

**FBDP member and former spare station agent for the Boston & Maine Railroad, William L. Patton, Jr., contributed this series of imaginative essays about life in and around our favorite depot. These events definitely could have happened here!**

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### **C.O.D. Carload of Hay**

On the day before he went on vacation, our Bedford agent received a visit from the spare man who was assigned to relieve him for a couple of weeks. They had met before so our agent was at ease with his temporary caretaker and thus was assured that depot business would be carried out in a reliable manner.

The usual routines were reviewed: the safe combination, current cash balances in each of the accounts, including Western Union, American Railway Express, the ticket drawer and all other sundry financial matters.

Other subjects covered were new train operating procedures initiated a couple of months ago. The last thing after all this was done was for our resident agent to turn over his spare set of keys to the depot and surrounding buildings.

Now this past week, a boxcar load of hay from Canada had arrived at Bedford and was placed on the public delivery track consigned to a lady who ran a farm in a nearby town. The freight charges on the car were C.O.D. and the spare agent was cautioned against giving any access to the car unless the C.O.D. obligation

was met. Our Bedford agent had had bad experiences with this crowd before. Our spare man acknowledged the warning.

During the week, farm workers arrived at the car and sought permission to unload the boxcar. This was politely denied. On Friday afternoon, the lady herself arrived and wanted to talk to the agent in charge. She said that the C.O.D. money was on the way and since Saturday was a day they did not work, would it be OK to unload the car on Sunday, the day the station was closed. After hearing all the explanations, which made sense to our relief agent, he reluctantly agreed to let them unload the boxcar with the condition that the C.O.D. payment was to be made first thing Monday.

Guess what?

The farm crew arrived and unloaded the car on Sunday, and when Monday rolled around, no C.O.D. payment was forthcoming. The rest of the week passed and still no action. Our spare man went so far as to travel to the farm to get paid. He just couldn't seem to connect.

Later, the spare man learned from agents up and down the line that our dear lady had been pulling this little scam for a long time. In fact, the Auditor of Freight Receipts in Boston had issued a stern warning about this account. Our permanent agent, upon arriving back from vacation, heard about this situation and was not pleased because it meant a black mark against his station.

Our spare man subsequently went on to work in the general offices of the railroad and 2 ½ years later got a personal,

albeit sarcastic, letter from the Auditor that the C.O.D. had finally been collected. (Think stupid on this recital.)

*The foregoing was an imaginary anecdote.*

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### **Safety First**

To illustrate that “Safety First” is not just a motto printed in the Employees Timetables...

On this Tuesday, our branch local freight had a lot of work to do and, upon arrival at Bedford, the crew still had to deliver two cars of coal down at the end of the branch to the Reformatory Prison in Concord.

By the time this local returned to Bedford, it was after 5:30 P.M. Putting their train back together, they were just about to back out of the Concord/Reformatory Branch and go north to North Billerica when the conductor noticed the train order semaphore signal atop the Depot was at stop position for trains headed north. The local’s conductor ambled over to the office to make a polite inquiry as to why the signal was set against him. Our agent responded that the southbound train from Lowell to Boston was late and had not yet arrived.

The conductor acted surprised saying that his hind-end brakeman had checked the station’s train register book, mounted inside a fold-down desk positioned on the outside of the depot. He, the brakeman, reported to his boss that the aforesaid register showed the train from Lowell had arrived and left. Our agent, puzzled by this mystery, suggested to the conductor

that they repair outside to take a look for themselves. Unlocking the register desk, the agent and the conductor determined that the newly hired brakeman had read the book for Monday. This was Tuesday! The conductor then turned and went over to the engine crew and explained the delay. There is no record of what he said to his brakeman when he got back to the caboose.

*The foregoing was an imaginary anecdote.*

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### **Unload This Side Only**

Although our Bedford station agent was not directly involved in this story, it’s a good yarn anyway and gives us a peak at train crew’s inventiveness when the “brass” is not watching.

