



Buffalo Tales



Volume 27, No. 4

Buffalo County Historical Society

July-August, 2004

e-mail: bchs@kearney.net

website: www.bchs.us

A Day In The Life Of A Depot Agent

As Recalled By Howard Kolbo, A Former Relief Agent

For The Union Pacific Railroad, Over 50 Years Ago

7:30 a.m. In cold weather the agent started fires in the coal burning stoves in both the office and waiting room. He also hauled out the ashes, swept the floor and tidied up the area.

8:00 a.m. It was time to check the numbers and types of railroad cars at his station. A list called the "C X" report had to be sent by telegraph to the Grand Island Division office. When the telegraph sounder clicked "ST ST GE" it meant a call to Shelton from the Western Union Telegraph Office in Grand Island. After the message was received and verified by sending "OK HK" the agent called the recipient on the telephone and offered the option of hearing the telegram read or holding the copy until picked up. In the days of "party line" phones country people could "rubber" (listen in) on any conversation. A telegram message overheard on the phone could be juicy gossip or certain invasion of privacy.

9:00 a.m. Farmers brought 5 and 10 gallon cans of cream to be hoisted onto the Railway Express wagon which would be pulled alongside the train baggage car for markets in Omaha and points east. During hot summer days the agent pulled the wagon into the shade of the wide overhanging roof. Sometimes wet gunny sacks were strung over the cans for cooling. Occasionally cream cans would "blow", exploding sour cream over everyone. Empty cans were returned within a day or so.

10:00 a.m. Railway Express was a separate company that utilized the railroad to carry more than cream. Large parcels too big for the U.S. Mail came by Express. At Christmas time bicycles, doll buggies and toys arrived to be stored in the freight room until patrons could pick up their packages. As trains passed the depot the agent noted the time and train number on the locomotive. This information was sent to the train dispatcher with an "OS" (out of station) for that train. It was a method of keeping record of train movements within the Grand Island Division.

10:59 a.m. The telegraph sounder started clicking once per second until there was a pause and the final click denoted 11:00 a.m. sharp. The correct time signal came from the U.S. Bureau of Standards in Washington D.C. All railroad personnel present were expected to reset their pocket watches. No wrist watches allowed. Precise time was essential for safety and smooth operation. It was the railroads that established time zones in the United States in 1892 to bring order out of the chaotic local time systems.

(continued from Page 1)

12 Noon to 1:00 p.m. Lunch hour.

1:00 p.m. Telegraph calls "ST ST GI" meant that the Grand Island train dispatcher had a train order. He could control train movements with special orders as needed. The order at Shelton was for train EX 394 to go into the empty siding at Gibbon to allow #5 Westbound to pass at

1:50 p.m. Both engineer and conductor must receive this message. The conductor was in charge of the train, although he was in the last car (the caboose, a yellow one.) He could not talk to the engineer in the locomotive because radios of that era were not reliable. He could only use hand signals. The agent typed the message in triplicate and tied the folded message in a twine loop stretched among the two arms and yoke of a "Y" shaped pole. The agent then set a foot on a white brick (the mark of the correct distance next to the track of the approaching train) and held up the "Y" pole. The engineer arched his arm out the window and hooked the message on the twine loop which slipped out of the "Y" pole. The conductor did likewise and the agent returned the empty wooden poles to the depot. Woe to the luckless agent whose message missed the mark. The engineer would have to stop and back up his train if there was time.

2:00 p.m. Prospective passengers came to the grill opening next to the waiting room to buy a train ticket. A bulletin board showed local schedules, but a printed one was needed for longer trips. The streamliner trains like the City of Los Angeles didn't stop at small stations so the agent advised the best departure point. Some passenger trains would stop for patrons on a "flag stop" indicated with a black flag. In that case the agent would need to change his semaphore to "Stop" or wave his red flag.

In those days the passenger trains were top priority, followed by refrigerator car trains, "reefers", heading east. Most reefers had individual cooling units, but there were still a few that had to be iced at certain stations to keep the green produce fresh. After freight trains came the little "doodlebugs", diesel-electric units that hauled passengers, express, and mail on branch lines. There were no long coal trains or "piggy-back" stacked container cars.

