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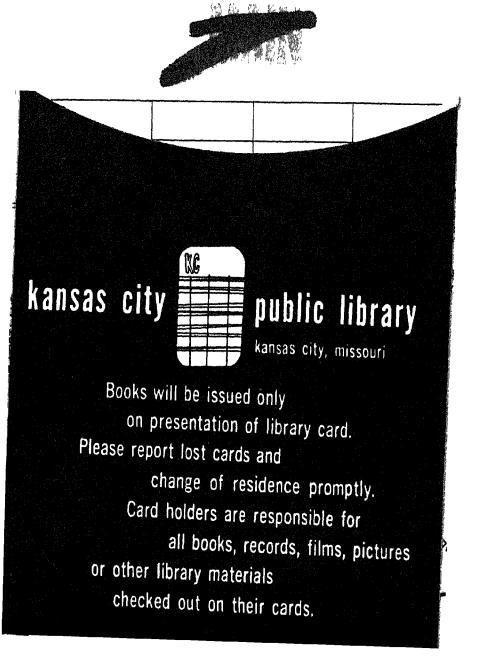
Harry Bedwell



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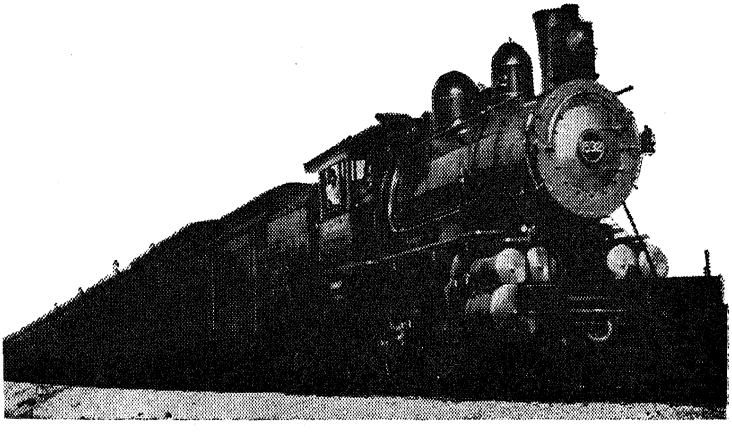
HARRY BEDWELL

LAST OF THE GREAT RAILROAD STORYTELLERS

By FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.

Introduction by Robert S. Henry

ROSS & HAINES, INC.
Minneapolis, Minnesota
1959



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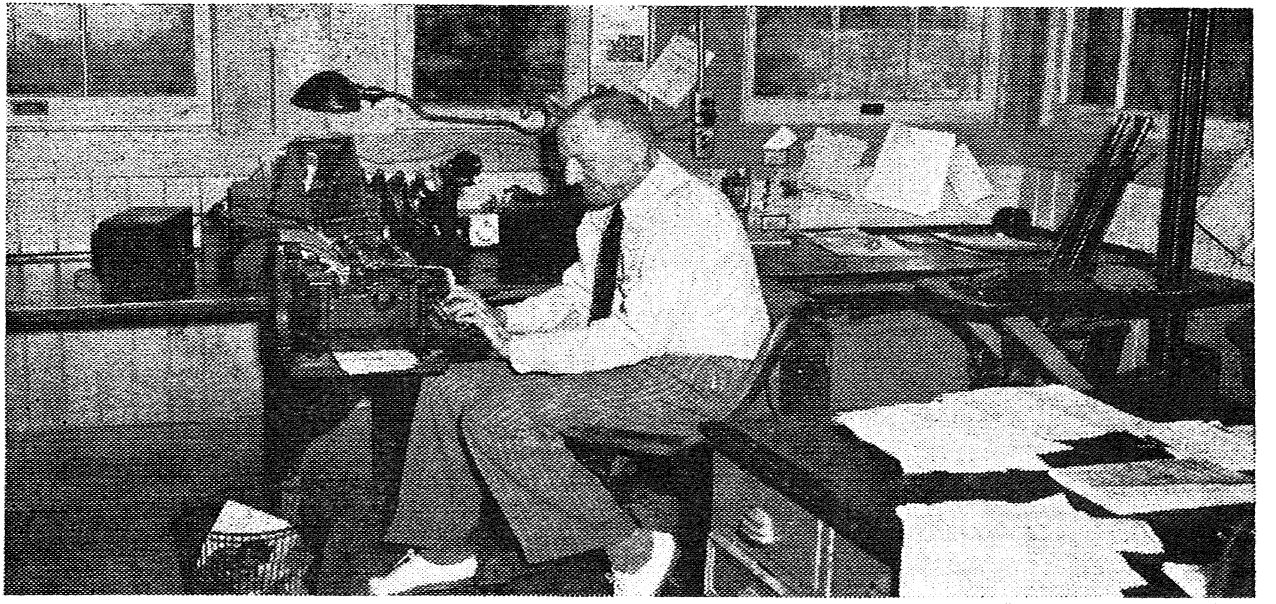


Courtesy Lorraine Bedwell

Harry Bedwell at work in the Santa Susana station on the Southern Pacific's "Coast Line" about 35 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Drama is inherent in the ceaseless conflict of man with space, time and weight which makes up the daily work of railroading. In this drama, there is nothing more dramatic than the daily accomplishment of moving thousands of passenger and freight trains safely and surely on their appointed runs.

Nevertheless, the unexpected is always to be anticipated in the business of transportation by rail—to say nothing of the twists in personality and the quirks of human nature.

Harry Bedwell chronicled in one book and some 70 short stories and articles the actions and reactions of railroad men faced with the unexpected. He was himself a railroad man with wide and varied experience in that most versatile of all railroad occupations, that of station agent and telegrapher. His experiences, and the experiences of others with whom he came in contact, became the raw material of his stories, which was worked in his skillful hands to bring out in sharply etched strokes the essence of the conflicts of which he wrote.

Frank Donovan is a collector and connoisseur of railroad stories. In this book he turns to biography, writing of the life from which Harry Bedwell distilled his essentially factual romances. He writes with sympathetic understanding of Mr. Bedwell's place in the railroad school of literature—a school of literature which Mr. Donovan himself has best outlined in his definitive work "The Railroad in Literature," published by the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society. This book is itself a contribution to that literature.

Robert S. Henry

Alexandria, Virginia
August 22, 1958

I

BOYHOOD ON THE BURLINGTON

My odyssey into the "Harry Bedwell Country" began the moment I alighted from the Rock Island's *Twin Star Rocket* at Chariton, Iowa. Going over to the Burlington's station, I found the 5 a.m. mixed train for Kellerton would be very late on account of heavy soybean movements.

Late or not, in getting material for a biography of America's last great writer of railroad short stories, Harry Bedwell, it was desirable I go by train. Moreover, Bedwell, who embodied his experiences and those of his fellows into some of the best railroad fiction ever penned, started railroading on the very line I elected to ride. So I patiently waited for the freight which would take me to his Iowa birthplace.

When the belated train did leave, at 11:45 a.m., I was aboard. Although it was the fall of 1957 and the newspaper headlines were full of Russia's first Sputnik, launched a few days earlier, this branch line still retained much of the leisurely pace of Bedwell's day. In wending its unhurried course through the rolling countryside, this local freight was close to nature. Thanks to Conductor L. E. Allan, I was permitted to enjoy the bright autumnal foliage from the cupola high up in the caboose. The line and depots, and even the little red caboose, have changed but little during the half century that has passed since the slim, tow-headed youth from Kellerton "pounded brass" as a telegraph operator.

Humeston, the first major stop, retains the original wooden station of Bedwell's day. Likewise, the bisecting branch running east to the Mississippi below Keokuk is still intact. But its western segment across southern Iowa to Shenandoah is only a memory. Gone, too, are the puffing branch line locals which made Humeston such a busy place at train-time. After our LCL freight was loaded, waybills checked, and cars set out in the traditional manner, we "highballed" south.

Two stations down the line is Leon, once a throbbing junction, where Bedwell worked as relief operator. In the wooded, hilly region he had one of his most thrilling experiences, which will be mentioned later.

Our train whistled for Davis City, formerly a division point, now identified by the crumbling remains of a roundhouse. The freight sharply reduced speed as the engines climbed to the plateau. At Giles, where there is a sign and a phone-box, the line diverges. One section goes west to Mt. Ayr, the other continues south to St. Joseph, Missouri. Here the caboose and much of the train was set out to lighten the load for the long, steep grade to Mount Ayr.

After all hands had boarded the two 1000-h.p. diesels, coupled cab-to-cab Siamese fashion; the bobtailed train started westward. At Lamoni the engines came to a halt adjacent to the campus of Graceland College. Because of the needs of this school of the Reorganized Church of the Latter Day Saints, the sidings were crowded with box cars. It was nearly dusk when the switching was done, and the train rolled again through the fields and pasture lands of southwest Iowa.

"We haven't any work to do at Kellerton," observed Allan, "so we'll stop just long enough to let you off."

Presently the engineer shut off the throttle, and the little train slowed down for the unattended box-car depot. This was Kellerton (population 483), birthplace and boyhood home of Bedwell.

Harry Chester Bedwell was born on a farm about five miles southwest of Kellerton in Ridley Township on January 8, 1888. Known as the "Bedwell Place," the farm is now the property of Vern Beck. Harry was the youngest of Chester and Flora (Crow) Bedwell's two children. Bedwell, along with his older brother, Howard, spent his early childhood on the farm. He helped with the many chores in the farmhouse and showed a great fondness for animals. His love for pets never left him, and to the end of his days there was always a dog or two in the household. One of his favorites was a brown rat-terrier called "Muggins."

The family later moved into town, which was then a thriving cattle-shipping point. While he was still in school his parents were separated, and it fell to Flora Bedwell's lot to bring up the children. It also meant Harry had to do odd jobs to help his mother meet expenses. Some of the older townfolk recall the lanky, smiling boy delivering milk from the family cows or taking mail from depot to post office. Of special pride was his Indian-Shetland pony, "Daisy," on which he sometimes rode to school. With that little bay animal Harry was the envy of every kid in the neighborhood. On Sundays he regularly attended the Young Men's Bible Class at the Methodist Church.

From contemporary accounts he was a friendly, happy-go-lucky youngster. Whether he was participating in "kick the stick" (a game similar to "hide and seek"), hunting, or playing the alto horn in the Kellerton band, Harry was much in evidence. It is also said he was the youngest of his group to smoke buggy whip, weeds and cornsilk. In short, he was a normal, wholesome young man. The only incident which ever got him into any serious trouble was the firing of his 32-caliber pistol too freely one Halloween. He easily out-ran the aged town marshall but nevertheless was fined $7.85 next day for carrying concealed firearms.

"Little Blue," as Harry was nicknamed, was an avid

reader. Like many of his chums, he read Terry Alcott, Frank Merriwell and other five-cent Westerns. He was also a devotee of the old *Youth's Companion,* considered by some the finest young people's magazine of all time. In school he learned quickly and generally stood at the head of his class. When the examination came around on Friday it was a safe bet Harry was the first one through—and out of school for the weekend.

Fired with adventure from relatively wide reading for a farm boy, and being of a restless nature with an inquiring mind, Harry wanted to go places and see things. No, farming was not for him. In a day before the general use of the automobile, when radio and TV were unheard of, living in a rural community could be singularly provincial. But there was one aspect of town life which spelled romance, far-off places, and the great beyond. That was the arrival and departure of passenger trains. Kellerton was situated on a loop diverging from the Chariton-St. Joseph Branch at Giles (then called Togo) and returning to it at Albany, Missouri. Possibly due to the predominance of cattle on the circuitous route, it was called the "Dirty Side." The shorter line by way of Bethany, Missouri, was referred to as the "Straight Side."

Be that as it may, the little locals meant a lot to Kellerton, particularly the early morning train, which originated at Mt. Ayr and went up to the state capital via Leon and Osceola. Its arrival from Des Moines around supper time was a big event in the town. The other trains, one in each direction, called at Kellerton on their 164-mile run between Chariton and St. Joe.

What brought the railroad even closer to home was the happy coincidence that Dan Cadagan, the local agent, boarded at the Bedwell's. The family by this time had moved to a frame house on the north end of Decatur Street, two blocks from the depot. Besides the romance of belching trains, with passengers from strange and

distant points, there was the telegraph. When it came to timely news, the railroad telegraph operator was the best posted man in town. Having firsthand knowledge from the cryptic Morse, he was in a position to swagger a bit, being looked up to by the boys and being the admiration of many a girl.

It was then that Harry decided railroading was the only form of work worth a grown man's time. He already had the "contract" for delivering mail to the post office at $8.00 a month. A few more hours at the depot, before and after school, and with Dan's help he could learn to be a real railroader. Carrying coal for the potbellied stove, sweeping the floor, and lending a hand in station accounting would be small pay for lessons in telegraphy. Under Dan's tutelage, with a dummy telegraph set at home, Harry soon got the knack of "sending" and "receiving."

One day when the traveling auditor came for a periodical check of the agent's books, he asked Dan's sandy-haired protege if he would like to have a station of his own. Harry answered in the affirmative although having misgivings as to his fitness. The youth was forthwith hired and sent to his first assignment on September 7, 1905. It was at Andover, Missouri, a tiny depot three miles below the Iowa state line on the "Straight Side." For a time he worked in dread of the dispatcher, who delighted in frightening "ham" operators. It is related that whenever his call sounded on the wire he would have to go outside and walk around the station to quiet his nerves after taking down the message.

From Andover he was sent to Leon, Iowa, a station of considerable importance. Called "Noel" (Leon spelled backward) in his autobiographical *American Magazine* article, it was the junction of the now-abandoned branch to Des Moines. Two miles south of the town, at a point called Koyle, was a register and telephone. This site marked the junction of another branch, now also retired,

running due south to the coal-mining village of Cainesville, Missouri. As converging trains, along with those of the Chariton-St. Joe line proper, were under the jurisdiction of the operator at Leon, it was a busy station.

Sunday, however, there were only two passenger trains, and the chance of seeing a freight was remote. So on the Sabbath when the day assistant suggested to Harry that they go down to the next town, he was willing. His colleague knew a couple of young ladies there, and both men welcomed the break in routine. Using their switch key to unlock a chained handcar, they were soon pumping their way to Davis City. Upon arrival the youthful railroaders were startled to see a headlight with two small white lamps, signifying an extra. After lifting the handcar off the track, they cautiously went up to the depot.

Their second surprise came upon hearing the dispatcher send an order for the crewmen of the "extra" to pick up five loads of time-freight at Leon. Then Harry remembered the five waybills he should have left outside the station. If the conductor did not get these bills, the dispatcher would hear about it and there would be a new relief man on the St. Joe Division. There was only one thing to do: get back to Leon before the extra without being seen. But how? Again the day man had an inspiration. Why not hook the handcar onto the freight? In a few minutes (and still without being seen in the dark) they had the handcar back on the rails and were pumping with vigor until the vehicle was switched to the back of the train. They chained and locked the handcar to the caboose in a matter of seconds.

Then the train started with a jerk, dashing their lamp to the ground. Next the handlebars began bobbing up and down faster with each turn of the wheel. To keep from being hit the two lay flat on their stomachs with heads over one end and feet over the other. When the train took in slack going down the first hill the car buckled and jumped. On the next grade the handcar's

handles broke off when they rammed the back of the caboose.

Chilled by weather and fright, the two put their hands against the drawbar to keep from running under the caboose. There was no turning back. They were padlocked to their destiny.

Finally the train reached Leon with the handcar still on the track. When the freight stopped they cut off the car and dumped it down an embankment. Then they ran to the depot and put the waybills and register into the box before the conductor arrived. After the train left they lit the lamp and took stock. Both had lost their hats, and Harry had a bump on his head. But they came out of the ordeal without losing their jobs or their lives.

Being a relief operator suited Harry's roving disposition, for he was required to "fill in" at many points on the St. Joseph Division. Often this meant closing a station at the end of the day and riding all night on a freight train to his next assignment. (Something of this arduous undertaking, although not without its amenities, was experienced by the writer in leaving Kellerton for St. Joseph. Because of heavy tonnage, engine trouble and a hot box, we did not arrive at the latter point until 2 a.m. But having fresh coffee with the crew in the snug caboose at midnight was a compensation. And if the sight where the Andover depot once stood was scarcely discernable in a driving rain, the frame station at Union Star, also where Bedwell worked, showed up clear and radiant under a full moon.)

Before leaving the Burlington late in 1906, Bedwell had issued train orders at such other Iowa locals as Shambaugh, on the Nodaway Valley Branch, and Bartlett, on the main line along the Missouri River. He also worked as relief operator in western Missouri at Langdon, East Leavenworth and other points on the busy Omaha-Kansas City line. Here the young man got a taste of high-speed, main-line railroading featuring luxurious limiteds and time-freights, particularly stock extras. The "iron" was

hot with close meets, and an operator had to be on his toes. It was a new and thrilling experience, and not without some tight situations and exciting moments.

Bedwell (in his *American Magazine* reminiscences) tells how he helped a "ham" operator out of a severe predicament. It concerned the omission of a single word in a train order. The locale was a small depot on the water-level route along the Missouri River. It was the next station to the south from where Bedwell was working.