When carloads of lumber were loaded by the shipper in the 1920s, it was done by hand. The best way to do it and achieve maximum use of the space was to load the lumber against the opposite boxcar door. This then made it important to unload it through the same door from which it was loaded. The boxcar was placarded outside, “Unload this side only.” *Capice?*

On this day, our local freight prepared to rush a car down the Concord/Reformatory Branch to deliver a carload of lumber from the West Coast. Many house builders in Concord received their lumber through the all-purpose public delivery track opposite the station. Having a notice that the load was due, the builder hired a couple of extra guys that day. Now, because Concord had no passing siding or run-around track, there was no

way to deliver carloads down the branch except to place the car on the front of the engine. It has been written elsewhere in the FBDP newsletter that it was common practice.

Now all is well until the conductor noted the placard was on the wrong side of the lumber car. In other words, the car had to be turned around before it made its eventual way to Concord. Now, normally, the crew would simply follow procedure and take the car back to Boston and let them deal with it. It is funny sometimes; even Boston would get it wrong and out comes the car still turned the wrong way. But in this case and on this day, the crew got inventive. Now, it was not unheard of for a wrong-headed car to be taken all the way to the turntable at the engine house at the Reformatory Station but this practice had long since been discontinued.

And this wasn't the first time the following stunt was pulled nor would it be the last.

As has been noted earlier, Bedford had an engine house for the overnight storage of its branch line engines with the track leading into it and little stub-end wye that was long enough for an engine to back into the shed.

So, our resourceful local freight train crew pushed the wayward car onto this little stub track at the engine house, then went around and picked it up on the other side, placed it on the front of the engine right-side to and proceeded merrily on the way to Concord. Small potatoes, but it was natural for a train crew to find a way to do their job.

*The foregoing was **not** an imaginary anecdote.*

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### **Decorator Colors**

One fine day, the railroad's Bridge and Building Dept. paint crew was discovered in a rare sighting at Bedford waiting for the late afternoon train to take them back to Boston at the end of their day's work.

A discussion, while not centering on the finer points of interior design, did lead around to who made the decision on what colors were chosen to be applied to the station agent's office. The laconic response was, "We really don't know from day to day. When we get back to the shop, we dump whatever's left over from that day's job into a big barrel and that is the color of choice for the next job." This may have been slightly tongue-in-cheek, but it sounded plausible at the time.

It took another 50 years before our wandering spare agent finally got it!

*The foregoing was an imaginary anecdote.*

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### **Western Union (WU)**

Once in a while, consumers hear about how fast a car can go from zero to sixty miles per hour. Believe it or not, it can happen in the bucolic setting of a suburban depot like Bedford.

Our agent barely had opened the office door to prepare for the day's activities when he heard the WU line practically dancing off the shelf in the telegraph bay next to the trackside windows. Whoa, Nelly! There was an urgency to the call

letters that warranted immediate response. As WU message materials were always at the ready, our main man plugged the relay into the desk sounder and opened his key to acknowledge the sending operator (OP). The pace slowed just a bit as the sending office said that it had an urgent financial message. Was Bedford ready to copy? “Okay, let her rip,” was the laconic response.

The sending operator was good—better than good, as were most WU guys. Our Bedford agent, no stranger to telegraph himself, reached into the desk drawer and grabbed a WU message form together with a couple of carbons and some copy paper and inserted these papers into his trusty L.C. Smith, which was built into the desk. The sending op was already a couple of words into the message by the time Bedford’s agent was ready, but not to worry. Some of these operators usually copied a sentence behind. But since this was a coded financial transmission and accuracy was extremely important, Bedford opened his key quickly, which broke the circuit and the sending operator stopped sending.

Bedford quickly brought his copy up to speed, closed his key, and the sending office began to rattle off the rest of the telegram. Since it was in code, the entire telegram would be repeated at the end. WU’s financial stock transaction code was laboriously printed out in a book the size of a Manhattan phone book. The code looked like gibberish, but hidden in these random letters were instructions and/or requests for brokers to transact business on behalf of customers all over the U.S.,

and WU was the pipeline through which this vital information flowed.

