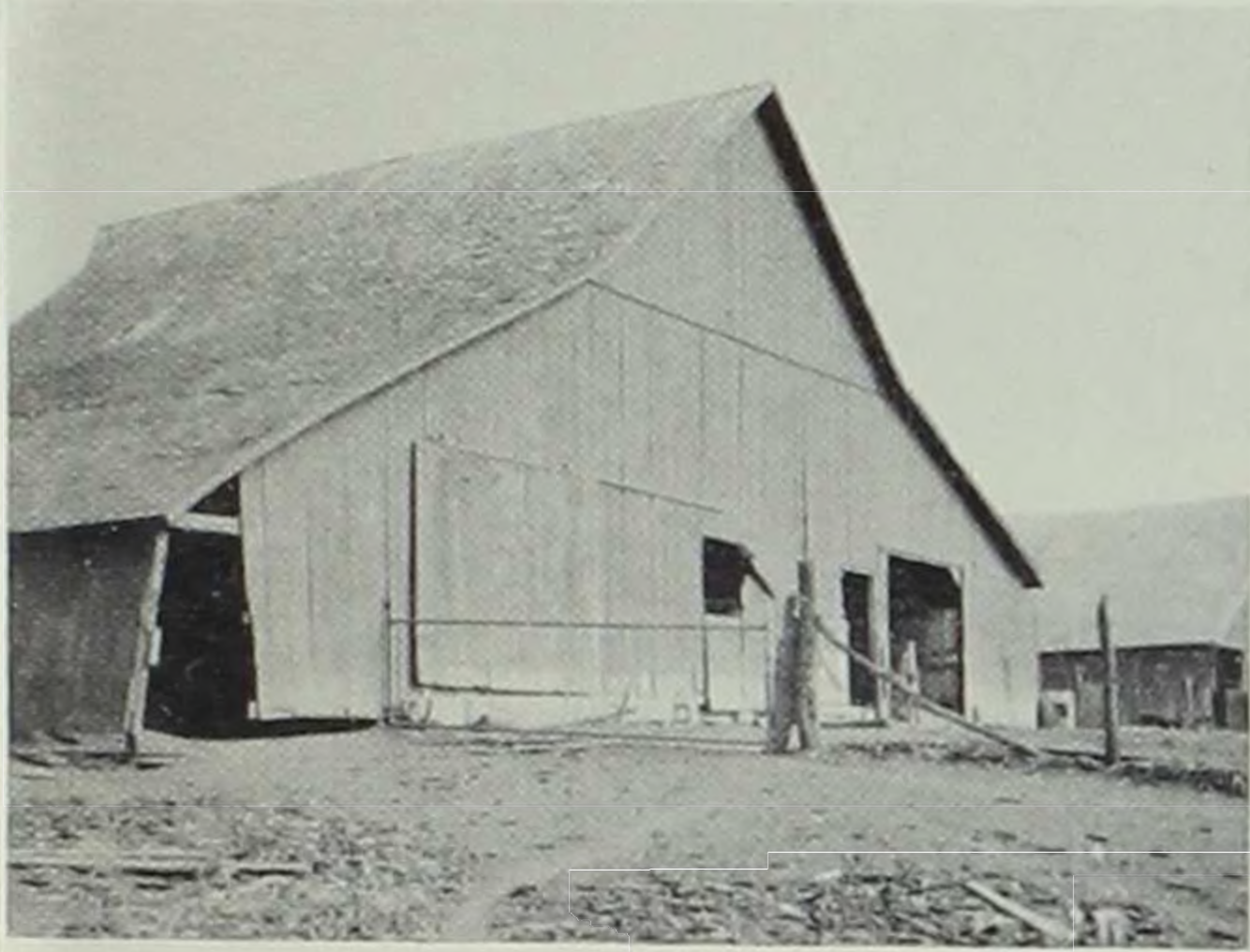
In 1911 Bedwell "made" *Harper's Weekly* with a short story of a boomer switchman called "The Snake." There was little doubt that he was becoming as competent with the pen as he was with the key. Moreover, his *metier* seemed to be railroading on two counts: that in fiction and in actuality. He showed 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.