The operator in question was receiving orders from the dispatcher. He, like Bedwell in his beginning days, had to re-do the orders *after* he had repeated them to the dispatcher. This, of course, was against the rules. A new man, however, would often take down what he could and let the rest go. After the orders were repeated over the wire he would go back and edit them, adding what he failed to put down when they came so rapidly over the wire. And therein lay his trouble.

On top of this the young "op" took a few minutes after receiving the order to chat with a section foreman who had dropped into the depot to visit. There on the table lay the orders, one of which was addressed to No. 15. It read:

"Number Twelve will run thirty minutes late, P. J. to S. J." (Bedwell purposely omitted mentioning the actual locations in his article, but the initials would suggest Pacific Junction, Iowa, and St. Joseph, Missouri.)

It may be explained No. 12 and No. 15 were passenger trains, the former being southbound and the latter northbound. No. 12, moreover, was superior to No. 15 by right of direction. The dispatcher was saving No. 15 from being held up by ordering her ahead, and not requiring her to meet at the regular meeting point on the single-track line. In recopying the order, however, the green operator overlooked one word. The order should have read: *"Second* Number Twelve will run . . ." As luck would have it there were two sections of No. 12 that

night, and the first was on time. It was apparent the new operator was going to give No. 15 thirty minutes on *both* sections of No. 12.

Presently there came a blast of a whistle indicating the appearance of No. 15. The inexperienced operator jumped to his feet and ran to the table. The shrill whistle always made him nervous, and what with being behind in his work due to chatting with the section boss, he was more fidgety than ever. No. 15 was moving fast and now in sight; he must not delay the train.

He hastily tore off two copies from the manifold, and wrote out two copies of a clearance card. He hurriedly wrapped an order and a clearance card together and thrust them into a delivery hoop, and did the same with the other two copies. It was going to be close! But he did get out on the platform in time to deliver the orders to the engineer and the conductor without stopping the passenger train. With a glow of satisfaction he watched the two red marker lights of the receding train and breathed a little easier.

Back in the office again he sat down at the table, recorded the time "15" went by, and began to straighten the carbons in the manifold from which he had hastily torn the order. He ripped off his own copy and was about to file it when he heard a station up the line report *first* No. 12 by. He glanced at his order and to his horror noted the omission of the word *"second."* To make matters worse, that station had reported *first* No. 12 on time. All this spelled out a head-on collision. No. 15 would pass up the regular meeting point as the faulty order stated No. 12 would run 30 minutes late. By so doing, "15" would hit *first* No. 12 due to the incorrect order since there was nothing to indicate the latter train was in two sections.

The erring operator became panicky. He seized the telegraph key to call Bedwell at the next station north but was so wrought-up he could not make the call. The

big clock in the depot ticked remorselessly while the two trains were coming closer together on the same track. He tried to call the section foreman to no avail as the trackman was now on the way home. Finally he thought of the telephone. Snatching the receiver he shouted for central to get him the next station. There was an agonizing wait; and when he did get Bedwell it was some time before the distraught operator became coherent. Sizing up the situation, Bedwell quickly threw "the board" against No. 15 and assured the operator he would "make it all right." From here we'll let Harry Bedwell tell how he saved the trains from colliding and the operator from losing his job.

"I could see Number Fifteen coming as I sat down at the table and began to compose another order which would annul the one that he had delivered, and at the same time correct the mistake so that no one would suspect. It did not take me long to do this; but I had to stop Number Fifteen and have the conductor sign the order so as to make the change seem natural. But I did not repeat his signature to the dispatcher, as I was supposed to do, and neither did I tell the dispatcher that I had stopped Number Fifteen when I reported them by."

"It was not until the train had gone that I began thinking the whole matter over, and it frightened me a little. This could just as easily have been I who made the mistake as the boy who did, and I made some very good resolutions that night which I kept, so that before I left that station I could telegraph well enough to take an order without re-copying it two or three times."

Harry Bedwell had made good in the prairie country. Now he would try the mountains.

*

II

BOOMER WESTBOUND

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 variety 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. Bedwell 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 encounter 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. Charles was an ace "lightning slinger." "An artist of the telegraph instruments," recalled Bedwell, "he could copy for long periods of time that flowing telegrapher's script, sometimes fifteen words behind the racing sounder, and carry on a fairly connected conversation at the same time." 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 side of the Summit, or brake shoes becoming red-hot and smoking in checking their progress on the way down. At other points fruit blocks and silk specials made a race track out of the high desert course.

A creation of the Rio Grande, Helper itself was very much a railroad town. It was, as the boomers expressed it, "one mile long and one street wide." The second floor of the depot housed the offices of the trainmasters, chief dispatcher and general yardmaster. "At the upper end of the station platform," recalls the colorful nomad Harry McClintock, "was the beanery, while at the lower end, or near it, stood the Railroad Y.M.C.A. Main Street consisted of one big restaurant run by Japanese, two or three general merchandise emporiums, and five or six saloons, all of which were practically under the trainmaster's windows."

Besides being the point where the Rio Grande started to climb the long, steep, winding grade to Soldier Summit, it was a busy marshalling spot. Hidden back in the nearby

canyons were some of the largest coal mines in the West. Nearly all of these were reached by branch lines which funnelled their carloads into Helper for countrywide distribution. There was a small but busy yard, a "rip" track for light repairs, a roundhouse and a coal chute. Much to Bedwell's delight it was a haven for boomers. But they did not tarry long, nor did Bedwell.

The fledgling "op" was rapidly becoming a "man of the world," or at least he thus fancied himself. 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 related them. Here he became acquainted with Matt Warner, a leader, along with Butch Cassidy, of the notorious Hole-in-the-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.

Mountain railroading had much more of the frontier spirit than that of the Iowa and Missouri prairies. The nerve and loyalty of the Rocky Mountain railroaders caught Bedwell's fancy; and the feats of hardship and daring of Rio Grande crewmen and operators appealed to his imagination. The stories of hill country "high iron" which he heard, and the adventures he experienced were to remain in his memory for the rest of his life. Better still, they were to be put on paper for the delectation of posterity. Under the guise of fiction, culled from actual happenings modified in plot and setting, they ring true to the time, background and circumstances. Two years after hiring out on the Rio Grande Harry Bedwell began recounting his experiences in a serial for *The American Magazine.* About the same time he started penning railroad short stories in which he was later to become an acknowledged master.

One such story concerned an unusual set of circumstances resulting in a wreck in which three enginemen were killed. The accident occurred on the Rio Grande

not far from where Bedwell worked. No. 3, a westbound passenger train, stopped at this community where it was to get a helper engine to aid it over the mountains. It was Christmas Eve and "3" was late, so it did not pull in until after dark. The "helper" arrived from division headquarters and in due time was coupled in front of the regular engine of the train. Prior to this the carbon headlight on the extra engine had gone out, but the engineer had repaired it so it was in working order. Once out of town, however, the carbon failed. It being near the end of the run, the train late, and Christmas Eve, the engineer of the helper decided to risk it without a functioning headlight.

That same evening a freight train was doing some switching at a station set in the hills. They had to use the main line in their work, so the dispatcher had given them two hours and 25 minutes on No. 3. Due to the station and yards being hidden from view of approaching trains a semaphore had been erected some distance from the depot. The freight conductor set the semaphore at "stop" and as an extra precaution put a torpedo on the track to warn other trains.

When their two hours and 25 minutes were up the engineer of the freight backed his train into a siding to await the passenger. Meanwhile the conductor walked back to the telegraph office to see if he could get more time on No. 3; and his brakeman went farther back to clear the semaphore if the freight was to remain on the sidetrack.

In the depot the conductor found he couldn't get more time on "3" as the passenger was due any minute. Leaving the station he caught sight of the lighted coaches of the passenger train through the hills although no ray from a headlight. Then he heard "3" strike and explode the torpedo, and he knew his brakeman had not had time to remove it. To expedite matters he waved his lantern high in the air as a signal to the passenger train that the

way was clear. The two engineers on "3" saw the signal, and came on without checking speed.

Down the line in the other direction, meanwhile, the engineer of the freight observed his conductor's signal and took it to mean he had more time on "3". Since the passenger train's headlight was not functioning he could not see that train; nor could his fireman, who had just opened the switch and climbed aboard the engine. Then the freight train with a string of cars started out on the main line, but hardly had the front truck rumbled over the switch points when the engineer saw No. 3 bearing down on him. About the same time the other brakeman near the end of the freight cars also saw the unlit passenger locomotive. He immediately pulled on the air brakes. This locked the wheels of the freight, preventing the engineer from backing up. The outcome was the passenger train plowed into the freight locomotive, knocking it off the right of way. The casualties were the two firemen and the head engineer of the passenger train.

Bedwell used this incident years later in his story "Old Mogul Mountain" in *Railroad Magazine*. It was rendered almost unchanged except that in the fictional accident there were no casualties. This is only one of the many true episodes which later went into his "factual" fiction.

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 knew he would be obliged to leave. So when Chief Dispatcher Ed Butler sent him to Victorville, nights, and he looked it over, he decided to beat them to it. Victorville, on the Mojave Desert, was strictly a frame and false-front village. It got hotter than Hades on the Mojave Desert. And the job wasn't suitable for a young brass pounder who was beginning to think he was pretty good. There were two local freight trains, and two local passengers, to work,

bills to expense, and abstracts to be made. Also, you had to keep the water tank filled, and the pumphouse was about a half-mile from the station. But let Bedwell tell the rest of the story:

"I called Butler on the Morse. Told him I didn't think I could handle the job, and I asked him for a wire pass back to San Bernardino. He wouldn't send me the pass. Not only that, he wired all his conductors in the vicinity not to carry me anywhere, for free. Three of them that I braced for a ride showed me the message. However, that was joint track with the UP, and the first UP conductor I encountered, stowed me in his caboose for the trip back. Butler had my time check ready for me when I showed up the next morning."

After that came Bedwell's long association with the Southern Pacific and its subsidiary, the Pacific Electric Railway.

Geographically the young boomer had run the gamut from rolling prairies to snow-peaked mountains. Now he was to experience the "sun and silence" on 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, Arizona.

Bedwell began working out on the desert not long after the SP had won its Homeric struggle to keep the Colorado River in check. In the spring of 1906 the river broke loose south of Yuma and threatened to flood the entire Imperial Valley. The Salton Sea, being below sea level, was for many months in grave danger of inundating the Valley. Much of the SP main line in that area, too, was at sub-sea level. In the end E. H. Harriman, the far-sighted head of the Southern Pacific, authorized the expenditure of $4 million to save the Imperial Valley and the railroad. Under the inspired leadership of Epes Randolph, the SP's frail, profane but truly gifted engineer, the job was

done. Randolph, even then slowly dying from tuberculosis, waged a valiant battle that the Valley might live. The Los Angeles Division was virtually out of the running except for the movement of 3,000 rock-loaded flat cars and other material to hold the river in place. It was not until February 11, 1907, that the breach was sealed for good. Here was an epic in rock which matched anything the Rockies had to offer.

In 1908 Bedwell's first published story appeared in the *Los Angeles Times Illustrated Weekly Magazine.* Called "The Lure of the Desert," it brought out the peculiar fascination the dry, barren country had on its author. The tale is about a young prospector who leaves California for the East but later decides that his burro and cat and the desert mean more to him than civilization and the eastern girl he had planned to marry. 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.

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 A. Munsey, an ex-telegrapher. When his tale "Campbell's Wedding Race" appeared in that periodical late in 1909 it marked his first entry into a national publication.

The short story concerns a young locomotive engineer on the day of his wedding. Campbell is to be married that evening at 8 o'clock in Junction City. But noon finds him at Farnham a hundred miles away with a freight wreck intervening and no scheduled trains running. Campbell, however, bullies the dispatcher into letting him take extra freight No. 1127, and he is out to make a record run. Then come accidents: a pulled-out drawbar, a fireman losing his shovel, leaky flues and, finally, derailment of his train. He, nevertheless, overcomes these four mishaps, by-passes a freight wreck, uncouples the

engine from his own derailed train and gets through to Junction City. There he learns his fiancee, upon hearing of the wreck, assumes the wedding is to be postponed and goes to a movie with another young man.

"You wired that you couldn't get out of Farnham," his prospective father-in-law remarked with asperity, in explaining why the wedding was cancelled.

"Why didn't you wire us when you started?" his fiancee's father continued angrily.

"I forgot," said Campbell out of breath.

Then taking out his watch he murmured, "This is accident number five!" But he stormed up Main Street to the theater determined to go through with the wedding as scheduled.

Close on the heels of Bedwell's first railroad story came his two-part autobiographical sketch in *The American Magazine*. Titled "The Mistakes of a Young Railroad Telegraph Operator," it suggested certain reforms while at the same time giving readers an authentic picture of railroad life. The feature was well illustrated by F. B. Masters.

III

INTERURBAN INTERLUDE

When twenty-one Bedwell began his long and pleasant association with the Pacific Electric Railway. He started working for the far-flung interurban in 1909, at the booming seacoast town of San Pedro. Its Los Angeles Harbor was a bustling port in the fastest growing area of Southern California.

Pacific Electric itself, in a land of superlatives, was soon to become the world's largest interurban railway. After the "Great Merger" in 1911, PE acquired all interurban electric lines in greater Los Angeles and vicinity. It was to embrace 1,000 miles of road; and with the extension to San Bernardino in 1914, it reached its zenith. No mere "trolley line," PE had four-track routes boasting heavy freight operation and frequent high-speed passenger service.

Long trains of "Big Red Cars" hauled thousands from Los Angeles to San Pedro, where the riders boarded steamers for Santa Catalina Island and elsewhere. Other PE "interurbans" made connections with a narrow-gauge cable railway and trolley line to Mount Lowe. Here, at an altitude of 4420 feet, sightseers reveled in mountain scenery from Ye Alpine Tavern or inspected the wondrous Lowe Observatory telescope at Echo Mountain. Visitors from Maine to Texas booked passage on the "Orange Empire Trolley Trip" to tour the "Sunny Scenic Southland" from personally conducted electric cars. The mountains and the sea, Hollywood, bright year-around flower

gardens and prodigious orchards were all served by Pacific Electric. Here, it seemed to the young railroader from Iowa, was a veritable Eldorado. Bedwell chose to remain with PE for nearly two decades. He liked the railway, the country, the people.

After two years as assistant agent in San Pedro, Bedwell went in the same capacity to the Quaker community of Whittier. He brought his mother to California and she lived in Whittier or its vicinity until her death in 1921. During this period he married Ellen Hart Talbot, the daughter of a prosperous southern family. A good cook and a fine housekeeper, "Ellie," as she was usually called, fitted into his life naturally and gracefully.

Whittier, fifteen miles from Los Angeles by trolley, in those days was a conservative, self-contained college town of 4,550 people. Bedwell characterized it as:

". . . an attractive little city spread on a slope of the Puente Hills, surrounded by citrus groves, with oil-well derricks sprouting from the upper reaches . . . . It had a busy station with an assistant, a ticket clerk, a warehouseman and an express driver to help."

Pacific Electric operated 60 daily trains, on a 45-minute average headway, running up to the one-story wooden passenger depot at Philadelphia and Comstock streets. The ticket office and waiting room occupied half of a large storeroom, whereas the remainder was given over to a fountain and magazine stand operated by Horace E. Rosenthal. Known as "Rosy," the popular merchant is still in business (1959) in the same building.

The Whittier branch veered from the La Habra-Yorba Linda line at Los Nietos. Before widespread use of automobile and bus, the ponderous red cars were a familiar part of the Whittier scene. Usually the sturdy, square-end, monitor roof vehicles of the 800-class with a balancing speed of 50 miles per hour, made the Whittier run. (One of these historic cars is preserved today in "Travel Town," Los Angeles's city transportation exhibit in Griffith Park.)

To be sure, the interurban never had quite the romance of steam railroading. Yet the high-speed electric railway had a fascination all its own. Many of the employees were old heads—experienced men who had held down important positions on other roads but had given those up to live in California. They knew their work, so there was no need to throw their weight around to cover up for lack of ability. Bedwell fitted into this situation admirably, for he was a hard-worker and a competent, reliable railroader. In 1913, when still a young man, he was promoted to agent at Whittier. The agency was lucrative, chiefly because of a heavy express business, on which the agent received a liberal commission apart from his PE salary.

So long as there were no complaints and the work was properly done the front office in Los Angeles was content to let well enough alone. Indeed, when Pete Groftholdt, an elderly Dane attached to the President's Office as a trouble shooter, came out to "look things over" Bedwell and he sometimes took the afternoon off and played golf. Another friend of Bedwell's was Oliver Crook, a local man and an avid golfer.