This wire advised the customer that a broker recommended purchase of certain “futures” at the Chicago Exchange at its opening that day. Coded words such as MUSENSPIEL (\$9,000), NOTIFIERAS (option to buy), OBLIAGE (purchase direct from commodities exchange from seller in whose name the future is primarily held). Enough already! The 30-word message in code was repeated back to the sending op exactly. The Bedford agent then pulled out his WU codebook and translated the telegram for the customer who lived up by our town’s common.

After the first train, the agent unlocked the messenger’s bicycle and hightailed it up the street. He contacted the Bedford town father and waited while a reply was written on a Western Union blank. Correct change was offered plus a tip, which the agent declined.

One might assume that with all that noise, the WU would be quiet for the day. Not so fast. That day’s business for WU included a plaintive message from a local college youngster concerning urgently needed funds. (What’s new?) The agent handled an answer later that day. Yes, the family came up with the dough. Another wire was a transmittal of funds to a family member who lived in the Midwest and who had fallen on hard times. Indeed, it can be assumed that the WU wire in Bedford was a cross-section of everyday family life throughout the U.S. This was our own version.

One additional interesting tidbit about WU in the “more than you need to know” department: the old Morse Code is still very active throughout the U.S. by more than 25 chapters of the Morse Telegraph Club. At one time, on Samuel Morse’s birthday, WU would reactivate what remaining lines it had and let the Morse chapters have at it free for 24 hours. Eventually WU found it was just too expensive to do this, so the special arrangements were discontinued. Lo, resourceful members put together several low-cost electronic parts from chain stores that sell these things and introduced a device that could be hooked up through regular telephone lines, and thus Morse Club members could make the wires sing 24 hours a day. Believe it or not, it is true. Retired agents, dispatchers and U.S. naval shipboard radio officers all get together and have some fun.

Of interest, too, according to WU, the last working wire in New England was—you guessed it—a brokerage wire in Vermont. It was in service until the late 1950s. WU equipment can still be bought and sold on the Internet, and many railroad station restoration projects have been able to take advantage of this service. Perhaps, one day we might see it happen in Bedford.

In summary, the Western Union Telegraph served the vital communications needs of the country as communications speeded up and as our country was expanding to the western shores.

*The foregoing was an imaginary anecdote.*

## **The Seal**

On this routine day, Bedford Lumber Company received a boxcar of spruce from its supplier on the West Coast. As with all freight cars on the railroad, even today, the car is “sealed” at the place of origin. A number is stamped in relief on a strip of metal and is secured at both ends with a device that cannot be broken by anyone other than the consignee. It is the only seal to display that number in the country.

The following day, our agent went over to the lumber yard as the helpers gathered to unload. More than routinely in this case, the agent wrote down the seal number and looked at the number written on the freight waybill which had accompanied the car on its way across the United States.

Whoops! The numbers didn’t match. The seal on the opposite door was okay—but the one on this side was off.

Now this could mean several things: it might have been the wrong car; the car may have been broken into en route and a substitute or phony seal was attached; or it could have been a mistake. The boxcar number matched the one on the waybill, so it was the right boxcar.

With editorial license, we now go back a week. The agent had received via registered mail a “memo bill” from the Great Northern Railroad yardmaster at Spokane, which simply stated that the number on the waybill didn’t match the seal because a mistake had been made and noted the correct number along with the

Spokane Yard's time stamp for authorization and certification.

Railroad freight cars used in interstate commerce come under the jurisdiction of the ICC (today, the Federal Railroad Administration). This bureau has full authority to investigate matters as outlined above, and a wrong boxcar seal would certainly wave a red flag. This could have been serious. Guess who the investigating arm of the ICC is? The FBI, formerly called the Bureau of Investigation. Now, the last thing our agent wanted was these suited guys to swoop down with a full-fledged investigation. Nay, nay.

But, not to worry. The memo bill had a note along with it, which said in effect that a new yard clerk had mixed up about 50 outbound boxcars that day, noting the incorrect numbers on that many waybills. A likely story!