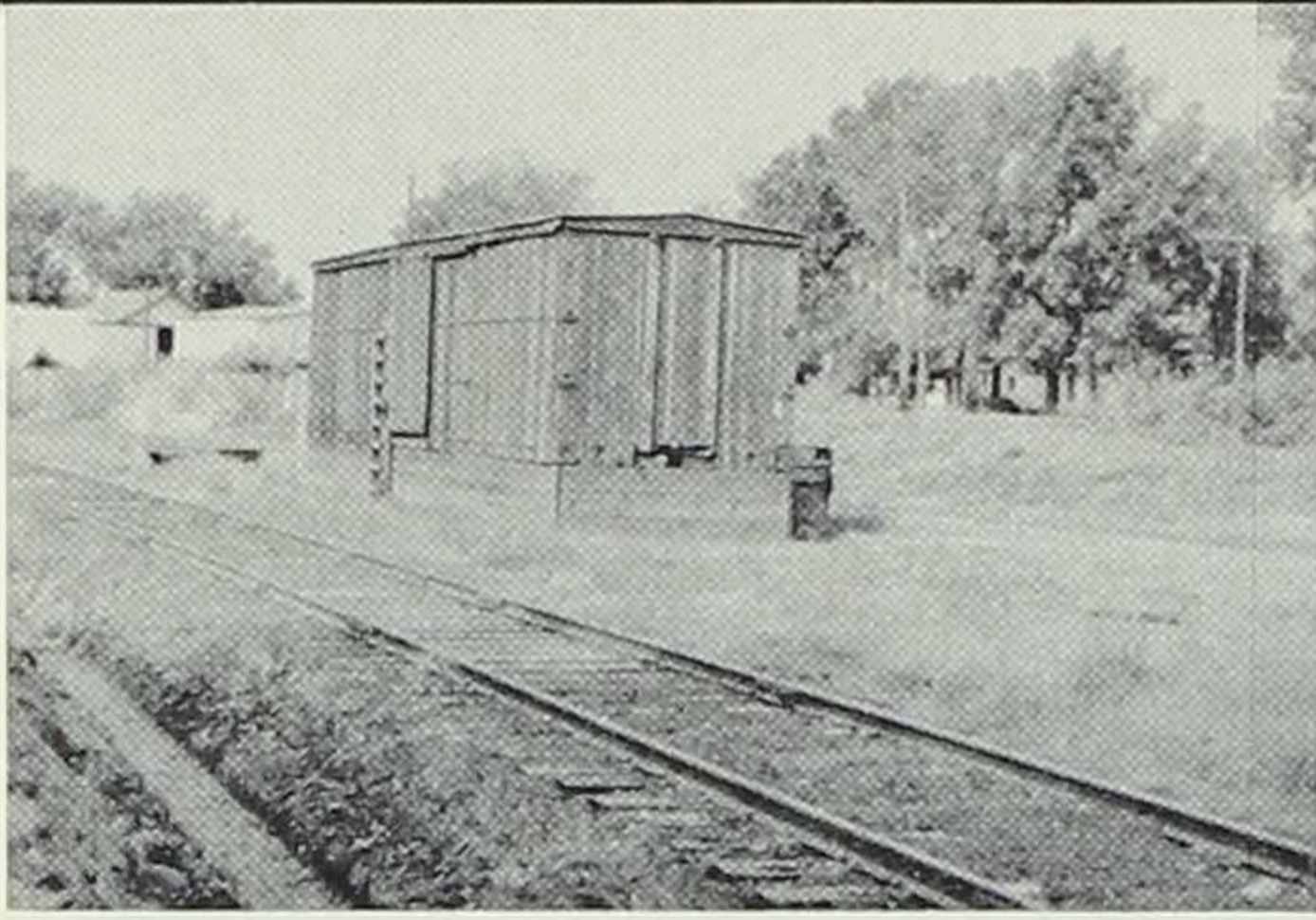


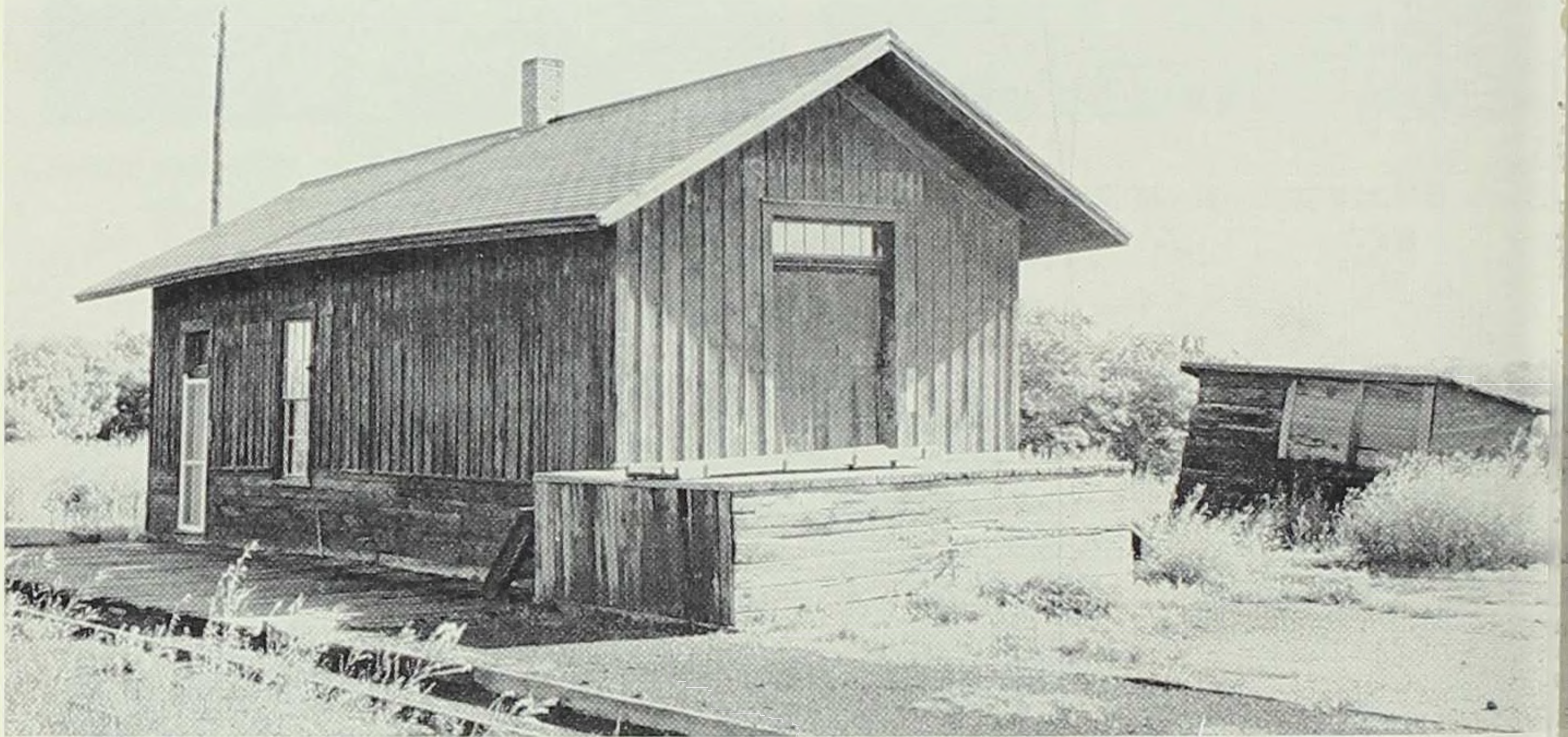
Photo by Frank Donovan

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



Photo by Frank Donovan

Leon Station where Bedwell served as relie operator.