Bedwell, who was not averse to taking a drink now and then, never let National Prohibition stand in his way. Ralph McMichael, the assistant agent, recalls with a chuckle how his boss used to keep a jug of white mule hidden in the back room of the station. All went well until McMichael discovered the liquor and took a few swigs himself. To avoid detection he filled the jug up to its previous level with water. Then Bedwell complained to his bootlegger, who was also a PE mechanic, about the poor quality of his product. Sensing something was amiss the vendor began "sounding out" McMichael. The bootlegger said he sometimes filled Harry's jug "out of kindness to an old friend," etc., but was told the white mule had mysteriously lost its "kick." McMichael showed surprise and said he hadn't "noted a thing." After more verbal sparring the illicit purveyor made the assistant

agent a proposition: if McMichael would keep an eye on the jug and see that no unauthorized person got into it, he would slip him a half-pint at intervals. The offer was immediately accepted. Thereafter there were no further complaints on the quality or strength of the white mule.

Despite Bedwell's "work at the jug" McMichael adds that he never showed the slightest indication of tippling and was always courteous and efficient in his work and in his contacts with the public. On the contrary, McMichael, who is now a Southern Pacific official, looked up to him as being a model railroader. He learned station-accounting, good work habits and how to shoulder responsibility from Bedwell—all of which paved the way for future advancement. Let it also be emphasized that Bedwell was not a lush, and he was never known to be under the influence of intoxicating liquors while on the job, either with PE or elsewhere.

In 1910 Bedwell had his second story in *Railroad Man's Magazine,* and the following year he placed a two-part serial in that periodical. Nineteen-eleven also saw his short story about a boomer switchman, called "The 'Snake,' " in the "slick-paper," *Harper's Weekly.* There was little doubt that he was becoming as competent in writing as he was in railroading. 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. This early work gave indications of promise but lacked the smoothness and polish which characterized his later productions. His insight into the character and philosophy of railroad men was apparent although not pronounced. And yet even his lighter pieces show indubitable authenticity. Bedwell was ever an honest writer, as he was a person, devoid of show and 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 11, 1927. In a letter to the writer Bedwell related how the editor, Harry Maule, "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.

In the first paragraph of the story one gets a telling picture of the hero:

> Being a telegrapher of great skill, Eddie Sand had developed independence of thought and a habit of moving freely about over the face of the land. Men of the craft class such as "boomers" because you seldom see them twice in the same place, unless you take a second look shortly after the first. Even then you may only see them going out and slamming the door.

Later Bedwell brings in Barabe, the superintendent, who likewise appears in subsequent tales.

> Barabe was a strong, heavy-set man, ponderously quick in his movements. He had a mind like a steel trap, and he knew his business. He was a veteran of the railroad game, and was quick to pick a man with railroad sense and training. He liked Eddie Sand's cool carelessness, and the bright gray of his eyes that showed an unmoved nerve.

Actually, the novelette is a picaresque adventure-story with western and mystery leavening. Eddie Sand's adversary is a renegade dispatcher and outlaw known as "Lightning-flash." The setting is in California and Mexico.

Speaking of writer-railroaders, it is a coincidence that during the time Bedwell was penning his "shorts," the president of Pacific Electric, Paul Shoup, began assembling his own stories and tales for book publication. Under the title of *Side Tracks from the Main Line,* issued in a privately-printed volume during 1924, Shoup had several rail stories along with other sketches. The PE head, like his Whittier agent, was once a telegraph operator. But it is doubtful if each knew the other had written railroad fiction. A little more sleuthing on the subject brings to light that PE once had a gateman at the Main Street Station who later excelled in writing mysteries. His name was Willard Huntington Wright, better known as S. S. Van Dine.

Bedwell's eighteen-year stay in Whittier with Pacific Electric was a happy period in his life. He worked closely with the Southern Pacific ticket seller, Charles Sterling Wallace, in that friendly 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 six feet, 1½ inch height of the Iowa-born agent, the SP man was a stocky five-feet-five; was a successful amateur wrestler; but was not addicted to reading railroad yarns. 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 that Bedwell bestowed on railroading.

Bedwell and Wallace enjoyed working together to the satisfaction of the company, and having a little fun in the bargain. The five-day-week was, of course, far in the future. Nor were Saturdays half-day. Since PE was owned

by Southern Pacific, the two railroaders' duties overlapped. To put it stronger, with Bedwell and Wallace working as a team, their duties sometimes turned out to be identical. Ergo, if Wallace wanted to see all the Whittier College home football games (which he did) appropriate arrangements were made with Bedwell to represent the SP. Conversely, when Bedwell wanted to get off early to go to his beach house in Belmont Shore, a subdivision of Long Beach, Wallace was *pro tem* the official representative of PE. But for the most part they put in long days on duty, and around Christmas they worked from twelve to fourteen hours a day.

If Harry Bedwell endowed his "fictional" Walley with a sixth sense almost to the point of being a soothsayer, the Wallace who worked beside him at the ticket counter was not so favored. The shoe was often on the other foot. In truth Charlie Wallace never knew by what form of clairvoyance Bedwell got results, when he and others could not. To cite one instance:

Every spring the *Whittier News* ran a BEAUTIFY YOUR CITY campaign. For years attempts were made to get the railway to clean up its grounds by the freight house on the outskirts of town. Scathing editorials were written, and letters deluged the paper. Marked copies of these items were sent to the PE officials who apparently were not in the least concerned. The sniping by the press continued and always with the same result: nothing happened.

One day in desperation Wallace asked Bedwell to request a lawn mower when the latter was making out the material requisitions. The SP ticket seller was new to Whittier and camped in the unused front office of the freight house. The single hotel left much to be desired in cleanliness, hence the temporary abode of the new man. Wallace told the PE agent he would gladly cut the grass and mow the weeds in front of his "home." The requisition went in, but no mower came out. That, in light of past experience, was to be expected.

Not long afterward the superintendent passed by and dropped in to have a talk with Bedwell. He was not only the Whittier agent's superior but a personal friend as well. The official casually mentioned the lawn mower and showed some curiosity as to why it was needed. Bedwell explained the situation, and no more was said. Next day out came the lawn mower together with rakes, hoes, shovels and hose. The day following came a whole landscaping crew. They rolled and graded and planted until the freight yard was a thing of beauty. And all for the request of one lawn mower!

About 1920 Harry Bedwell and Ellie moved to their "ranch" at McCampbell station, just west of Rivera. Their front gate, of what we would now call a semi-sustaining acre, opened onto the PE tracks. By taking the Big Red Car, Bedwell could be at work in the Whittier depot in a matter of minutes. His mother, however, continued to live alone on West Philadelphia Street in Whittier. Bedwell was very solicitous about her, calling by phone daily and making frequent visits.

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 parlor. He could talk with equal ease to section men, farmers or millionaires. Meticulous in dress and personal appearance, the slender, well-groomed interurban representative became a familiar figure in the college town.

Charles Wallace tells of an incident showing Bedwell's popularity and at the same time indicating the wide variety of the agent's customers. A shabbily dressed man came into the station to reserve a drawing room to New York. Wallace waited on him. Feeling sorry for a man so poorly dressed with apparently limited means, he tried to explain the comfort and convenience of a tourist car. Traveling "tourist" was very economical and you could carry your lunch in the car. At this point Bedwell inter-

rupted to introduce the stranger to Wallace and also to explain that the gentleman always took a drawing room on the best train.

When the "space" was procured and the man left, Bedwell told his understudy the shoddy-looking individual had once been his mailman. The postman had wanted a home but could not afford Whittier prices, so he settled for a few acres of sand and weeds nearby. The land turned out to be right in the middle of the Santa Fe Springs oil field. As a result of his purchase he became a millionaire. The Southern Pacific would have gladly sent out a special representative to take care of his travel needs but he always went to Bedwell for old times sake. Besides he had a feeling his old friend knew more about getting the proper accommodations than did the "higher ups" in the Los Angeles office.

Meanwhile, the Talbots, Bedwell's in-laws, had been wanting him to go into business. With his knowledge of bookkeeping and managerial ability 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 gave up his PE agency in 1927 and was subsequently 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. This jeopardized the other interests of the family, including Dorado Club. And Bedwell was out of a job. He also lost heavily in mortgaging real estate to help his relatives stave off disaster. On top of this his wife died in 1934. The couple had no children.

Los Angeles was a bedlam of bankruptcies, widespread unemployment and general chaos. The rampant prosperity

and reckless inflation of the twenties came to a sudden and gloomy end the autumn of 1929. Bedwell wanted to get away from it all. He sought peace and quiet. He urgently needed a rest. After that he would turn to full-time writing, more as a source of livelihood than as an avocation.

IV

RAILROAD WRITER

After the death of Ellie, Bedwell found sanctuary by retiring to a small cottage near Alpine in San Diego County. Situated twenty-five miles northeast of San Diego on a large tract of land, it overlooked mountain peaks and ridges. The house had a combination garage and studio. The latter, being of knotty pine, served as an admirable study.

During this period of semi-retirement Bedwell began writing in earnest. Success came in a bound with the publication of "Imperial Pass" in *The Saturday Evening Post,* January 13, 1934. This is a tale of a runaway train on a mountain railroad. It took only one domineering and inexperienced trainmaster to make trouble but several seasoned crewmen to keep his poor judgement from endangering life and property. The selection was the first of nine railroad stories to appear under his by-line in that popular weekly.

It was not until July that he placed another manuscript. In this article Bedwell collaborated with his friend Gordon Montgomery in telling the latter's experience involving an oil well which caught fire in Venezuela. The prize-story, called "The Lake of Fire," in *Bluebook Magazine,* netted the writers a modest $50.

Bedwell made his re-entry into *Railroad* with "A Man Who Could Handle Trains" in November, 1936. Freeman H. Hubbard, editor of that magazine, quickly realized the potential literary merit of the newcomer and from that time on actively solicited his stories.

Hubbard liked the sound operational details of his yarns, but what captivated him the most were the warm, homespun pictures of rural American life. Passages like:

> "Indian summer had come to the prairies, and a tranquil hush was on that bright land. River smells floated through the trees. The air was like fragile silk."

Better still is the account of the arrival of the evening train:

> Twenty-two, the 6:45 eastbound local passenger train, was about due. Station and platform began to hum and bustle with people, town and country folk in search of diversion in the idle hours after the five o'clock supper. Girls gathered in groups and chattered. In the bare space between sidings, men and boys played catch and pitched horseshoes. The editor of the *Auburn Weekly Enterprise* was on hand taking notes for his next issue. Laughter and guffaws ran through the crowd.
>
> Meanwhile the station force worked like a dexterous machine. Madden [the agent] answered the wire and the telephone . . . Roy Dent [the clerk] sold tickets, gave information, and delivered and received express shipments. Eldon [the student operator] juggled baggage and express on the platform.
>
> The hack came from the hotel and the drayman brought a load of drummer's sample trunks. The pitch of excitement climbed as engine smoke smudged the sunset. Human beings on the lower platform milled and scattered. The train clanged in slowly, tainting the lifeless air with its sharp scent. A brakeman leaned from the car door and waved the engineer to a stop with the combination baggage, express and mail coach spotted at the freight platform.

Eldon loaded three sacks of mail and received four in return. He trudged away at once to the post office with the sacks on his back.

The clerk and the brakeman shoved the gang plank across to the combination car and began carrying out machinery parts, packages and suitcases, and rolling trunks to the platform. The agent and the messenger exchanged receipts for valuable packages. Then with the help of them all, and the undertaker who had come to receive it, they carried out a corpse in a great wooden box. The noise of the crowd was suddenly hushed to a murmur.

The clerk and the brakeman began rapidly loading the outbound goods that Eldon had accumulated on the platform—ten gallon cans of milk and all the baggage and express that Auburn was forwarding for that day.

"All aboard!" the conductor barked, raising his hand as Dent and the brakeman sprang to the lower platform and pushed the gangplank clear.

The engine's bell tolled, and Twenty-two clanked and chuffed into the twilight.

The crowd broke into sections. The elders trailed toward the square and the post office to await the distribution of the mail. Boys and girls mingled and strolled off in couples through the shaded twilight.

The above passages are from "The Careless Road." They could well have come out of Willa Cather's novels except for their very detailed railroad description.

Bedwell nearly always had his story-settings in rural locales. He himself worked in small and often inaccessible towns and hamlets. His world was closely linked with the pot-bellied stove and village depot. Later he featured diesels and centralized traffic control. Yet many of his stories are period-pieces concerning the day of the horse and buggy or shortly thereafter. Most of his best tales

contain nostalgic memories of this more leisurely era when the Iron Horse meant so much to grass-roots America.

Having returned to *Railroad,* Bedwell hit his stride; and in 1939 eight of his short stories or novelettes had appeared in that unique periodical within a twelfthmonth. All told, his contributions to that magazine total 35, of which only three were non-fiction. 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 first 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, Robert Fulkerson Hoffman contributed many short stories, and there were features of varying merit along with railroad verse. At that time it was edited by Robert Mackay.

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 non-existent. *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.

Nor were its contributors limited to "railroad writers" as such. John T. Winterich, the distinguished bibliophile, had story and verse; and Alvin F. Harlow, the popular historian, regularly wrote features for the old *Railroad Man's Magazine.* One also sees the names of the iconoclastic H. L. Mencken and his theater-critic, associate, George Jean Nathan, in the early yellowing pages. In current years by-lines of Senator Richard E. Neuberger and the equally prolific Stewart H. Holbrook have appeared.

The author must confess his earliest published manuscript ran in *Railroad.* While taking English courses at the State University of Iowa in the summer of 1937, the author mentioned the fact to Frank Luther Mott, then head of the School of Journalism. He likewise confided his first published short story had appeared in that magazine.

"Do they still have that contract on the back of their checks stating the author renounces all rights and privileges upon endorsement in *typewritten* form?" the scholarly dean queried with a grin.

"Yes," I replied, fondly recalling my earliest writer's check.

It may be added this typed-statement was superseded by a stamped notice around the time Popular Publications purchased the magazine from the Frank A. Munsey Company.

In writing for *Railroad,* Bedwell added stature to his hero Eddie Sand. Born, as previously noted, in *Short Stories,* the affable, independent, devil-may-care boomer appeared in the majority of his tales. Eddie somehow always came out on the winning side. Ever a likeable "brass pounder," honest, competent and cocky, he endeared himself to readers. To a small degree Eddie Sand became to railroad fiction what Casey Jones became to folksong and John Henry to Negro folkways.

While Eddie was always top dog in Bedwell's railroad

fraternity, other strong characters were taking shape. There was Walley Sterling, who flitted in and out of stories, sometimes as dispatcher, more often as "op"—and one of the best. Other leading personages were Hi Wheeler, a boomer brakeman, and Mel Hatch, another "stinger," late of the farm. Somewhere along the line one encountered the redoubtable Andy Sharp, locomotive engineer, and two irascable conductors: "Galloping" Gunderson and "Scrap Iron" Hawkins. On the managerial level there was President Henry Hewitt Nickerson, better known as Salt-and-Molasses Nickerson, revered by his men, respected by his rivals, yet as plain as the proverbial shoe. Of superintendents good, bad or unclassified were the genial Welby, the wild Hibernian O'Conner, and the martinet Buck Barabe. Finally, the roll call included a wide range of trainmasters, from the seasoned "Clinker" Ward to the rodent-faced Neff, with character in kind. All these men and many more "railroaded" on the never-never pikes of Bedwell's imagination.

There were women, too, but they usually played minor roles. They were not as sharply drawn as the male characters, nor as real. Railroading to Harry Bedwell was essentially a man's calling, and what love interest he added was secondary.

Among the more popular stories published in *Railroad* during this period were "Sun and Silence," "With the Wires Down," and "In Search of the Sun." He also wrote two yarns reminiscent of his interurban railroad days, called "Pacific Electric" and "Tower Man." The former relates how Eddie Sand on his own initiative provided shuttle service from Whittier to Los Nietos during a severe flood. Although the line was washed out west of Los Nietos, connections were made with the Santa Fe trains at that point for the remainder of the trip to Los Angeles. This temporary expedient is said to have actually occurred with Bedwell's inaugurating the emergency shuttle. The second "juice" story has Eddie Sand in Watts

Tower preventing a serious accident on the four-track line and, at the same time, outwitting an obstreperous trainmaster. It has some basis of truth but more of fiction. While not his best works, these two titles have the virtue of being among the very few stories concerning electric railways.

It was not until late in 1940 that Bedwell's second *Post* story appeared. Titled "Snow on the High Iron," the tale concerns a locomotive engineer who "lost his nerve" only to find it in the teeth of a blizzard. The next year saw two more Bedwell stories in that magazine. "Smart Boomer," which appeared in March, is Eddie Sand at his best; and "Pass to Seattle," run in October, simply added to the boomer's fame. The latter deals with such technical obfuscations as "The Dutch Drop and the Two-Legged Order" (which was its original title until changed by *Post* editors), known to railroad men and no others. But that's explained in the story.

While in Alpine Bedwell used to see Henry Herbert Knibbs, who spent his last years in San Diego County. Knibbs's novels and verse-narratives of the old West were in vogue earlier in the century. In his varied career the "Western" writer had clerked for the Lehigh Valley and the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh, making him an ex-railroader of sorts. Then, too, Knibbs was a close friend of the late Frank H. Spearman, who wrote railroad novels, short stories and other "Westerns." Apart from this, Knibbs was a remarkable old gentleman, given to spinning cowboy tales, which were to Bedwell's liking.

During the Depression Bedwell continued to keep 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."