The load of lumber was promptly released to the unloading crew and the agent made a note of everything that took place and attached the West Coast memo bill to his monthly car report to the auditor of Freight Receipts. End of story.

*The foregoing was an imaginary anecdote.*

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### **The Dip**

On this rainy afternoon, a southbound passenger train from Lowell approached the station. As the train came around the bend, the track curved to the left and the view ahead was obscured to the engineer but not to his fireman who yelled out, "Red board!"

The first reaction was for the hogger to grab his whistle cord and demand a clear signal, which, in effect says, "How dare you stop this important train!" In response to the train's urgent voice, the semaphore dipped halfway, to yellow position, and returned to stop. In answer to this confirming signal, the engineman replied with two sharp toots, which indicates "Acknowledgment of signal." What this drama all meant was that Bedford had not received a clear block south to Lexington and the train would have to wait until it was okay to go.

The passenger train hit the end of the platform at track speed; multiple brake shoes began their job to overcome the inertia and the outfit slows down. Triple valves under each coach emit the usual "chuck-a-chuck-a-chuck" as air is pumped to replenish air brake reservoirs. The train crew's brass buttons peer out of vestibules to determine the cause of this annoyance. "After all, we were on time all the way down from Lowell and now this stop signal pops up."

As the combine passes the depot, the head-end brakeman swings off with a well practiced nonchalance and bounds up the depot steps to get the message. The train now at stop, the engine's safety valve lets go with a resounding roar and its air pumps begin their chore of restoring the brakes, "panta-panta-panta."

Well, the reasons for this interruption in the railroad's progress is that the "B-B Local," our favorite local freight on the Lexington Branch, derailed one truck on a car of coal being set off at Arlington Gas

Company. Now, the track on the branch in the early 1920s was double track between Somerville Junction and Lexington. So, the message to this train at Bedford was that since the southbound was blocked, it would receive a train order at Lexington authorizing it to go south on the northbound track to Arlington yard, thus avoiding the B-B's little mess. (In the still time-honored fashion, when a crew of one train passes another that has had a mishap, the salty, sarcastic remarks are *de rigueur*.)

Later this derailment was fixed and traffic resumed its normal routes.

So, on a clear winter's night when Bedford residents are wakened by the plaintiff wail of a mogul's whistle, it is only the southbound asking for a clear block at Bedford Depot, which he won't get. Now listen carefully for two sharp toots on the whistle, which is acknowledgement of the stop indication (which remains to this day). And no, it will not be your imagination.

*The foregoing was an imaginary anecdote.*

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### **St. Elmo's Fire**

Mention has been made previously regarding the "black boxes" mounted on the window frame just above the telegraph desk. These were rectangular, about 7–8 inches high, about 6 inches wide across the front and about 6 inches from back to front. On the face were several holes which were used to place "jacks" or small jumpers. There was a catch at the top that allowed the face of the box to tilt forward about three inches. The box was hinged at

the bottom so this tilting action, in effect, disconnected the outside telegraph line from the station itself. Often it was used at night when the operator (op) had gone home for the day. There was a hook at the bottom of the box upon which were hung several jumper cables.

During the day, if the telegraph wire chief in Boston wanted to track down stray grounded telegraph wire circuits, he would call Bedford on the wire and request "ground all circuits north," for example. The agent would plug in the cables to do this. Thus, the wire chief could then spot grounds north of Bedford.

The box also contained a Wheatstone bridge, also used in the stray ground detection process. The box had several fused lightning arresters. Although not strictly enforced, as noted above, the agent was supposed to cut the station's telegraph lines out at night. Upon the approach of a thunderstorm during daytime working hours, this unit was used to cut the station out as lightning often struck telegraph lines out along the right-of-way and was known to travel some distance in its effort to seek ground.

Failure to perform the above cut-out procedure could result in our favorite agent dancing around the office to avoid the resulting St. Elmo's Fire which could make Bedford's small ticket office a lively place indeed.