Burlington Lines Phot

Shambaugh railroad station where Harry Bedwell issued train orders.

Burlington Lines Phot

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



RAILROAD

MAGAZINE

May

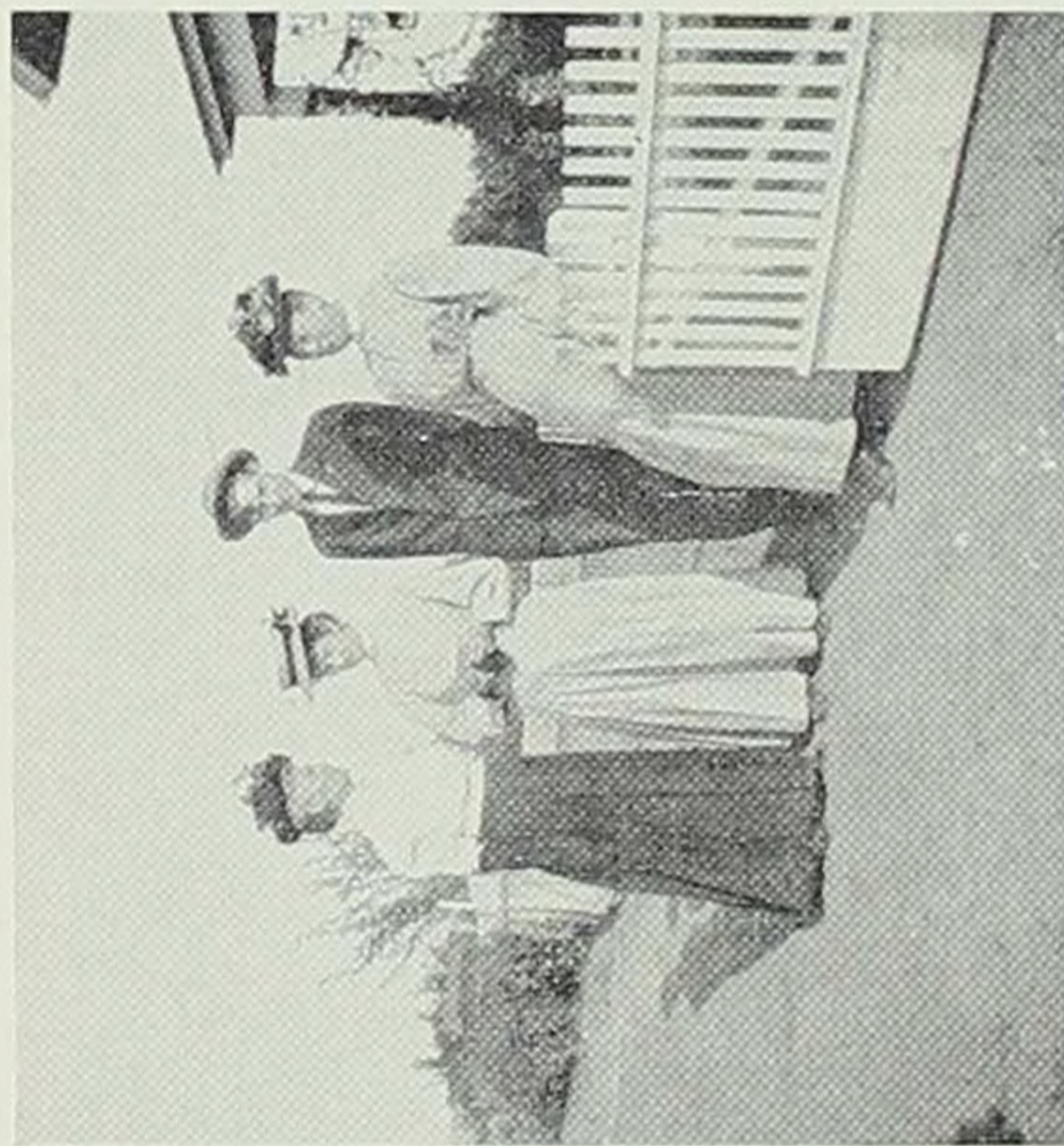
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A Stirring Novelet
by HARRY BEDWELL