On May 13, 1940, Bedwell married Lorraine Richardson. Coming from a railroad family, with one brother who was locomotive engineer on the Pennsylvania and another a conductor on the same road, Lorraine had much in common with her husband. She liked him because of his interest in writing, literature and life, but most of all because he was "a magnet of charm and graciousness in a down-to-earth manner." Both were fond of pets, and many a lost dog found asylum in the Bedwell household. The couple made their home near Alpine, naming their house "Lorwell," a combination of part of her given name and his surname.

In 1941 Bedwell traveled over nearly all of the Denver & Rio Grande Western system as a guest of the trustees, Judge Wilson McCarthy and Henry Swan. He was to do some writing on the road. The Rio Grande men, described by Bedwell as "a robust bunch of fellows . . . easy to like," brought back memories of when he was a young, lanky "op" for that road in Utah. Very little, however, came out of the extensive trip. Indeed, hardly had he returned to Alpine when war was declared on Japan, and the country desperately needed skilled railroad men regardless of age or seniority.

The Southern Pacific called him back to work. Like a good railroader he answered the call.

V

SOFT METAL MAN

Early in 1942 Harry Bedwell was back on the railroad, one of the old Soft Metal Gang. These men, with "silver in their hair, gold in their teeth and lead in their pants," as he put it, had come out of retirement. They gladly pitched in during the manpower shortage to keep the trains moving while the nation was at war.

Bedwell's first assignment was at Norwalk, near Los Angeles, on a Southern Pacific branch line. While in the midst of catching up on overdue reports, Bedwell went to the phone to answer a call from Vic Carroll, the chief traveling auditor. The last time the auditor had checked him was at Whittier station before Bedwell's retirement. Vic queried him as to what he had been doing when "off the railroad."

Bedwell promptly replied, "Just as damn little as I possibly could!"

Vic came back with: "Brother, you're not doing that now!"

There was plenty of work to do but no train orders to copy. The abstracting, revising and billing was far behind due to the regular man's having been sick and the crowding of rails with war-shipments. This meant the new relief agent hadn't much time for sleep.

Bedwell's reemployment on the SP is thinly veiled in "The Return of Eddie Sand," one of several short stories on war-time and post-war experiences. The setting of the tale corresponds in many particulars to the actual background of Norwalk.

Next he went to Glamis, where he had issued his last train order thirty-five years before. He sat down at the same telegraph table and began "sending" over the Morse wire exactly where he had left off at age nineteen. In contrast to the Glamis that he knew as a young man the town was now alive with military personnel. General George Patton's army was training there on the Colorado and Mojave deserts, and they made Glamis a supply dump for their maneuvers and sham battles. The Air Force frequently bombed the community—with sacked flour. One-hundred car freight trains crawled out of sidings and onto the next. Crews "died" on the "hog law" (the Federal sixteen-hour law limiting the time train and enginemen can work without having eight hours rest), and "block busters" were sent out of San Francisco to get them through the Yuma Yard. You get a nostalgic picture of Bedwell as one of the old Soft Metal Gang in his two-part novelette "Desert Job."

Back at work memories of his earlier years at lonely depots came floating through his mind like kaleidescopic pictures.

"Little, old, battered, telegraph stations under the eternal frown of dark peaks, with Moguls stamping solomnly on the grade. Headlights along the glittering ribbon of steel, crowded close under the bluffs, with the river smells heavy in the night. The restless lights and ceaseless turmoil of great terminal yards. Lonely tricks, at the tag end of night, when the stars died quietly and the gallant challenge of a hotshot was flung across the prairies to salute the dawn."

How railroading had changed in a quarter of a century! Eddie Sand finds (in the story) that the telephone has supplanted the "key" in sending train orders. His stylus, which he had saved all these years, is regarded as "quaint" by the little first-trick female Mexican operator. She knows only a smattering of Morse, picked up in a telegraph school in Los Angeles. But when a violent dust

storm puts the telephone out of commission the old timer has his inning and manages to keep the trains running with the key.

Coming back from story to reality, one finds Bedwell working at numerous stations on the main line of the SP between Los Angeles and Yuma; also at Calexico. At the latter town, on the Mexican boundary line, he saw many "wetbacks," or "border jumpers" so vividly described in "Night of Plunder." In boiling down the original eighty-page manuscript of the story, the *Post* editors took out some of the parts which had given the Mexican "wetbacks" more sympathetic treatment than in the edited version. As a result Bedwell received threatening letters from across the border protesting against the way he portrayed the Mexican nationals in the story. "It looked for a time as if it were going to cause an international incident," Bedwell wrote to the writer. He also had correspondence "from a conspirator" who tried to ring him in on a revolution that was brewing down there at that time. "But I ducked out of that one," he commented.

While serving as relief operator at stations on the desert and frequently moving from place to place, he left his wife on the West Coast until some permanance of locale was assured. One day at Glamis the temperature in the drab, wooden depot reached 127°, the highest his thermometer would go.

The isolation of Bertram, a tiny station on the Salton Sea, was described in his letter to William Knapke:

". . . a lone yellow telegraph office set on the sand with the rails and the sea before it, the dun-colored desert sloping down from behind. The trains slammed by, seldom stopping, and then the silence would come back and the sun shine furiously or the stars would wink impudently. Nothing else except you waited long enough and there did seem to be something. Something that came in, out of the silence, that you could almost touch, only those who did touch it, they sent away and didn't let them come back!"

Through it all Bedwell never lost his sense of humor, his ability to laugh at himself and with others. Rarely did he laugh at others. He had too much humility and forbearance to find merriment at the expense of someone else. But he liked to relate droll incidents, even when they concerned himself. For example: When first stationed along the Salton Sea, he wrote Lorraine about the reception he received.

"What's your name?" growled the first trick dispatcher.

"Bedwell," came the reply.

"Oh," the veteran DS (dispatcher) exclaimed, "I was in jail with a Bedwell once—and a very good criminal he was, too!"

There was scarcely a letter his wife received which did not reflect his love for animals. The following is typical:

> ". . . I'm just belatedly reminded that I haven't mentioned the most important individual in our community. He has just called to take me home. He is Buster, an elderly shepherd dog, and a very amiable gentleman. He calls at the station at one in the morning to escort Geer [another operator] home. He's at my door early in the morning, and if I don't get up when he thinks I should, he warns me. Then he takes me to work, and he stays around till he is sure everything is going nicely . . . He dives into the Sea [Salton Sea] to chase the helldivers. A very fierce dog in the Dusty [name of a beautiful Labrador retriever which the Bedwells once owned] manner—all sound and fury, with a twinkle in the eye . . . So, as I call him as my best friend here, I had to add this."

From the Salton Sea Bedwell worked back again toward San Bernardino and ultimately to Los Angeles. While he was stationed at Garnet, about 55 miles southeast of San "Berdoo," the inroads of automation were poignantly

brought home to him. Issuing train orders from the little frame depot flanked by palmetto trees, he heard rumors of Centralized Traffic Control being extended southeast from San Bernardino.

CTC, it may be explained, is a method of electronic operation controlled by a person sitting in front of a large panel. On this panel are levers surmounted by tiny light bulbs. When a train is in the district the bulbs light, showing its exact location. By merely flicking a few levers the CTC operator sets signals and switches so that trains can safely meet without other human intervention. When CTC comes in, the old fashioned train-operator goes out. No more are tissues, or "flimsies," with their blunt directives to "C & E" (Conductor and Engineer) required. Train orders are *verboten.* Locomotive engineers proceed entirely by signals which may be actuated by a CTC operator in a tower a hundred miles away.

Soon rumors became fact. CTC was on the march. El Casco ceased to be a train-order station. Next, Beaumont operators were relieved. CTC moved on relentlessly through Banning to Palm Springs station as more "ops" got the ax. Finally it came to Garnet. Its side track was lined with outfit cars and workmen. Then one day Bedwell received the following message over the wire:

"Protect second trick Calexico four p. m. tomorrow."

At eight o'clock in the morning CTC took over—and Bedwell was on his way to a new assignment.

Later Bedwell saw duty on the SP's Coast Line between Los Angeles and San Francisco. While living in Ventura he was only a few feet from the blue Pacific. Here he loved to watch the red-and-yellow *Daylights* speed by, making the setting, at least for him, worthy of a Rembrandt. In protecting these assignments, he and his wife generally lived in a trailer.

Shortly after he went back to railroading in 1942, he had his first and only book published. Titled *The Boomer,* the novel is actually seven short stories rewritten and tied

together to make one harmonious whole. It received most favorable reviews. The *New York Times* hailed the book's hero, Eddie Sand, as "an upstanding, lovable fellow, a legend among railroad men" and called the novel "A pleasant, readable story, dealing knowledgeably with a world one knows little about, and not without thrill and adventure." The *Herald Tribune* exuberantly proclaimed it "an exciting yarn in sinewy prose about brakemen and engineers and telegraphers . . . Eddie Sand is a genuine and winning character . . . It has almost everything except sound effects by Richard Gardiner."

The novel was reprinted (106,000 copies) in a pocket-sized edition for the armed forces. Bedwell was proud of his Iowa background, and the volume has many flashbacks to his early years in Iowa and Missouri. Consider, for example:

> Eddie had come out of the prairies, learned the trade "hamming" about a country station, and was being moved from station to station as relief man on the line along the Missouri River, a green boy of sixteen who had arbitrarily added two years to his age to get a job, a rebel kid who would fight for his rights with impatient, willful alacrity, wide-eyed at all the world; a good operator, lacking only seasoning, when they shoved him into the St. Joe yard office, a hot telegraph job. The pressure here was intense, you worked with the fastest in the craft, and a kid might have fallen down for lack of confidence.

That's Harry Bedwell mirrored in Eddie Sand.

Again, his homespun description of caboose ride is tip-top Americana, if not "Iowana."

> The busy speed and the stubborn, muffled rumble of the moving train made you feel tucked-in. You felt at home in a caboose, the way you do in a farm-

> house kitchen. The ghosts of a thousand sturdy meals, ingeniously cooked by trainmen on the small round top of the drum-bellied heating stove, were faintly there among the shadows. There were smells of a dozen brands of tobacco, some of them with a range of forty yards, but all mellowed by time and the milder mixtures of old leather upholstery and signal oil. It was a snug, tight feeling, with the wash of the rain at the little windows and the brisk rhythm of the wheels clicking at the rail-joints. Dim lamps in brackets and lanterns, red and white, by the back door. Above, in the cupola, the faint outline of the rear brakeman, lounging there on lookout. The high wail of the engine's whistle trickled back, a thin challenge.

It is hard to liken Bedwell to other Hawkeye writers, simply because he wrote entirely on railroads. One can, however, point out certain regional characteristics common to Phil Stong's *Village Tale*. Stong's "Kaydee," moseying along the 166-mile Rock Island line between Keokuk and Des Moines, has the local color of a Bedwell setting. Indeed, the "Six-Forty-Five" meant as much to the folks of "Brunswick" as the old depot and local trains did to Bedwell and other Kellertonians at the beginning of the century. But Bedwell's salty, carefree railroaders, craftsmen in their own right, bear a much stronger resemblance to the lusty railroad linemen in William Wister Haines's *Slim* and *High Tension*. Des Moines-born, Haines makes his pole-climbing individualists have the same clear ring as Eddie Sand, Hi Wheeler, Mel Hatch, Walley Sterling, to mention a few of the characters in Bedwell's yarns. This is not surprising, for both authors participated in the work they portray, and have the happy faculty of putting their experiences into story. Their expressions are pat, pertinent and genuine. Their nomenclature is dictionary-clear to those in the industry and is part of the woof and weave of their calling.

Railroaders, like linemen, have their own lingo. The boomer in particular has a saltiness and felicity of expression peculiar to railroading. His jargon is part of the folkways of railroading. It is simple, picturesque and colorful. Railroad men, especially those out on the line, seldom have much formal education. But many have innate intelligence of a high order—coupled with independence of thought, a strong sense of humor and earthy figures of speech, unspoiled by an over abundance of learning. Their thinking is uninhibited and direct. Apart from sailing, probably no other calling has a more pungent language of its own than does railroading. Perhaps we should say than *did* railroading, for the passing of the boomer and the coming of automation has made for less individuality of expression. Even at that the heritage of the boomer lives on wherever men pull throttles and flag trains.

Bedwell almost unconsciously brought out this phenomenon in his stories. It comes naturally in his writings, as it did in the fictional yarns of A. W. Somerville or the true tales of Harry McClintock. These turns of expression and "slanguage" were as much a part of the boomer as his service letters. How many words the drifting brothers coined is anybody's guess, but it is certain they constitute the bulk of railroad slang. The itinerants were like bees carrying pollen; they took the vernacular from one region to plant it in another. Hence local expressions soon became common terms among railroaders. Often they combined certain permutations to germinate new words, which they propagated and nurtured, thereby enriching the folklore of railroading.

Anyone reading Bedwell's stories will soon come upon such words as "crummies," "hogs" and "reefers," which is to say, cabooses, locomotives and refrigerator cars. Such bizarre personnel as "snakes," "stingers," "ashcats," "hoggers" and "skippers" are simply railroadese for switchmen, brakemen, firemen, locomotive engineers and conductors. A superintendent or general manager on any-

body's railroad is, of course, the "Old Man," just as a dispatcher is a "train delayer;" and even the layman knows section men are called "gandy dancers." Slang if used judiciously adds spice and color to authentic railroad fiction. But overdone or wrongly placed, it appears artificial, forced and "wooden." Nothing belies a spurious railroad writer more than misplaced slang unless it is deviation from the traditional practice of designating eastbound trains in even numbers, and westbound in the odd.

In depicting the railroader, Bedwell always wrote as one of the fraternity. Many of his readers were railroad men; and at least one admirer, William A. Burke, Jr., a telegraph operator for the Jersey Central Lines, became a "brass pounder" after reading Bedwell's stories. Bedwell was never a railroad fan as such, nor was he given to studying locomotive rosters, engine-numbers or types of valve gears. He left that to the master mechanic. He saw railroading in its entirety, and he saw it whole. He could say with Christopher Morley:

> "Engines that go by steam
> (For pistons and cranks,
> Oh Lord, my thanks.)"

The steam locomotive was an integral part of his railroad mosaic when boomers "railroaded" in the grand manner. To him that was self-evident. An engine was to be appreciated, not analyzed. Nor did he delve into minute details of railroad history. On the other hand, he liked history in its broader aspects in that it provided a panorama of railroad development and national growth. This was evinced in his being a charter member of the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society.

As a writer he showed some aspects of realism, but he was primarily a romanticist. Railroading to him was not a job; it was an adventure. He, like the late Edward Hunger-

ford, saw trains and all that goes with them in rosy-tinted perspective. A prosaic railroad yard, for example, became a sensuous and enchanted locale full of sounds and sights and movement. Here is a typical word-picture from *The Boomer*:

"The sounds of the iron highway came up from the yard—the clang of engine bells and the stamp of exhausts and the solemn rumble of drawbars. A long, thin switchman on top of a rolling string of cars slid along the bright sky, his arms extended, waving as graceful as a dancer. A stock train clanked into the yard and sent up the faint bleating of sheep. Far out on the prairie the limited shouted her insolent warning. The restless traffic moved with the minutes, day and night."

More than anything else Bedwell lamented the passing of the boomers. "They were a restless breed," he soliloquized in his writings, "and their lives were high adventure. They were the glory of railroading. They'd split their last dime with you, or bust your nose if they thought you needed it."

Only the boomers could roam over the nation's railroads with jaunty indifference and yet have a fierce loyalty for their craft. Good boomers kept their records clean. They respected and sometimes admired the officers under whom they worked—but never wished to be of their kind. As Eddie Sand expressed it (which is essentially Bedwell himself) to desk-bound Superintendent Buck Barabe:

> "You've sat there for fourteen years," the boomer mused. "And during all the while you've never encountered much beyond this desk. All that interests you comes and goes across that thirty-six square feet of flat surface." His eyes drifted beyond the hot, flickering flats. "You've never heard the Feather River go raving mad down there a thousand feet below the high iron. You've never listened to the

big jacks snarl coming up to Arkansas Junction, where the line slips off to climb to Leadville. You don't know the smell of magnolias on a wet night down South, or the tang of the north woods when they drip with the night fog."

VI

RAILROADING IN STORY

One can easily visualize Bedwell on the second trick at some lonely station. He has OS'ed the last evening train; the key is silent; and the pot-bellied stove cracks in the dimly-lit waiting room. A cone of light shines on the table where he sits with pencil in hand scribbling on a yellow Western Union pad. He draws on his cigarette and then leans back to meditate. Memories? Yes, a whole panorama of them come sweeping through his mind. Back on the "Q" for example . . .

He was nineteen when they sent him to a little town along the Missouri River on the night trick. The depot marked the end of a double track, to the south of which extended but a single track. He recalls, as if it were only yesterday, the dispatcher had put out a standing order to "All Trains Southbound" notifying them of a broken water spout. This spout was a few miles south of the station where Bedwell worked, and to which he gave the name "Rush" in an article. The faulty spout necessitated trains going into a siding at Rush to get water. It also meant southbound trains had to go out on the single track and then back onto the siding.