*The foregoing was an imaginary anecdote.*

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### **"Bonnie" MacDonald's Final Trip**

Here is a copy of an obituary notice that appeared in our local paper some years ago. (The names have been changed to protect the innocent.) This anecdote is written to show the wide range of activities our Bedford agent encounters periodically.

Patience “Bonnie” MacDonald died at her home in Bedford, Tuesday, August 21, at the age of 60. A native of Nova Scotia, Miss MacDonald was a well-known local registered nurse and spent her entire adult life tending to Bedford residents. At her request, she will be interred at her family’s plot at St. Stephens-By-The-Sea, Musquodoboit Harbor, Nova Scotia. A memorial service in Bedford will be held at a later date. Arrangements are being handled by a local funeral home in Bedford.

Our local Bedford station agent got into this story early as he transmitted a Western Union wire with the news to Bonnie’s relatives in Halifax sent by the attending physician. A brief exchange of wires transpired as her family authorized expenses to cover the trip home. These funds included a casket, transportation by rail with an escort from the local funeral parlor. The money was handled by the agent with a regular wire transfer via Western Union.

Although the above details were handled promptly, our local funeral director had no idea of how to do this chore, since it was a first. So, a call to our trusty railroad agent brought these details: copies of the death certificate, one-way railroad ticket Bedford to Halifax for the

decedent and casket; round trip railroad ticket for the escort, U.S. and Canada customs forms, and a heavy-duty quilted canvas cover.

Our Bedford agent previously had worked at Cambridge where several funeral parlors shipped decedents to Canada, often as much as several times a month, so he was familiar with the process. A short note was sent via the railroad’s local message wire to Cambridge requesting customs forms together with a sample as to how they were to be filled out. Bedford also asked Cambridge for the loan of a shipping cover for the casket. Done and done.

On the first outbound train that very afternoon came a large railroad company envelope all bundled up with the canvas shipping cover. (I owe you one, buddy.)

To the relief of the funeral director, all was in order and Bonnie was prepared for the trip home the following day. An itinerary was prepared for the funeral home’s escort showing arrival and departure times and any junction points. It was possible that our young escort, a new employee at the funeral parlor, would be given an extra day coming back from Nova Scotia to enjoy Halifax. The Bedford agent tipped off the afternoon train baggage man what to expect the following day. All was ready.

Early the next morning, our Bedford agent was busy with the following details:

- A WU wire to the family on all details, numbers of trains, when to expect arrival and name of escort;



- An internal wire to the chief baggage master at Boston, which said in effect, “casket to you in PM to Halifax N.S. on No. 3216 with escort —escort has all papers incl customs;”
- An inter-railroad wire asking Me C Railroad, at Portland, CP Railroad agent at McAdam, and the CN Railroad at St. John, N.B. to protect the move;
- A WU wire to U.S. and Canadian Customs at Vanceboro and McAdam with details;
- A WU wire to the funeral home in Musquodoboit Harbor, N.S. with details on arrival at Halifax and name of escort; and
- An inter-railroad wire to agent at Halifax authorizing release of decedent to funeral parlor and/or family member by name.

Also, early on the morning of the shipment, a brief meeting was held at the Bedford funeral parlor with the owner and the escort to make sure the following materials were at the ready:

- A first-class ticket with scrip for each railroad for the decedent;
- A coach-class round trip ticket for the escort;
- Documents, e.g., notarized death certificate (multiple copies), embalming certification, U.S. and Canadian customs forms, and a letter on funeral home letterhead introducing the escort as its employee; and finally,

- A timetable showing all departures and arrivals.

Early that afternoon on train No. 3216, Bonnie began her long trip home along with her nervous escort. The young man in question was told if anything went amiss, he was to wire the agent/baggage master at Boston who would be able and authorized to set things straight.

