



TALES OF OLD TIMERS

With the Wire Wizards--A Telegraphic Treatise

By WALTER J. THOMPSON

THE life of the telegraph operators of early days on the Pacific Slope was replete with hazardous adventure, mingled with a certain amount of humorous experience as an offset to lighten their labors. It required nerve and endurance to manage a key in the jonesone stations of the plains, where the depressing stillness was liable to be broken at any time by the blood-curdling warwhoop of the Indian, as well as in the rude mining towns in the shadow of the wild Sierra, where every phase of life was decidedly in the rough.

Thirty odd years ago it was the custom of the then surviving veterans of the early days in the fifties to foregather and exchange reminiscences, and those conventions were well worth attending if one had an invitation. There you would hear of Jim Gamble, George S. Ladd, Frank Jaynes, John Leatch, Colonel Fred A. Bee and many other pioneers of the service; how they sometimes had to fight desperately for popular favor, for they all rose to prominent positions later; how they performed this or that difficult job, and of the strange characters and odd personalities they had dealings with. Interesting, indeed, were the episodes and anecdotes they passed around.

Wires Suspended From Brackets in Bald Cliffs

Colonel Bee, who afterward became Chinese Consul in this city, was a host in himself at these gatherings. He was a good story teller, with a ready wit and a pithy conciseness of statement. He was one of the builders of the first line connecting California with the East, running from Placerville to St. Joseph, Mo., and superintended the construction work in the Sierra, where the wires had often to be suspended from brackets fastened to the bald sides of high cliffs. John Leatch, an operator at Placerville, was also full of good stories, as the following will attest:

"A husky Missourian, looking like a tall sunflower stalk gone to seed, meandered into my little office shack one afternoon. Big Nick, they called him. He had lately blown in from Calaveras with a full bag of gold dust, won by trading horses and mules and in other ways that I fear would not bear investigation.

"Say, young un, what's the game I'm hearing 'round camp? They say them wires 'g'ot strung over the hills like copwebs kin talk. Is that so?"

"Feeling my inability to make him comprehend the intricacies of the telegraph system, I explained that the wires did not talk, but only conveyed information in quick time, and that he could hear from Missouri in a few hours.

"Durn my sister's cats if I believe it," he announced, with a shake of the head, tipping me a knowing wink. "I ain't been a boss trader for nothing. I know your dodge exactly, but when y'say y'kin send letters over them wires like lightning, I'm a lookin' for spavin' or heave, I am."

"Send a message and find out," I remarked.

"Blame me if I don't," he cried. "Jat you send to Ike Pettus in St. Joe and ask him if Big Nick Mellus didn't sell him a boss with a white-star red ear. I'll prove that a ring dodge of yures to a finish if it costs me a fifty slug."

Startling Answer to Message Received

"The answer that came was somewhat startling. As I remember it read somewhat as follows: 'Big Nick Mellus sold Ike Pettus a white-starred horse that was stolen. Tell Sheriff to hold him. Wanted here for various crimes.'"

"'Sufferin' corn-cobs," blurted out my visitor, dismay on his features. "Did you git that from Ike Pettus? Why, the ---, but say young un (trying to speak severely and retreating toward the door), 'them's lies. Cuss me if I want anything to do with a devil's contraption like that. I danno what the boss and mule tradin' business'll come to if it gits poplar. A feller won't be able to see one qu' kenner the d his reptitashon." Out he went and Placerville knew him no more."

Another case which showed that twenty years after the telegraph was a practical success there were persons that had never heard of its achievements, was told by Colonel Bee.

"It happened, said he, "on the Los Angeles end of the Southern Overland I have always suspected that the ignorance in this instance was more assumed than real. A break in the line occurred some distance out in the desert and the foreman of the repair crew sent out returned with the information

that a trainload of material would be needed, as a mile of wire and poles was missing.

"A detective was sent out and it was not a long time before he ran down a claw. Finally he came across a ranch house tucked away in a mountain canyon surrounded by a neat fence consisting of substantial square poles strung with four or five strands of tightly drawn wire. He recognized in the component parts of that fence the missing material he was seeking. He introduced himself and made his business known to the rancher.

Telegraph Lines Taken For Foolish Fence

"Well now," said the rancher, "I ain't seekin' any trouble with the law. I'll tell you how it is. Four or five years ago a passel of fools started to fence off the desert out there. They used mighty high poles and I opined they was goin' in for ostrich or giraffe farmin'. But they only put on one strand of wire at the top and then quit. Mebbe, says I, they're waitin' to get more wire made. They didn't string any more, though, and I didn't see any ostriches or giraffes--why, they could have got under that high wire, anyhow. Then I concluded the business was busted, as a fool scheme like that naturally would. Well, I waited two whole years and saw all them poles and the wire goin' to waste. So, as I needed a fence powerful bad, I h'isted some of it up here and used it. It's a sin to see things wastin' when poor people need 'em. I wasn't a hog and didn't take it all."

"Then the detective unlimbered his jaw and dwelt upon the enormity of the rancher's offense.

"Telegraph!" he queried in wonder. "Why, I never heard of it. You send messages over it? Sho! You must be foolin'. I've watched it by the hour figgerin' how much it would take for fencin' and I never saw no messages. They couldn't get by the poles. But, sure, I'm sorry I took it. I never stole in my life and don't want to begin now."

"His distress of mind seemed genuine and he said he was too poor to pay damages. In the end the company forgave him and left him his fence."

"Speaking of breaks on the line," said Frank Jaynes, long San Francisco manager of the Western Union, "reminds me of the time when one of the three lines running to Virginia City in the booming days of the Comstock ceased working and it appeared almost impossible to locate the break by two crews that were sent out. Frank Bell was superintendent of the mountain circuit and he got mad down to his socks. He took the trail in person swearing he'd find the break if he had to finger every foot of the wire."