On this memorable night No. 14, the southbound passenger train, was late and the crew was in a hurry. They had been accustomed to "the water spout order" and took it for granted. But it so happened that Bedwell had another

order from the dispatcher instructing No. 14 to wait at Rush for northbound passenger No. 19, which was running an hour and thirty minutes behind time. The customary procedure was for him to hand a copy of the standing order to the engineer and another to the conductor as the train went by. To save time, however, the crew had the conductor get both copies of the order and, if it concerned the faulty spout, the "skipper" would wave a "proceed" signal to the head brakeman. Then the brakeman would run ahead and open the switch. While the train pulled out onto the single track, preparatory to backing into the siding, the conductor would walk through the coaches. Lastly, when they stopped for the rear brakeman to close the switch, the conductor would alight and give the engineer a copy of the order.

On this occasion the conductor on "14" came into the station to sign the order as his train stopped. He read it carefully, acknowledged it with his signature and inquired as to when No. 19 would arrive. "She's coming over the hill now," Bedwell replied, for he had seen the headlight around the bend in the valley. The train could not be seen again, however, until she was within about a hundred yards of the depot. A grove of trees and stock pens obstructed vision. Bedwell tore off two copies of the order and handed them both to the conductor.

The conductor crammed one copy into his pocket and carefully folded the other to give to the engineer. As the "hogger" had no right to move until the agent gave him a clearance of the "stop" semaphore, the conductor paused to chat. Meanwhile, the engineer and brakeman, thinking it was the same old "water spout order," did not wait for the conductor's signal but started out onto the single track line.

By a quirk of fate, Bedwell got up from the chair to look out the big double windows. He espied the red marker lights of No. 14 moving forward over the switch. About the same time he saw a moving shaft of light over

the tree tops cast by No. 19. Over his face came an expression of horror.

Railroaders are quick to read danger signals, and when the conductor observed that look he dashed through the doorway and ran along the track until he caught the end of his train as it cleared the switch. Once on the car-platform, he frantically pulled the signal cord and at the same time called out to the rear brakeman to leave the switch open and stand by it.

Slowly, very slowly, the train began backing into the clear. The engineer, apparently, only had a vague idea what was wrong.

Number 19 hove in sight from behind a clump of trees like a one-eyed Cyclops. No. 14, meanwhile, had its engine and baggage car still out on the single track. The brakeman at the switch bravely calculated the distance between the two trains with the spectre of death staring him in the face. The engineers of both trains subsequently went through the same close mental gymnastics—and stayed at their posts.

The "hogger" of No. 14 opened the throttle wider, just enough to get maximum traction and not slip his drivers. But the man on the right hand side of the cab of No. 19 did not see the danger until he was close to the other train. Then he "big-holed" her, as an emergency air brake application is called. The brakeman at the switch gripped the stand with both hands and tried not to be afraid. During these seconds Bedwell had his eyes fixed on the ghastly scene, eerily illuminated by the two bright headlights. Number 14 barely pulled into the clear when the alert brakeman threw the switch, shunting No. 19 by as the cylinders of the two engines came within inches of hitting each other.

Bedwell leans forward, aroused from his reverie. Here is just the thing he needed for that feature in *The Ameri-*

can Magazine. He processed and polished the incident under the flickering yellow ray of the lamp in the still of night. Later he rewrote the pavid experience for the *Post* story, "Smart Boomer." One will find Eddie Sand witnessing very nearly the same circumstances but in a different locale. Millions of *Post* readers noted its authentic details, and Bedwell's name became synonymous with sound stories of railroading by a railroader.

The above-pictured station-setting has its counterpart in many flag-stops and village depots where Bedwell worked from the time he started writing to his last agency on the Southern Pacific. He preferred the night trick because it provided the stillness and peace which he liked and which are conducive to good writing.

This brings up the fascinating subject of how a writer works, thinks, feels, lives.

Bedwell nearly always wrote his first draft in longhand. Then he would type the copy, improvising, correcting and editing as he went along. He did all his own typing. About the only part Lorraine Bedwell played was to read the manuscript for clarity. If some passages weren't clear to her, they presumably wouldn't be clear to the *Post* readers either. Then they would get together and thrash out the garbled paragraphs and rewrite for clarity. Bedwell believed in simplicity. He never used long, pedantic words if shorter simpler ones would best convey his thought.

He smoked incessantly when writing. A pack of cigarettes went hand in hand with his pencil and paper. He frequently drank tea as he worked over his MSS. In the earlier period while with Pacific Electric he would often walk across the room to "Rosy's" for a "Coke." During these Whittier days he went at his writing just as he did any railroad paper work. If there was a lull in the office activity, be it morning, noon or evening, Bedwell

would bring out his story and work on it. In later years he favored the morning hours as best conducive to writing. Generally speaking, however, he went over his manuscripts as time permitted. He was never a temperamental writer but wrote when and where he got the chance.

Bedwell took untold pains to revise and rewrite his MSS. He would sometimes re-do a paragraph a dozen times to bring out the proper meaning, color and setting. Experience taught him, as it does all conscientious writers, that one cannot be too careful in checking for accuracy. Once he omitted a three-word phrase, "through the siding," from a *Post* story; and he received over 70 letters of protest from readers. "They read 'em over carefully," he chortled, "and they want their railroading correct!" He admired competence, whether in writing or railroading; and he himself was his hardest taskmaster.

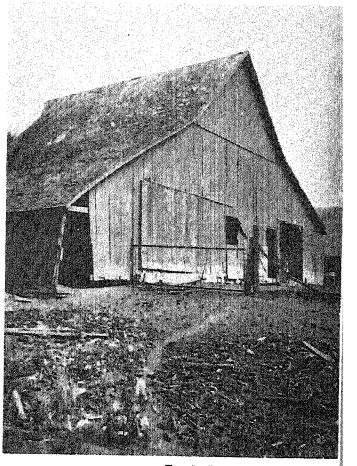
Then there is the all-important question: can such a thing happen?

One may have the talent of a Maupassant, but if his short story is on railroads and his railroading is grossly incorrect, he is damned. No railroad editor will buy his writings. Railroad men will shun his by-line. Even railroad buffs will treat him as a pariah or a literary stuffed shirt. That is why the expert railroader and the gifted writer are seldom one and the same person. The one can "railroad" but can't write; the other can write but not "railroad." Rarely does a single individual have the two abilities in a very high degree and in equal measure.

Harry Bedwell would buttonhole locomotive engineers, conductors, brakeman, roadmasters . . . just about every railroader who chanced to come into his office. He would query each one as to the feasibility of a certain operation. Could it be done the way he outlined it? Some said "yes," others "no." The older men were inclined to be skeptical, whereas younger employees were prone to accept unusual and thrilling maneuvers. Bedwell would not be satisfied until he had talked with those "in the know." Often this

Frank Donovan photo

Bedwell's boyhood home in Kellerton as it looks today. It was here that the local station agent, Dan Cadagan, roomed.

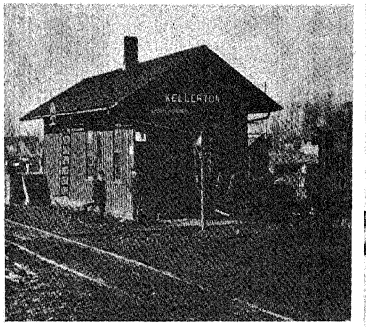


Frank Donovan photo

Barn on the "Bedwell Place." Farmhouse where Harry Bedwell was born is no longer standing.

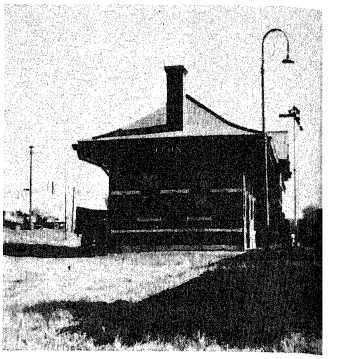
A. J. Goodell Collection

Kellerton elementary and high school, where Harry Bedwell was educated.



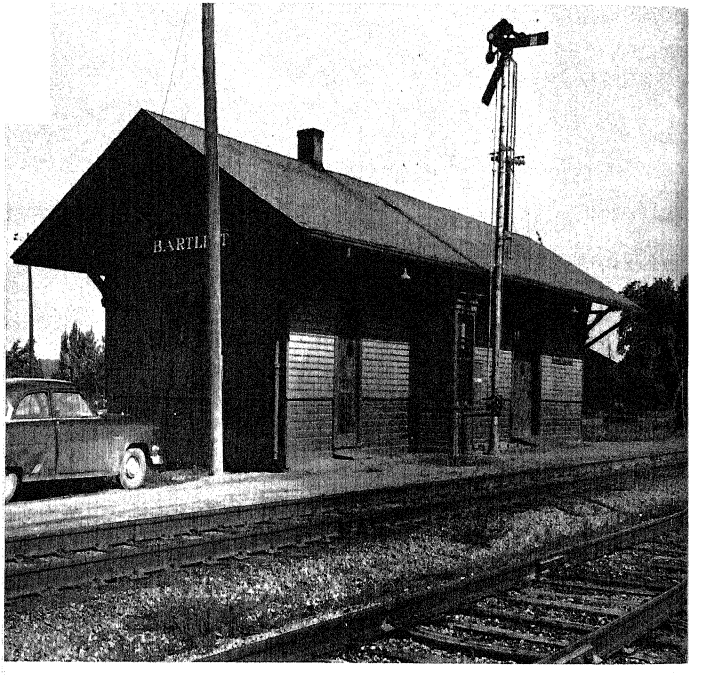
Florence Whitson Collection

Kellerton Depot, where Bedwell learned Morse in 1905. At that time four daily passenger trains were serving the town.



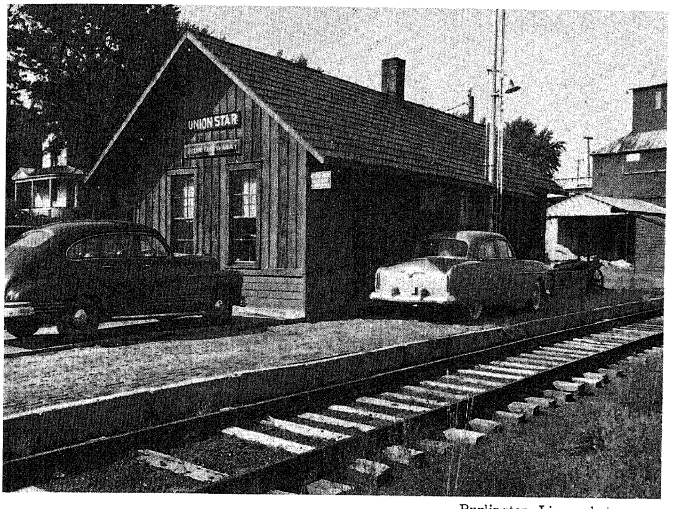
Frank Donovan photo

Leon, Iowa, where "Little Blue" served as relief operator. Original station is no longer standing.



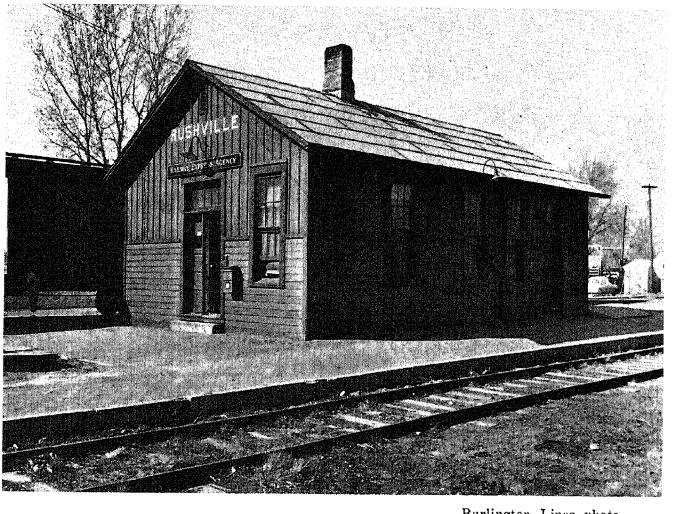
Burlington Lines photo

Bartlett, Iowa, on the Burlington's "high iron" between Omaha and Kansas City. Bedwell issued train orders here and at other locals on this busy line along the Missouri River.



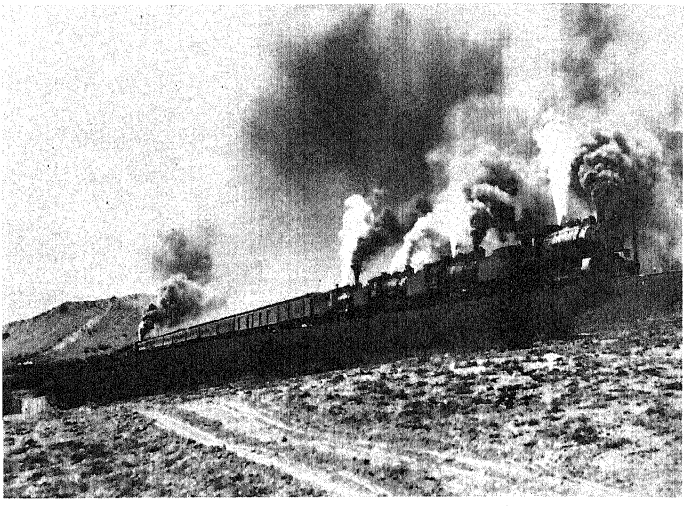
Burlington Lines photo

Mid-century automobiles accentuate the old-style motif of the station at Union Star, Mo. The bay windows, order boards, hand-truck and Western Union sign characterized the rural depot. Bedwell OS'ed trains here in 1906.



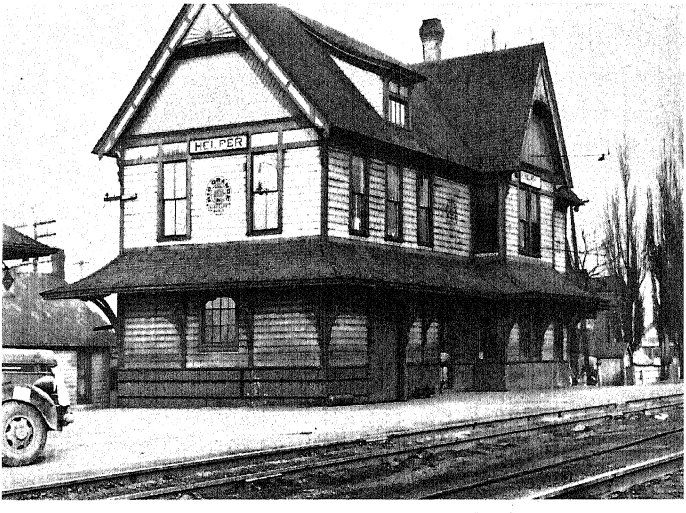
Burlington Lines photo

Rushville, Mo., station is much the same as when the young Kellerton railroader worked here as extra man. In Bedwell's day one could judge the temperament and personality of a telegrapher by his sending. With the coming of the Vibroplex key, commonly known as "the bug," sending became evener and less likely to reflect the idiosyncrasies of the operator.



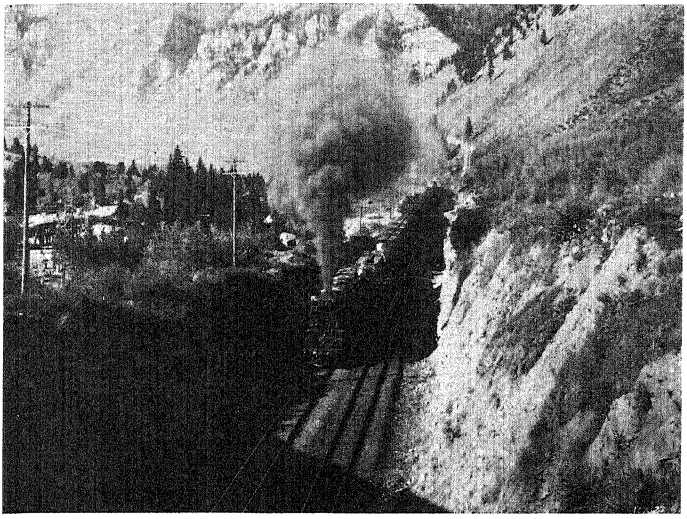
Rio Grande R. R. photo

Classic action-picture of a Rio Grande train struggling up the old 3.97 per cent grade to Soldier Summit, in the Rocky Mountains, about 1906. The locale is mentioned in "The Superintendent's Story," one of Bedwell's few non-fiction tales. Grade has since been reduced to a maximum of 2.4 per cent.