All the carriers, the B&M, the Maine Central, the Canadian Pacific and the Canadian National, protected the move as planned. After all, they handled such traffic every day. Our young escort, who got to see the world, returned to Bedford three days later, tired but nonetheless now an expert on international affairs. It was at this point he was able to launch his new career at Bedford. Interestingly enough, at Bonnie’s memorial service held at Bedford later that month, our escort was asked to recite Bonnie’s last trip, which he did with flourish and aplomb.

*It is important to note that in later years, the transfer of caskets back and forth to Canada was very much streamlined and did not need the extensive notification as described above.*

*The foregoing was an imaginary anecdote.*

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### **Prizefighting Superstitions**

Once in a great while, a little bit of the outside glitzy world showed up at Bedford. Such an occasion occurred in the early 1920s as the fleeting spotlight of fame indirectly touched down in our town.

It was and still is well known within the prizefighting fraternity that a once preeminent training site was right next to us in North Lexington. The place was named after its founder and thereafter we'll call it the "Farm."

Since air travel had not yet proven reliable to those who take risks for a living, many front-runners preferred to go by train. And this was true in boxing as anything else. On this special day such a prizefighter was scheduled to arrive at the Farm, and the syndicate that owned the fighter decided to route the leased Pullman car in which he was riding across the country, hitched to a local train to take the troupe to Lexington. And so it was. The plan worked without undue delay.

Now, Pullmans of any stripe would have been rare on our branch. They were something to behold when compared to, say a regular commuter coach. These were called within the railroad industry "heavy weights" as their tonnage sometimes was more than the little locomotive pulling them. Placed on the rear of a Lexington Branch local, our party got off at Lexington and proceeded by a town omnibus to the Farm. The Pullman continued on and was parked overnight in our passenger yard at Bedford. In the early 1920s, Bedfordites paid little to no attention to the daily routine of what was happening down at the depot. But on this occasion, word soon spread that a special railroad car was in the yard and probably was the first, last and only time they'd get to see an honest-to-goodness knight of the shining rail.

These heavy-weight Pullmans were built for comfort. They were painted a beautiful, distinctive dark green and were named for historic parks and other landmarks across the U.S. Our Bedford (albeit temporary) guest was called "Cape Henlopen," named after a location on the outer edge of Delaware Bay. The car was configured into four drawing rooms and eight bedrooms, and at one end was space for the crew. The resident crew consisted of three persons: a cook and two Pullman porters.

As an attraction, the car didn't disappoint our resident inspectors. This baby sported six wheel trucks compared to a coach's four. Indeed it was a hulk containing a small kitchen and dining area as well as the other features mentioned above. The car was attached to an inbound commuter train the following morning and taken to Boston where it was stored pending notice to come back to Lexington. Lexington, the town, was used to celebrities who often showed up due to the town's historic past. What was another big-name pugilist? "We seen 'em all the time!"

Now sometimes when there was a break in training, boxing managers or handlers took their fighters to Boston, whether to see a medical specialist or just a day trip on the town. Wishing to avoid any publicity or attention, the manager showed up one day at Bedford with his charge to take the train to Boston. He purchased two round-trip tickets and slid a five dollar bill under the wicket to pay for same. Our on-duty Bedford Depot agent

quickly returned change for the five spot with some coins and a two-dollar bill.

It is safe to say that time stood still. Little did our agent know that a two-dollar bill was bad luck to prizefighters. Don't ask why. There were and still are many superstitions in sports, and among fighters a two-dollar bill is one of them.

In a whisper, the manager asked the agent to give him two singles, hoping his famous companion wouldn't take notice. Accordingly, the agent complied. He had learned a lesson. Not big potatoes, but important to remember in the future when dealing with denizens of the ring: no deuces.

A month later, our "Cape Henlopen" reappeared and the boxing party left on schedule from Lexington. None of the agents along the branch had to worry about the revenue side of this deal as it was all handled by the syndicate through central office channels. It probably cost a bundle to not only pay for the transportation but the lease of the majestic Pullman car.

Yep, end of story. Instant fame for 5 minutes as it was recalled 60 years later by some writer.

*The foregoing was an imaginary anecdote.*

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