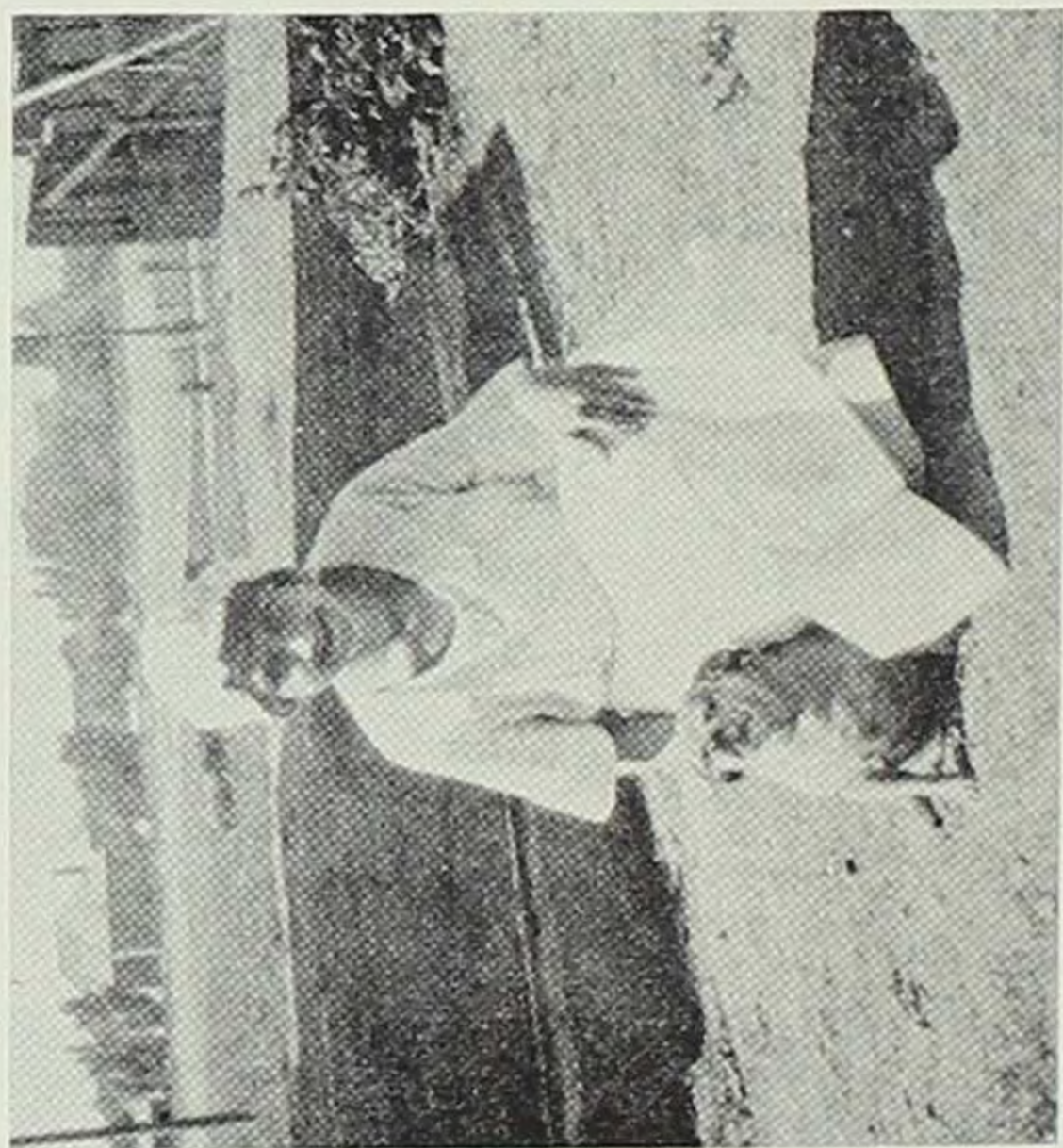
Code of the Boomer

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