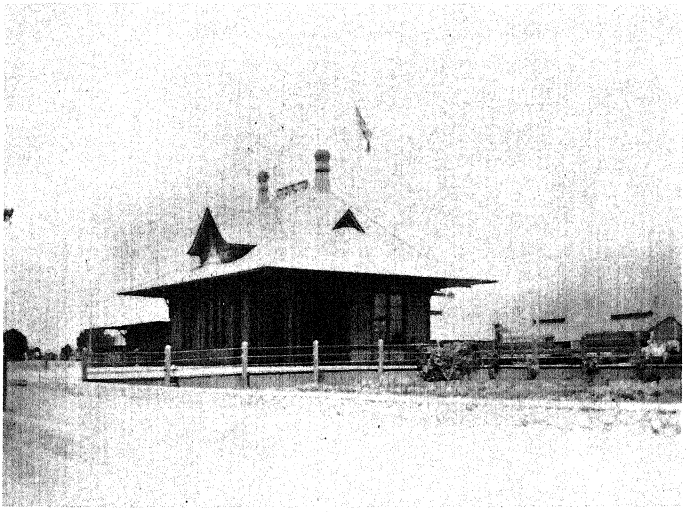
Rio Grande R. R. photo

Historic station and division headquarters at Helper, Utah. The colorful railroad and mining town was a stopping off place for many a "boomer," including Harry Bedwell. A modern one-story building now serves the



Rio Grande R. R. photo

A Mallet-type locomotive at the head-end of a long freight ascending Soldier Summit eastbound near Gilluly, Utah. Observe steam from helper engine cut in the middle of train. Abandoned right of way, visible at left, was the route of the original three-foot gauge, widened to standard in 1890. The present line, with more favorable grades, was completed in 1913.



Historical Collection, Security-First National Bank

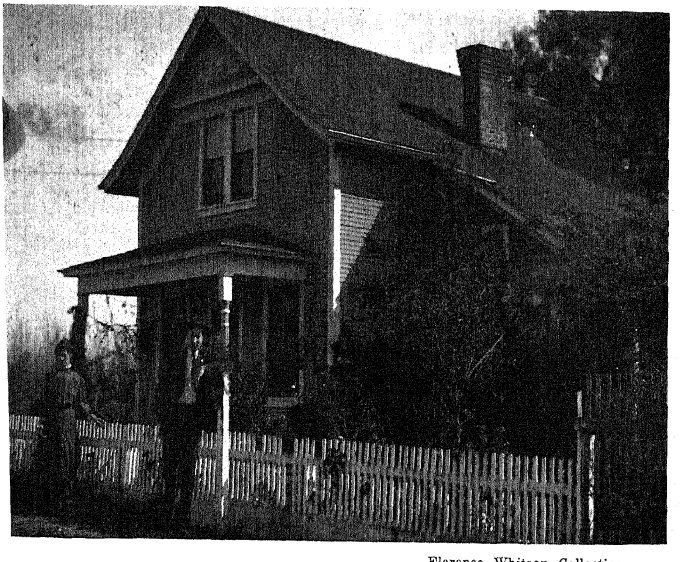
Old Santa Fe depot at Riverside, Calif., where Harry Bedwell worked the night trick in 1907. The wooden structure has since been replaced by

Florence Whitson Collection

Bedwell with his mother standing second from left. At far left is his aunt Tillie Hause; on right aunt Mary Hoffman. The young railroader was 6′ 1½″ tall. Photo taken in Whittier, Calif.

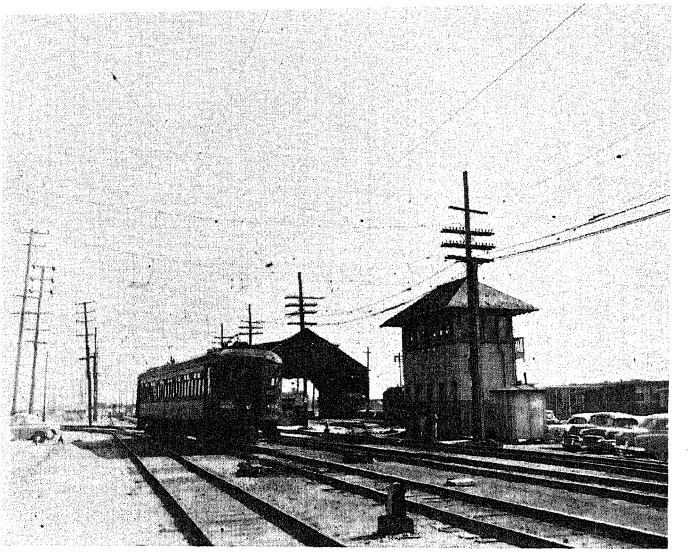
Florence Whitson Collection

Ellen, Harry Bedwell's first wife, shown with their dog in California. Mrs. Bedwell died in 1934.

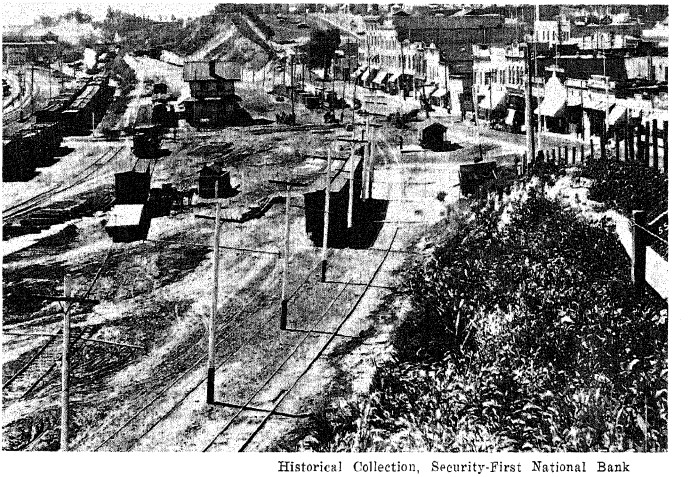


Florence Whitson Collection

Trees and shrubbery abound behind the picket fence of the Bedwell's modest Whittier home. Alongside of Harry is his mother, Flora, of whom he was very fond. In 1909, when this picture was made, the placid, Quaker community was peopled by retired "Easterners," students and faculty of Whittier College, and business men of moderate

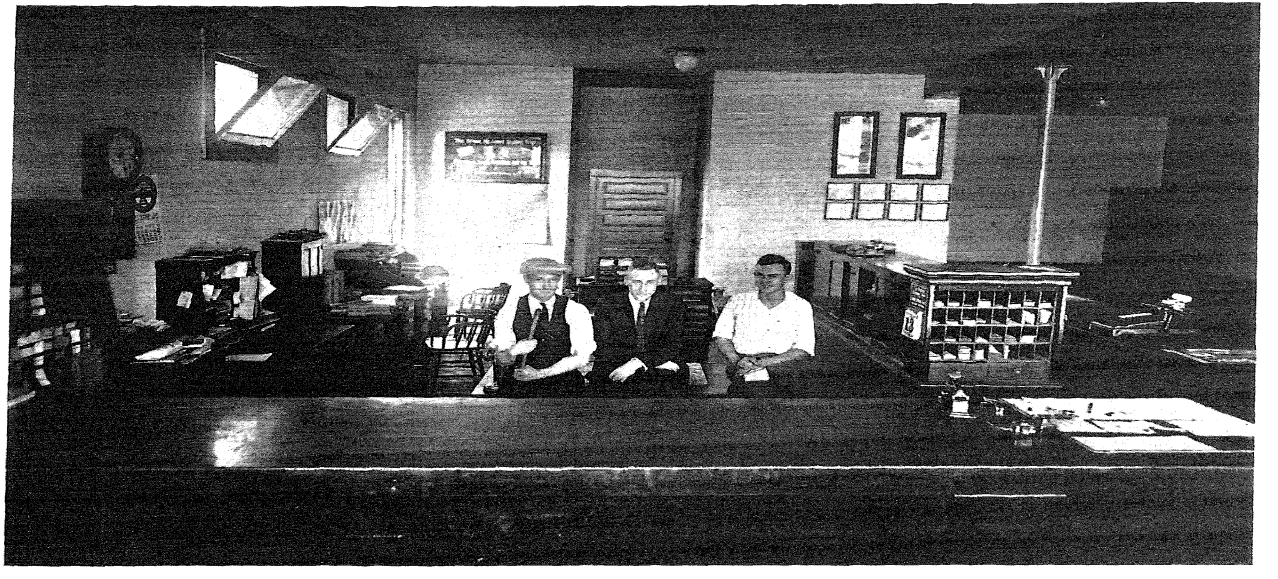


Watts Tower, showing Bellflower car on its way to downtown Los Angeles. Photo taken by Ira Swett, May 16, 1958, eight days before passenger service was dropped. At this junction interurban trains once fanned out to Santa Ana, Redondo Beach and El Segundo, to say nothing of Long Beach and San Pedro. Watts is the setting for the novelette "Tower Man."



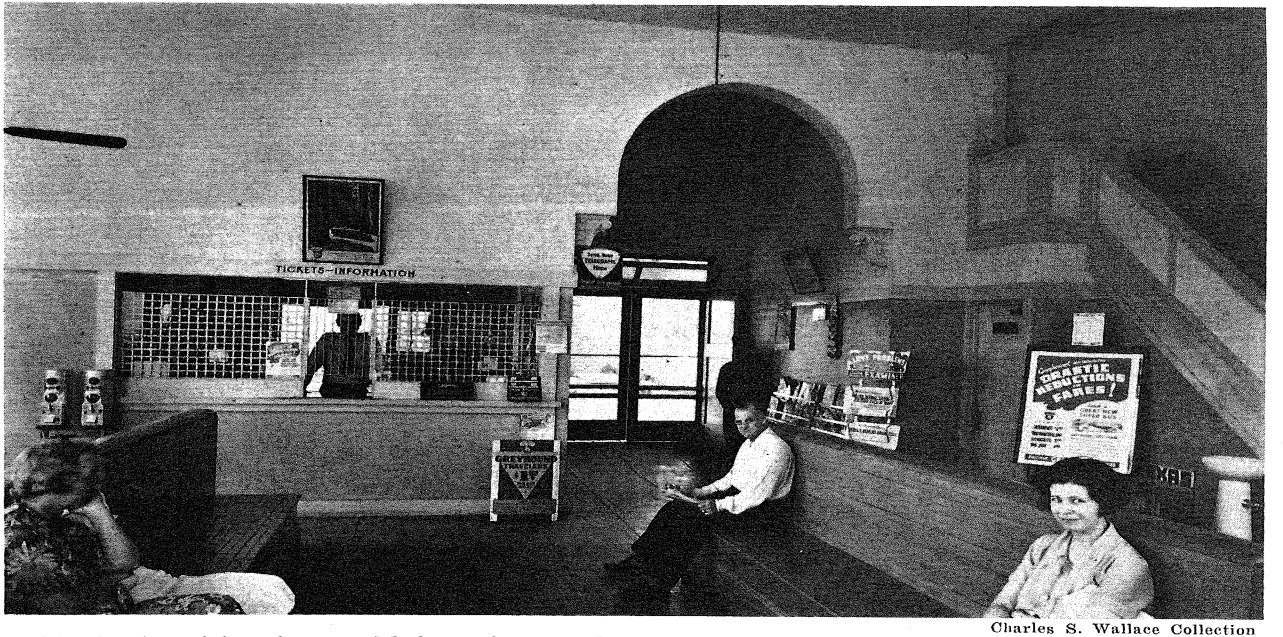
Historical Collection, Security-First National Bank

San Pedro, Calif., about 1909. Track on right is that of Pacific Electric; on left the Southern Pacific. Center is SP freight house where Bedwell probably worked as PE only had a shed for a depot. Note the two



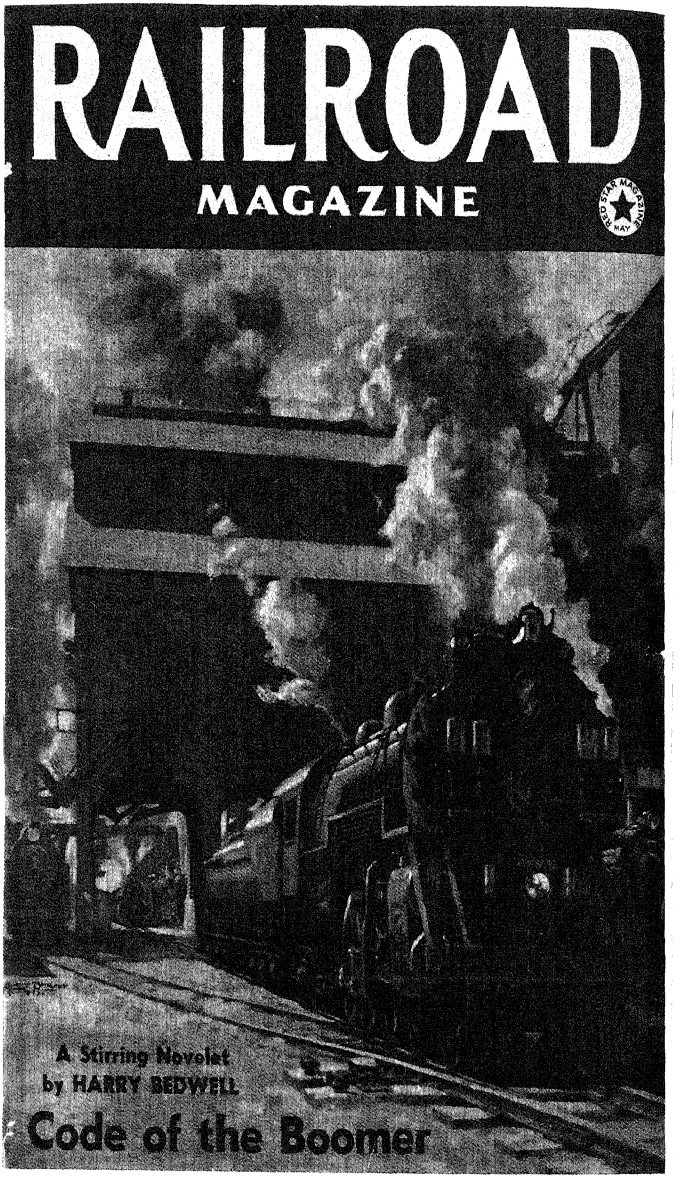
Charles S. Wallace Collection

Rare picture of Whittier passenger station showing Agent Bedwell flanked by Horace Rosenthal (holding broom-handle) and Ralph McMichael. "Rosy" operated the newsstand, and "Mac" served as the agent's assistant. Note framed advertisement of "The Great Mt. Lowe Trolley Trip" near rolltop desk on left. The absence of a telegraph key is explained by the fact that Pacific Electric dispatched trains by phone. Photo taken about 1922.

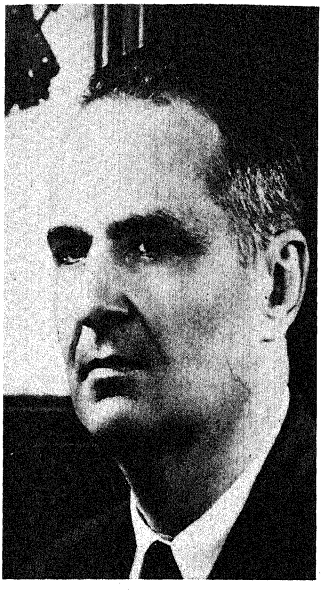


Charles S. Wallace Collection

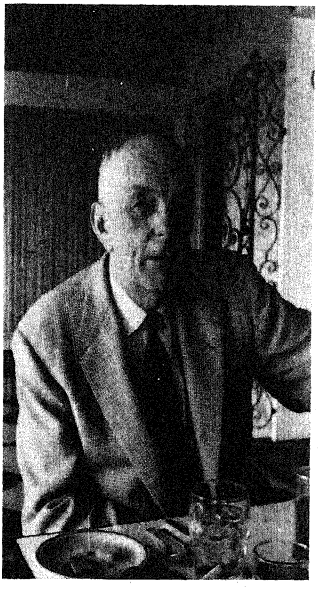
Pacific Greyhound bus depot at Modesto about 1936. Bedwell stands behind ticket grill. His friend and co-worker, Charles S. Wallace, is shown reading newspaper. Barely visible near doorway is Bias Waters, the porter. "Greyhound Travelers $1.00 Per Day Menu," indicated on the placard, was a means to encourage riding during the Depression-ridden '30's.