First Trip Fails to Reveal Interruption

"He actually finished the first inspection without finding anything out of the way. He retraced his steps. There was only one point where his eyes had not scanned each foot of the wire. It was where the line went over the top of a hill and in doing so it passed through the branches of a large tree on the apex. The wire was stretched taut on each side of the hill, but determined to take no chances he toiled up the incline and there--well, he let out a string of language that was proper for that occasion only.

"The wire had been broken at the tree and some thoughtful and unenlightened person had carefully tied the ends with a rope to a stout limb among the branches, thus, of course, cutting off the circuit. While he was vexing the atmosphere with powerful expletives he heard a hall from the road below. A teamster had halted his wagon and was bawling up at him.

"Hello, you wire stretcher!" "What is it?" shouted Bell. "I reckon your company owes me a reward. I found your blamed old wire cuttin' all kinds of capers over the hill here and I tied it to a tree so your business wouldn't be interrupted. I must have saved you a pot of money."

Mission of Telegraph As Medium Misunderstood

"Oho," shouted back Bell, boiling over. "You're the blankety, blank, blank, blank idiot responsible for this mess. Wait till I get down there, and there were more remarks only suitable for that occasion. Down the hill dashed Bell, but the teamster caught the menace in Bell's manner and speech, and whipping up his horses, disappeared in a cloud of dust."

"I must tell you of Jim McVey's way of misunderstanding the mission of the telegraph as a rapid

medium of communication," said Colonel Bee. "It was an original conception with Jim, the 'Only Jim McVey of Bidwell's Bar.' He was a great, big-hearted bundle of simplicity, devil-may-care and indiscriminate prodigality. It was just as well for the reputation of any community in which he located that he did not come in manifold. He whooped from one diggings to another and the goddess of luck seemed ever to be with him. Rich finds appeared to lie around loose for his especial benefit and the moment he secured one he began injecting cyclonic eddies among the golden particles that scattered them far and wide.

"Jim was celebrating one Fourth of July in Placerville and toward noon loomed up in the telegraph office.

"Good morning, suh," he said to the operator with that suave dignity which distinguishes the true Kentuckian. "Can you jingle those wires and send a letter to a sweet young guhl of mine in Looleville?"

"The operator admitted that such service could be rendered, name and address of said girl being made known to him. The admission seemed to please Jim and with an affable smile on his rather handsome face Jim went on to tell him that the young lady was his sweetheart and that he was pledged to marry her as soon as he had made his pile in California.

Lines Invoked for Fourth of July Love

"I always send huh some loving words on Fourth of July," he continued, "and I thought I would try this new-fangled telegraph and kindah supprime huh. She's just the sweetest, dearest guhl in the world. I want to send huh something tendah and loving," and, taking up a blank, he wrote name and address and underneath, "My Honey Sue." Then he fell to scratching his head, jabbing the pencil in his mouth at intervals and shifting his six-foot fraps from the support of one foot to the other as he leaned over the counter. But not another word did he write.

"By hokey," he mumbled between contortions. "I can't get a twist on anything tendah enough for that blessed little angel." Finally he straightened up and, pushing the blank over to the operator, said:

"I'll ask you, suh, to nab onto that blank for a few minutes. I was up a bit late last night and my head isn't quite right yet. I'll take a little fresh air. I don't want to send huh any fool message. I must get to feeling tendah and loving."

"At the door he stopped and, returning, threw a small bag of gold dust on the counter.

"Mebbe time counts with you, suh. Just hang a time cad up for me and when you think I'm stretching the limit, take a pinch or two out of the bag. Expense don't count with me when it comes to that guhl of mine."

"Jim's minutes swelled into an hour and when he returned the beam in his eye was as bright as the alcoholic aroma of his breath was powerful. Again he hung over the message blank but without adding a word. Evidently the tender phrases he longed for were off on a celebration of their own. His labors were interrupted by a boy running in with a message from some scene of festivity. Seeing how things were heading the operator offered to write out a nice little message to the girl and send it along.

"No, suh," protested Jim. "There's no one can do huh justice in language but myself. If the time is itching you take another pinch outah the bag."

Operator Threatens To Close for Day

"Thus it went on for the rest of the day. At intervals Jim would steer in and then steer out in response to a summons. He never got beyond 'My Honey Sue.' About 5 o'clock when Jim was wobbling like a pine tree in a gale of wind the operator took a determined stand, saying he was about to close up for the day.

"'Ta,so,' bellowed Jim. "Wha's mattah, suh? Dust gone? Here's 'nuzzah bag, suh.' But the operator was firm and at last convinced Jim that the moment for decisive action was at hand. Bending over his well-thumbed blank Jim began scrawling hieroglyphics over it.

"Thyah, suh," he said, huskily, passing it over. "Jingle 'long--short--sweet an' tendah--patrotic love's what woman wants--nothing too good--Sue--suh." The operator glanced at the message and made it out as follows:

"My Honey Sue--Bully Fourth July--Dear Jim."

"There was nothing to do but to jingle it along and he did.

"It's a pleasure to say that Jim McVey didn't wind up in the gutter as those of his proclivities usually do. He had a streak of manhood in him, as was eventually proved. Soon after this incident he located a claim that he sold for \$10,000, said by draft on San Francisco, and a couple of real friends went with him and shipped him and his wealth on a Pacific Mail steamer for New York. Jim didn't know it until he was miles out at sea. I afterward heard that he braced up and married Sue and--well, that's enough, isn't it?"