3:00 p.m. The local freight train set off a coal car for the lumber company, an oil tanker for the Standard Oil supplier, and two box cars for the grain elevator. Using a tariff book the agent then checked the waybills for proper charges. L C L shipments meant less than carload freight, but too heavy for express. This included stoves, furniture, and farm implements. Sturdy "dollies" (wheeled movers) were useful in hauling the L C L items up the ramp and into the freight room. Patrons could back their trucks to the loading platform and haul away their merchandise.

4:00 p.m. The local grain elevator was busy loading the box cars with corn. Workers came to the depot for more "grain doors." These were

sturdy wide boards to be nailed inside the sliding doors of the cars to keep the grain from bursting the sliding doors. The agent then wrote the way bills to be given to the conductor of the pick up train.

5:00 p.m. The agent began tallying the telegram and express income, then deducting 10 percent for himself on the report. Ticket sales and freight income had to be listed and the books balanced each day before proceeds could be forwarded. A sturdy safe was provided for security of change, tickets, checks, and valuable papers.

6:00 p.m. The station closed.

Central City, NE, 1947

12 midnight A banging on the window of the relief agent's rooming house roused him to dress quickly and follow the policeman to the depot to send an "AX" report by telegraph. (Accident) A waitress was crossing the tracks after work and waited for the westbound train to pass, but failed to see an eastbound train. There was little sleep that night. A year later the relief agent went to college to become a 35 year teacher.

From the Director

The 2004 summer season at Trails and Rails Museum was a busy one. We saw an increase in visitors and researchers utilizing our archives. As we enter the fall months into the holiday season the museum will have extended hours. New fall hours will be 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday. Archives volunteers will be available 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Tuesdays.

The Freighters Hotel has undergone a much needed exterior facelift. Exterior sills have been replaced, storm windows repaired and replaced and the building has a new coat of paint. The hotel will finally have a back stoop and a screen door. The Freighters Hotel restoration was made possible through a Keno Funds grant.

The Howell Garden is in place and still awaiting a few finishing touches. The family of Mrs. Howell is working with the society to find the perfect benches for the space. A dedication is slated for June 2005. The addition of the garden is a welcome improvement to the grounds and a fitting tribute to long-time volunteer Alice Howell. The Howell garden was funded through memorials, a contribution from the Soil Sisters Garden Club and Mrs. Howell's brother Lyndale Shaneyfelt.

"Blast from the Past" on the grounds was a great first time success. Mary Henning provided storytelling in the Axmann gazebo and the "Riverdale Rounders" filled the afternoon with music. Through the admission of canned goods we were able to provide much needed food for the Jubilee Center in Kearney. Thanks to those who shared their time and talents and attended the event.

Looking ahead to 2005, Trails and Rails Museum will celebrate 30 years. As we make plans for next year we welcome your thoughts and ideas as to how we can mark our 30th year. Give us a call, a letter or an E-mail and share your ideas.

Brad Driml, Director

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.

Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor

2004 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Individual	\$25.00
Basic Membership	\$30.00
Institutional Membership	\$40.00
Supporting Membership	\$50.00

Life memberships are \$150.00 for individual; \$200.00 for couple.

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Kearney, NE
Permit No. 7

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 2005: Dan Speirs, Robert Goldenstein, Mary Henning and Larry Nansel.

Term expiring June 1, 2006: Dora Day, Jan Fern, Merlin Burgland and Robert Guge.

Term expiring June 1, 2007: John Shafer, Julie Oldfather, Dick Mercer, Susan Underhill.

Officers (1 year term)

President	John Shafer
Vice-President	Dan Speirs
Secretary	Julie Oldfather
Treasurer	Jan Fern

Trails & Rails Museum

New Fall Hours

1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Tuesday to Saturday

Trails & Rails Museum 710 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

Buffalo County Historical Society
Box 523 • Kearney, NE 68848-0523

Address Service Requested