Front cover of *Railroad Magazine* for May, 1940, featuring "Code of the Boomer." Bedwell had 35 stories or novelettes in this unique periodical. His first tale appeared in October, 1909; his last in December, 1955

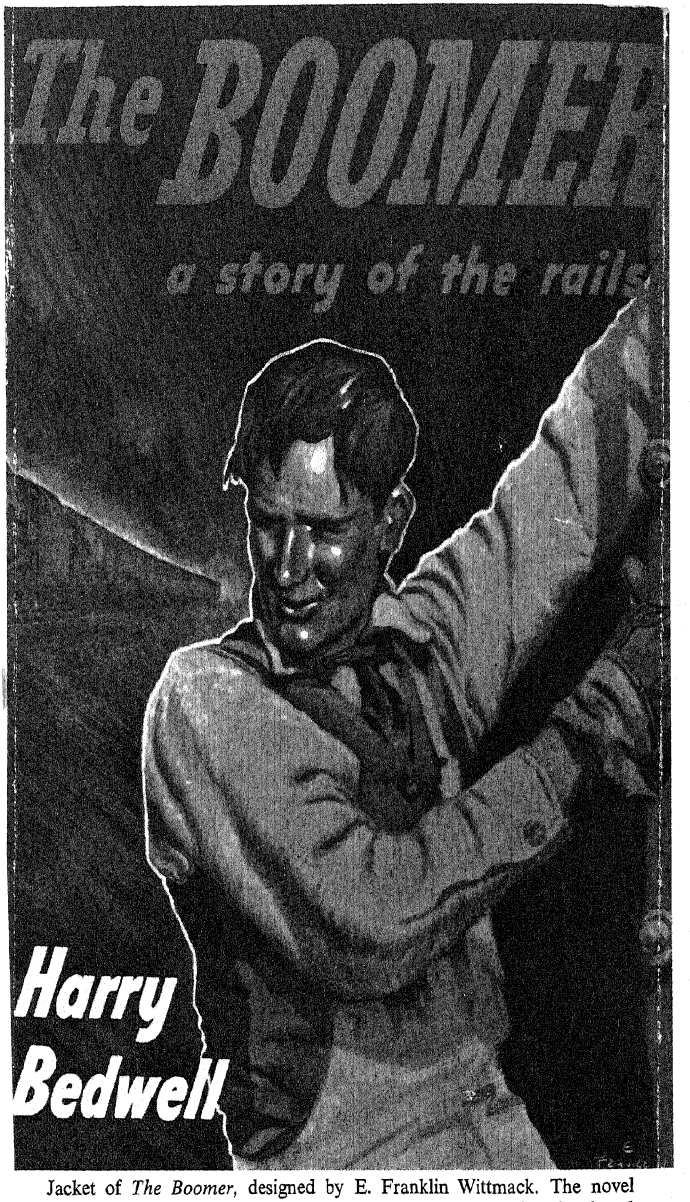


Freeman H. Hubbard, veteran editor of *Railroad Magazine,* who was referred to as "one of Eddie Sand's best friends." Bedwell's novel, *The Boomer,* was dedicated to Hubbard.



Erdmann N. Brandt, associate editor of *The Saturday Evening Post,* in which Bedwell had nine stories. Mr. Brandt considered Bedwell "one of the very best writers of our railroad stories" with the "gift of translating personal experience into a fiction story."

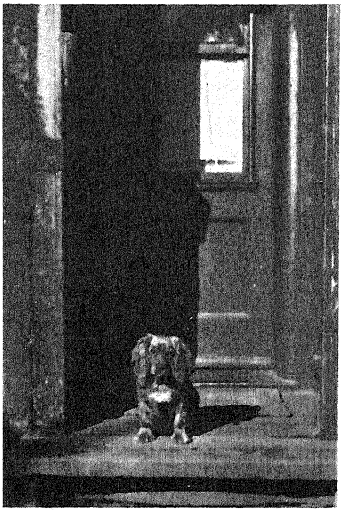
The Clinker, Miss Selby, Double-Drop Brill and Latimer—leading characters in "Avalanche Warning," Bedwell's last published story. It appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* on May 11, 1957. Illustrated by Stan Galli, the novelette recounted the hazards of mountain rail-



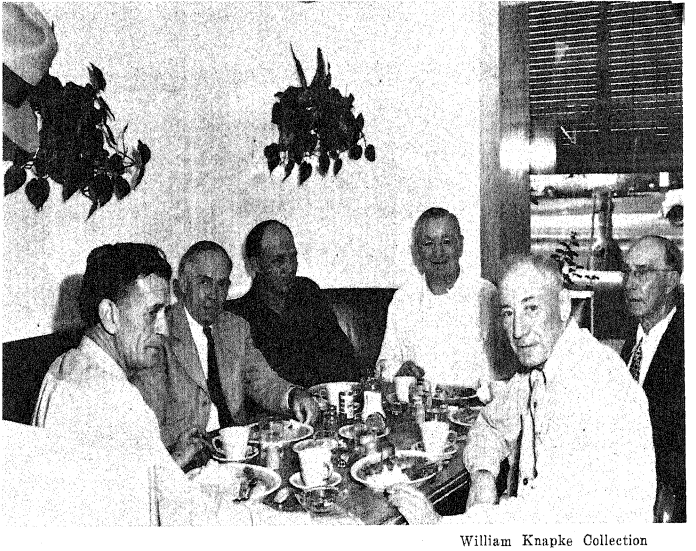
Jacket of *The Boomer,* designed by E. Franklin Wittmack. The novel was widely acclaimed for its authentic railroad background and enjoyed a 106,000-copy reprinting for the armed services overseas during World War II.

Railroad Magazine Collection

Harry Bedwell and his wife, Lorraine, looking over reprint of *The Boomer,* which was widely distributed to servicemen. Bedwell married Lorraine in 1940. Photo taken in their house-trailer at Santa Susana, Calif., October, 1947.

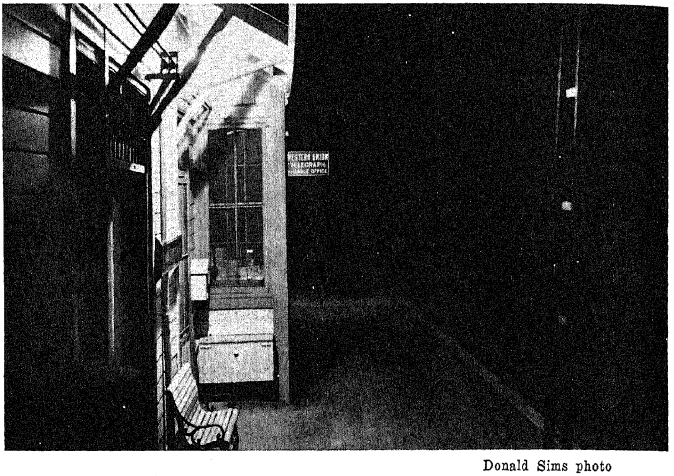


Penny, the third member of the Bedwell "family," pictured in their railroad car-home at Seghers, Ore.



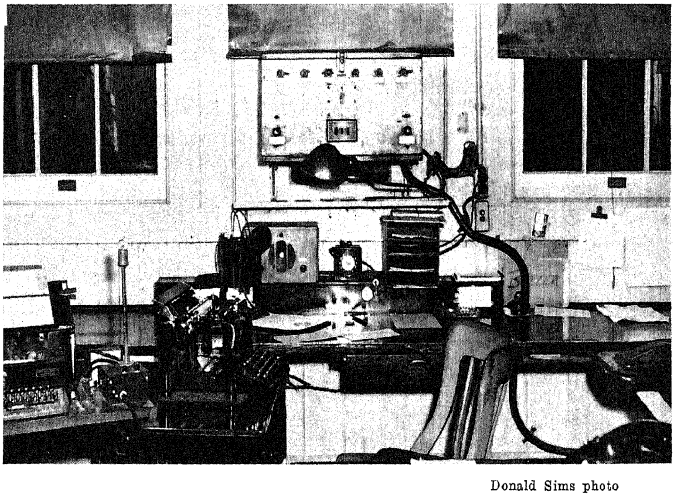
William Knapke Collection

Los Angeles Railroad-Writers' Dinner honoring Harry Bedwell in 1950. Left to right (clockwise) are H. L. Kelso, Charles W. Tyler, H. C. Reynerson, Harry K. McClintock, William F. Knapke and Bedwell. All the group were railroaders; and, with the exception of Reynerson, they



Donald Sims photo

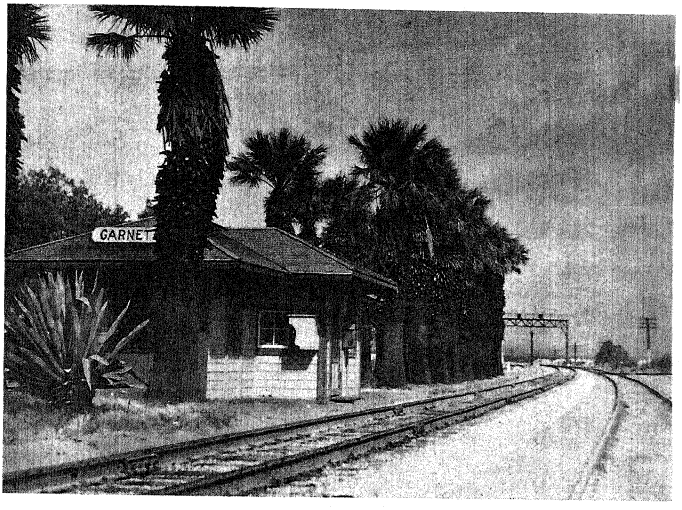
Santa Susana at night. The friendly bench on the platform is characteristic of stations in warmer climes. Ladder on right goes up the semaphore pole not visible in the dark. Over doorway are rods running into the building by which the operator sets the signals. The present "op" is Charles Munro, who traded rights with Bedwell when the latter went from the Los Angeles to the Portland Division of the SP.



Donald Sims photo

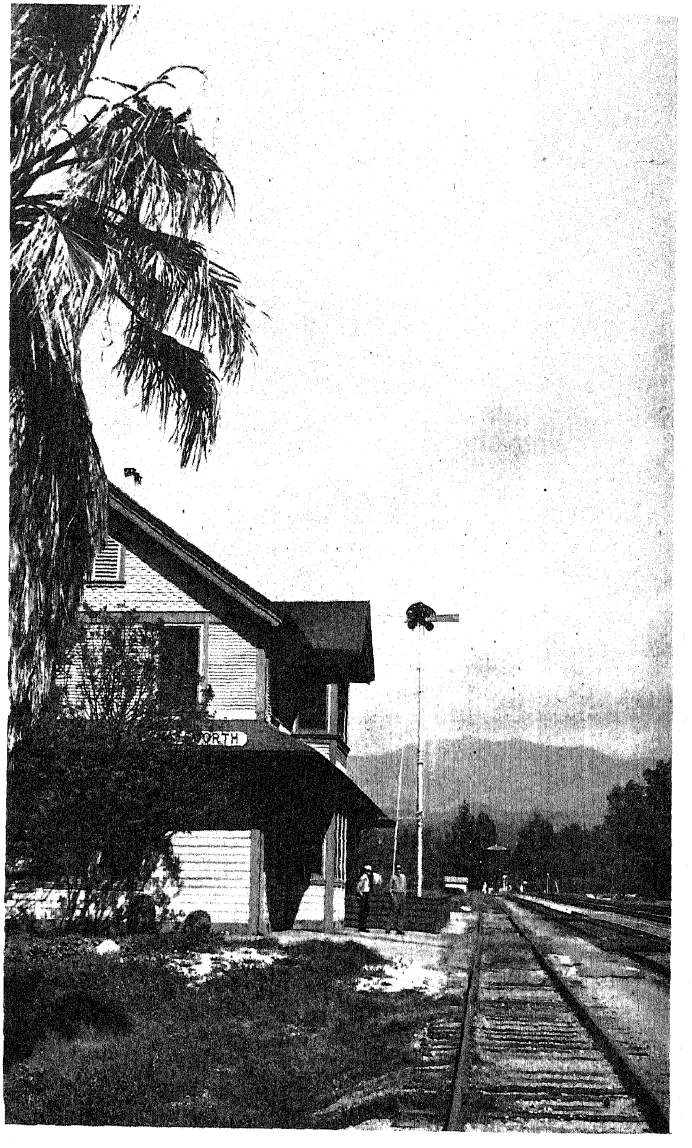
Harry Bedwell worked here. Still retaining the atmosphere of the traditional depot, this Santa Susana operator's office is, nonetheless, quite modern. Witness the teletype at left and the loud-speaker near the dispatcher's phone. Note the customary practice of hanging the operator's watch alongside his switch key. Bedwell worked the second trick here for nearly four years—the longest he remained at any Southern Pacific station.

Operator Bedwell pictured on duty at Chatsworth, Calif., by his friend H. L. Kelso. Note train-order forks and signal lever. The tobacco can in the resonator is an old "Morse-man's" trick to amplify sound. Photo taken in 1951.



H. L. Kelso photo

Before the advent of Centralized Traffic Control Garnet was an important train-order station out on the desert on the Southern Pacific's Los Angeles Division. Bedwell worked here until CTC took over. The building, along with the tropical palmetto grove, has since been removed, and only a sign post is left to mark the spot.



H. L. Kelso photo

Another view of Chatsworth showing William F. Knapke, retired Southern Pacific conductor and railroad writer, with Bedwell on platform. Station is on SP's "Coast Line" between Los Angeles and San Francisco. In background is the beautiful Santa Susana Mountains.

entailed extensive research. Sometimes it meant contacting a master mechanic if it dealt with highly technical aspects of locomotive performance.

However well versed an operator may be, there are a lot of little things he cannot possibly know about the running of trains. For details in this phase of railroading Bedwell turned to his friend William F. Knapke, a retired Southern Pacific conductor. Bill Knapke is a man of parts, a boomer with a service record from 32 railroads. He has twisted brake-wheels, pulled throttles, punched tickets and flagged trains all over the nation and in Mexico, the Phillipines and Cuba. And he is a writer, too, having had almost as many true tales published as the number of "pikes" on which he railroaded. At this writing Knapke is eighty-eight, slender, active and alert.

It was he, as Bedwell's literary executor, who added about 150 words to an unfinished novelette and placed it with *The Saturday Evening Post.* The story, "Avalanche Warning," Harry Bedwell's last published tale, netted his widow $2,500. Curiously enough, it does not feature Eddie Sand. But it is one of Bedwell's best yarns.

Bedwell, always a modest person, was ever ready to give others credit. To show his appreciation for the help and counsel of his friends he would occasionally bring them into his stories. Knapke, for example, appears in "Back in Circulation"; and the late Dan Cadagan is mentioned in "Christmas Comes to the Prairie Central," probably as a Yule-tide greeting to the man who first taught him railroading in the old Kellerton depot. Then, as stated elsewhere, Charles S. Wallace was the "Walley Sterling" who popped up again and again in his stories.

Incidentally, the description of Walley in *The Boomer* resembles Charles Wallace in most details, although the positions the latter held were not identical and certain other items have been altered. At any rate, here is Eddie Sand's portrayal of his friend:

> Walley was a genius at life. He was neat and dis-

> orderly, tireless and lazy. He had a round placid face and a deceptive bland eye. Life in no way perturbed or baffled him. Most men liked him immensely, when he wanted them to, and Eddie grinned as he recalled the girls Walley had taken away from him, just for the heck of it.
>
> He looked fat, but he wasn't. He'd once trained to be a wrestler, and that had amplified his burly physique. Then he'd suddenly decided that it was too strenuous an occupation, too much effort to put into earning a living. He'd learned something of other crafts meanwhile; printing and engraving, machinist, blue printing and telegraphy. He had a vast curiosity about all human activities, and a mind like a steel trap. He'd decided, after a review of the opportunities, that the telegraph operator earned his wages in the easiest and most pleasant way. Jobs were plentiful all over the country, and a railroad man could get a pass to where he wanted to go, or else find an agreeable local passenger train conductor willing to carry him free on the cushions. That covered your hankering to travel.

Little realistic touches like the brakeman tossing a package of meat through a depot window for the agent are true. This incident, according to Knapke, took place at Glamis, California, even to the ripping up of the telegraph instruments, causing chaos in the operator's work. When Eddie Sand handed a hoop with a couple of blocks of wood attached to a passing trainman, this crude joke had been perpetrated before. To quote the salty Knapke, "That was some hammer-headed ape, at Salton, handing me a rusty iron barrel-hoop with two spikes attached." Even the four timely wires of commendation Eddie Sand received from railroad officials to help get a friend out of a tight spot were based on "certain correspondence" of Knapke's. The three items mentioned above are all found in *The Boomer.*

In one significant respect (and there are others) Bedwell was like Frank H. Spearman, doyen of railroad fiction writers. He had the ability to listen. He seldom talked about himself, preferring to let others do the speaking.

He also had a great deal of sympathy for the deaf. Apropos of this, Charles Wallace comments:

> There was something uncanny about the way he seemed to attract the hard-of-hearing and the way he could talk to them. I never met so many hard-of-hearing people as when I was with Harry. Just one example. At a get-together of some Hollywood top talent Harry was seated almost instinctively next to Rupert Hughes and spent the evening relaying witticisms to him. Hughes is very hard of hearing.

The similarity between Eddie Sand and his creator carried over to their common interest in literature. Eddie invariably carried a book. Bedwell since childhood was an omniverous reader. Back in his PE railroading he left a standing order at Fowler's Bookstore in Los Angeles, for them to send him Joseph Hergesheimer's latest books. He read nearly all of Rudyard Kipling and committed much of his poetry to memory. No doubt he read and re-read Kipling's "007," a classic railroad story of a locomotive told through the medium of personification. Other favorite authors included H. L. Davis, J. Frank Dobie and A. B. Guthrie, Jr. He enjoyed many of the old-line railroad storytellers such as Spearman, Packard and Warman. It was a happy day for him when *The Saturday Evening Post* featured an A. W. Somerville "Patchbolt" story. Generally speaking, he favored virile western writers with genuine local color and verisimilitude.