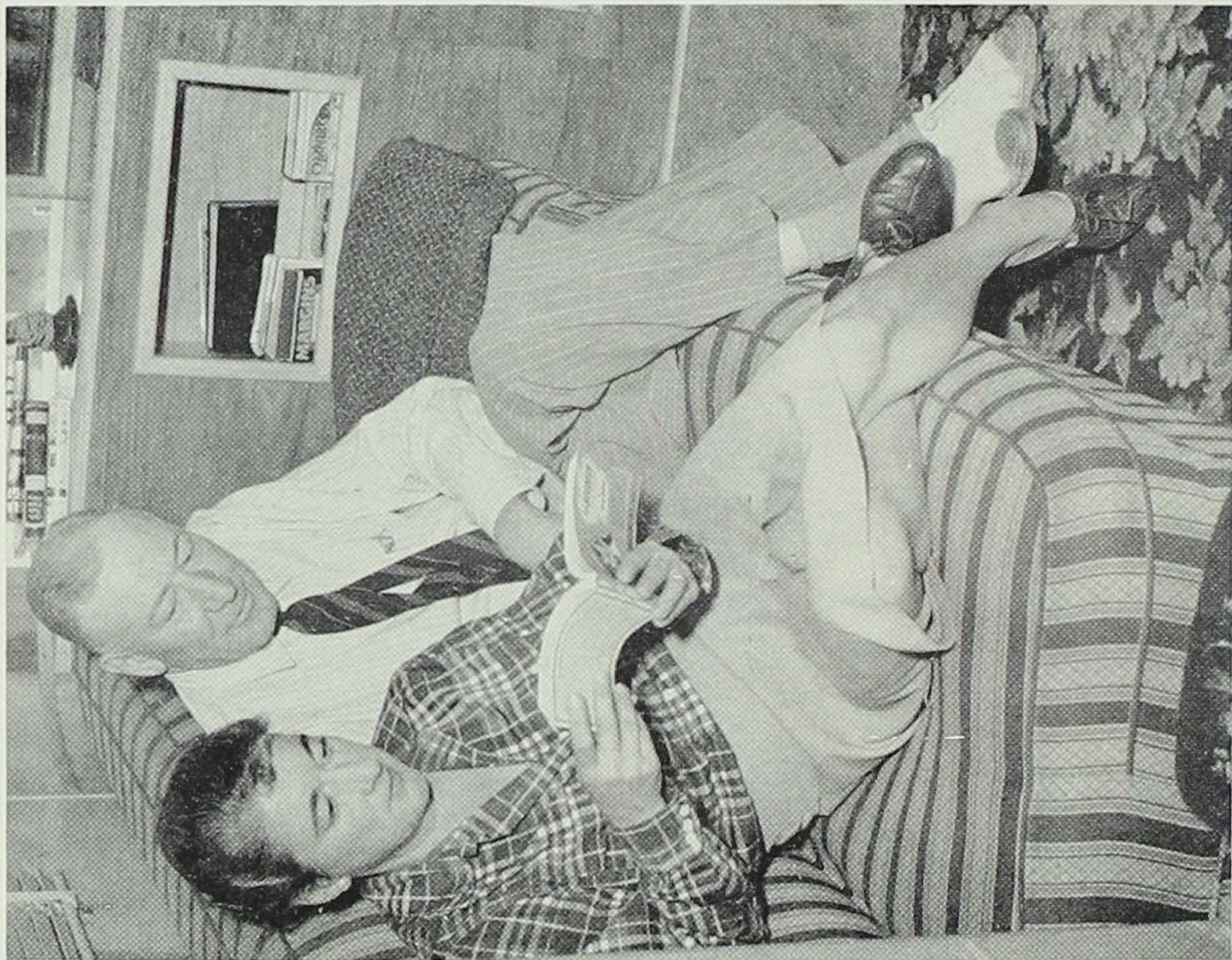
Courtesy Florence Whitson

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.