

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.

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