Bedwell's friends were of the same general pattern. Many, of course, were railroaders. He particularly liked

robust, talented individualists. If some were short in formal education they were long in wit, native ability and resourcefulness. All had character. Some of his close friends, like Wallace, Knapke and H. L. Kelso, had done considerable writing as well as railroading. Others, such as Fred Annable, general superintendent of Pacific Electric and later president of the San Diego & Arizona Eastern, and O. P. Davis, division superintendent of Pacific Electric, representing management, were among his esteemed friends.

In the publishing world he considered Freeman H. Hubbard of *Railroad Magazine* a personal friend although he had never seen that New York editor. As a token of appreciation he dedicated his novel, *The Boomer,* to Hubbard. Then, too, he used to look forward to seeing Erd Brandt, senior associate editor of *The Saturday Evening Post,* when the latter made his bi-annual trips to the West Coast. Occasionally Ben Hibbs, editor of the *Post,* would also visit him. Bedwell regarded the *Post* staff as the "salt of the earth." Book publishers, on the contrary, he found "negative" and lacking in "spark."

Besides his long list of published works, Bedwell had one story issued as a radio broadcast. This was "Priority Special," which appeared on the air June 6, 1945, and was subsequently printed in a booklet by the Southern Pacific and widely distributed. It described the careful movement of a hospital train on the SP up and over the mountains into the desert country with never a jolt or jar. The selection, along with his "Smart Boomer," is reprinted in *Headlights and Markers, An Anthology of Railroad Stories.* The latter tale of mountain railroading, in the words of Robert Selph Henry, "depicts extraordinarily well the curious mixture of group loyalties and loyalty to the job which runs through the whole business of keeping the trains moving."

Because of the interest in Bedwell's works *Railroad Magazine* is currently reprinting his stories, some being

slightly cut or revamped for present-day readers. Whenever they are quoted in this book, however, the original versions have been used.

In 1950 Harry Bedwell was the guest of honor at a railroad-writer's dinner in Los Angeles. The group consisted of Harley L. Kelso, William F. Knapke, Harry K. McClintock, Harold C. Reynerson, Charles W. Tyler and Bedwell. All were railroaders or former railroaders and, with the exception of Reynerson, they had written extensively for *Railroad Magazine*. Everyone had a wonderful time swapping stories of experiences in engine, train or station service on nearly every major railroad in the country.

Bedwell traded his rights on the Los Angeles Division for those of the Portland Division in 1952 and worked mostly on freight-only lines in Oregon. First he went to Brownsville, near Albany, Oregon. Next it was on the Siskiyou Line, deep in the heart of the Siskiyou Mountains, at Glendale. He ended up at Seghers, an out-of-the-way lumber mill in the dense timber country between Portland and the Pacific Ocean. At Seghers the first time he went to the mill's traffic office he noticed a huge map of the Burlington on the wall. The first town his eye picked out from all the communities along the vast rail networks across the country was Andover, Missouri, population 25. That was his first station. Seghers, it turned out, was to be his last. He retired from the Southern Pacific on April 29, 1955, after 32 years with that road or its affiliated Pacific Electric.

After leaving the SP Bedwell and his wife bought a mountain home in Nevada City, California. From their new house they had a beautiful view of the lower Sierras to the south. You may be sure their little cocker Spaniel, Penny, went along as part of the family. But the Great Dispatcher was soon to give the sixty-seven-year-old railroader his last order. In working about his new home he slipped on a rock and was injured. Complications later

developed and he took a turn for the worse. While critically ill he confided to his loyal friend, Wallace, "I wanted to have this place all fixed up so you could come up here and live and we could get busy on a novel."

That was as far as the joint-novel ever progressed. He died October 4, 1955, and was buried in Rose Hills Cemetery, Whittier.

His passing moved Charles D. Dulin, railroad telegrapher and poet, to write:

"The bay* is silent; not a click
Intrudes upon by somber mood
As I begin the graveyard trick
In sorrow's realm of solitude.
Although the Morse will weave its themes
In singing brass, the veteran hand
Will always be, in pleasant dreams,
That booming brother, Eddie Sand."

*The "bay mentioned here is that part of a station by a bay-window where the telegraph operator sits, insuring him an unobstructed view of the track in both directions.

VII

BEDWELL AND THE "RAILROAD SCHOOL"

Railroading never had a prominent role in American literature nor in world letters. Compared to the sea, for example, there are no *Moby Dicks* nor works like *Two Years Before the Mast.* Global-wise, the industry has yet to produce a Joseph Conrad. It is only in the United States that railroads play even a significant minor part. For want of a better name we can call this thin slice of literature, the Railroad School. Harry Bedwell's role is important because he is the last of its "graduates." The Golden Age of railroad fiction is past. Whereas books on rail history are on the increase, you can count on one hand authors who write short stories or novels on the industry. A brief resume of the Railroad School, then, is necessary to assess Bedwell's contribution to specialized writing and to Americana.

Railroad fiction enjoyed its greatest popularity from about 1895 to 1915. During the first decade of the 20th Century it flourished both in books and in periodicals. The volatile S. S. McClure made it a point to feature the best railroad fiction in his *McClure's Magazine. Scribner's, Munsey's* and *The Saturday Evening Post* also solicited short stories on the industry and occasionally serialized a novel. It was an era which Grant C. Knight has aptly called *The Strenuous Age in American Literature* in his book of the same name. The romancing of the earlier years had swung to realism and an awareness of American industry in short story and novel. They were virile novels

about rugged individualists, dynamic and forthright. Big business, of which the railroad was a typical example, whether it be appraised, examined, glorified or condemned, appeared more and more in the nation's literature.

Later, World War I diverted attention from railroading, and after the conflict the automobile usurped the role of trains in short-haul travel. Gradually, too, the railroad played a lesser part in the social life of the community as the motor vehicle came to the fore. Because of this and other factors the interest in railroad stories never regained anything like its pristine glory. Bedwell came in at the tag-end of the era. He carried on the tradition of the "old masters," if we can call them that, to the mid-century.

The best known of the earlier "fictioneers" was Cy Warman, author of some ten books on rail themes, most of them being volumes of short stories. Since he was a locomotive engineer on the Denver & Rio Grande Western, many of his tales had their setting in the Rocky Mountains, with a strong frontier flavor. His first bound book, *Tales of an Engineer,* published in 1895, was well received and opened the way for other volumes often concerning his own experiences. He also wrote fair verse and penned the lyrics for that once-popular song "Sweet Marie."

The dean of railroad novelists and short story writers, however, was Frank H. Spearman. Oddly enough, he was the only exponent of the School who never worked for a railroad. Spearman's *Held for Orders,* a volume of short stories, is a classic in its field. His *The Daughter of a Magnate* was one of the earlier railroad novels to be serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post* before appearing in book form. But *Whispering Smith* was by far his most popular production and may well have set a peak in the sale of a rail novel. This "Western" was twice filmed in silent motion picture days and once in recent years in technicolor.

Other representatives of the School include Herbert E. Hamblen, who made his niche in writing realistic railroad stories, along with those of the sea and of fire-fighting. His *The General Manager's Story* is outstanding in its *genre*. Purporting to be the biography of an official who came up from the ranks in the link-and-pin days, it has all the gusto and daring of old-time railroading. As a locomotive engineer and a sailor, he drew on his experiences and those of his acquaintances for tales of land and sea.

Frank L. Packard, best known for his Jimmie Dale mysteries, also penned some fine stories on the industry. Among them are *Running Special* and *The Night Operator,* volumes stemming from his observations as an apprentice in the Canadian Pacific Railway shops at Carleton, Jct., Ontario. Both titles are short story collections with robust western settings.

Finally, there is Francis Lynde whose railroad career included a stint as a master mechanic on the Southern Pacific, and traveling passenger agent for the Union Pacific. Author of a long list of romances, many of which were on railroading, he wrote more from the executive viewpoint than that of the trainman. Among his more popular titles is *The Wrecker,* concerning a newly-appointed general manager who saved a railroad from being gutted by Wall Street speculators. His *Scientific Sprague* is said to be the first American book of short stories featuring a railway detective.

Bedwell, as he expressed it, "was brought up on Spearman and Packard and Lynde stories and . . . Somerville when he came along." It is possible, although not likely, that he may have read Burton E. Stevenson's, "The Boys' Story of the Railroad Series." In 1905, the year Bedwell hired out on the "Q," Stevenson wrote *The Young Section Hand* while a railroad reporter in Chillicothe, Ohio. The newspaperman and later librarian—who is now best known as the scholarly compiler of *The Home Book of*

Verse—finished his rail tetrology in 1912. Far more popular, although not nearly as well written, was Allen Chapman's ten-volume "Ralph On the Railroad Series." It started off with *Ralph of the Roundhouse* in 1906. But the granddaddy of teen age rail-writers in the earlier Alger-Optic-Beadle days was Edward S. Ellis. Among his voluminous works, a half dozen of which concerned railroading, were *The Young Conductor* and *From the Throttle to the President's Chair*. Both were published in the nineties.

Along with fiction for adults and teen agers there were novels on social aspects of the industry. Seldom dealing with actual operation of trains or the crews who man them, they nevertheless had greater literary merit than products of the Railroad School. Frank Norris's *The Octopus* is a good example; and to a lesser extent is the American Winston Churchill's *Coniston* and *Mr. Crewe's Career*. All three concerned the evils of railroad domination in politics, a spectacle which is far from true today. The first has its locale in California's San Joaquin Valley, whereas the others by Churchill have their setting in upper New England.

The point is, the railroad played a noticeable role in literature for two decades preceding World War I. Even earlier William Dean Howells took time out from his more serious writing to pen farces recounting the amenities and humors of train travel. His sparkling little plays, *The Sleeping Car, The Parlor Car* and *The Albany Depot* delighted the readers for a half century. Meanwhile, Cy Warman, whom the *New York Sun* called "The Poet of the Rockies," continued to write verse on railroading. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call him "The Bard of Railroading" as he was the first to extensively turn out poetry on this subject. While he was far from a great versifier, his "Will the Lights Be White?" has appeared in recent editions of Bartlett's *Quotations*. Again, the now-forgotten Josiah Flynt Willard, writing

under the name of Josiah Flynt, put tales of railroad vagrants into popular magazines and on library shelves. His *Tramping With Tramps* and *Notes of an Itinerant Policeman* were considered top-drawer social literature around the turn of the century. And did not Jack London give a vivid account of "riding the freights" in *The Road*? In short, the railroad permeated nearly every phase of American life and literature.

This fact became less and less true after the first world conflict, and the slow, constant decline continued to the present. By the twenties and early thirties the "top" railroad fiction writers had thinned out. Harry Bedwell was in the breach, but had not yet risen to his full stature. This period, notwithstanding, did feature the remarkable yarns of A. W. Somerville, mostly confined to *The Saturday Evening Post*. William E. Hayes likewise wrote some creditable tales, as did one or two others. When these men ceased their story-writing the only rising star in the limited galaxy of rail fiction authors was the ex-boomer from Iowa.

That's how the picture looked when the forties rolled around, and it has not changed much since. To bring the record up-to-date, mention should be made of Albert B. Cunningham, prolific author of the Jess Roden "who-dunits." Under the pen name of Garth Hale, the ex-Chesapeake & Ohio telegrapher wrote *This Pounding Wheel* and *Legacy for Our Sons,* both having high-fidelity depot settings. More recently James McCague produced *The Big Ivy,* a lusty novel of turn-of-the-century railroading; and Hollister Noble in his *One Way to Eldorado* has honest railroad realism in an otherwise hyper-melodramatic plot. The short story is represented in *Life on the Head End,* nine rousing tales of pre-diesel days by P. M. Adams, a Canadian Pacific Railway locomotive engineer.

Mystery-story addicts are currently getting a glow out of Bert and Delores Hitchens's *F.O.B. Murder* and *End of the Line*. Penned by a man-and-wife team—the husband

being a Southern Pacific special agent; the spouse, a veteran detective-story writer—the stories have first-rate rail backgrounds. They are probably the most "railroady" of detective thrillers since the appearance of Frederick Nebel's *Sleepers East* in 1933.

As for short stories in periodicals, the heritage of the old Railroad School is virtually a memory. The only writers in this category contributing tales with any regularity are Jack Clinton McLarn and John Rhodes Sturdy, the latter a Canadian.

The decline of railroad fiction in America has a parallel in overseas literature. Only, England and continental Europe had so few tales of the railway that they were hardly missed when the strain died out. *The Bay Psalm Book* of English collectors, however, is Victor L. Whitechurch's *Thrilling Stories of the Railway,* issued in 1921. The work of an Episcopalian clergyman, it has the distinction of being the earliest book of short stories featuring a railway detective. Just three copies are known to exist in America, and not many more are extant in the British Isles. On the other hand, most European railway novels and short stories seldom command more than their original price, once out of print. W. Pitt Ridge's *Thanks to Sanderson* and *On Company's Service,* stories by a popular English writer, have a satisfactory and realistic rail background. Others include C. Hamilton Ellis's *Dandy Hart, Rails Across the Ranges* and *Who Wrecked the Mail?* It is significant that Ellis often looks beyond his country for "story" material. Only the first title has its locale in England, whereas the others have their backgrounds in Australia and Spain respectively.

When it comes to murder and mayhem, the railway comes into greater favor. Because of the prevalence of non-corridor cars in British and Continental trains, mystery writers found them admirably fitted for their crimes. There is nothing like the privacy of a European express for a good clean murder! The *Royal Scot, Blue Train* and

Orient Express have long been favorites for detective "thrillers." What the frontier is to the American railroad storyteller the European compartment express is to his English cousin. Of the long list of such works probably Freeman Wills Crofts's *Death of a Train* has the most accurate and detailed railway setting.

Of French railway fiction, Emile Zola's *The Human Beast* is outstanding. A grim, horrible tale of human depravity in which a locomotive driver is the central figure, the novel is well researched as are all of Zola's works. More recently, and on the lighter side, are the escapades of Hercule in Pierre Audemars's mystery tales. Among the books in which the droll and bizarre engineman appears are *The Temptations of Hercule, Hercule and the Gods* and *The Obligations of Hercule.* German and Russian fiction railwayise have produced Gerhart Hauptmann's "Flagman Thiel" and V. N. Garshin's "The Signal," respectively. Both are short stories of tragic realism. There are doubtlessly more authors writing in their native tongues who feature the railway in literature of other nations. But the list is short and the fiction on this subject is seldom noteworthy.

From the above one can safely conclude the railroad story is primarily an American institution. Yet it apparently has run its course, for Bedwell appears to be the last of the specialized writers in this category. As David P. Morgan, editor of *Trains,* expressed it: "He was as capable a practitioner in the art of good railroad writing as lived in our times." Many of his tales rank with the best the Railroad School produced. True, his cumulative writings may not come up to the standards of Spearman, but his finest can hardly be said to take second place to any of the "classic" railroad writers.

Let us now stop to reflect on how Bedwell resembles his forerunners; also in what way and to what degree he differed. At the outset the fact should be stressed that Harry Bedwell was essentially a short story writer. This

is not surprising, for the railroad yarn is best portrayed in the short story. Nearly all the standard railroad writers have found that the brief, rapid-fire incidents occurring in the everyday life of the railroader call for a plot which is equally compact and to the point—a story which moves. Action and character analysis given clearly and concisely are preferred to love interest and delicate plots. Let's face it, they are adventure stories, nothing more nor less. You may read them for setting, atmosphere or local color, but most of all you read them for enjoyment and fun. To quote Vincent Starrett in his *Books Alive,* "Is there anything in life more satisfying than the thrill of danger experienced in perfect safety?"

It should be emphasized Bedwell wrote mostly of the Midwest and far-West, with the latter predominating. He, himself, had never worked east of the Mississippi. The few tales he related of the East and South do not have the ring of authenticity as do those whose settings were found in the regions of which he was familiar. He was likewise influenced by the spirit of the frontier but not to the degree evinced in the work of Warman, Spearman or Packard. Earlier the one potent factor dominating railroad stories was the frontier. All the loyalty, bravery and self-reliance of the pioneer are found in the classic old-time railroad yarn. Bedwell carried on this gusto of the West, only in a more mellowed and polished manner befitting a later period.

Like all the Railroad School of authors, with the possible exception of Francis Lynde, Bedwell's "heroes" are men out on the line: telegraph operators, locomotive engineers, firemen, conductors, brakemen, switchmen and the like. He wrote from the point of view of the rank and file instead of management. His sympathy was for the working man, and he believed strongly in labor unions. Many of Bedwell's stories show Eddie Sand or his allied brethren coming out to their credit after a run-in with a prejudiced superintendent or a "rawhiding" trainmaster.

On the other hand—and this should not be overlooked—he was not averse to putting an arrogant conductor or a browbeating engineer in his place. Furthermore, competency, fairness, honesty and integrity, whether in a "brass hat" or "brass pounder," he extolled. Witness the respect and admiration he had for old Salt-and-Molasses Nickerson, the shrewd, hard-fighting, beloved and altogether human president, as pictured in *The Boomer.* Often, too, the most unreasonable officer or obnoxious crewman will in a combination of circumstances show hidden strengths and highly commendable qualities. Man is seldom entirely right or totally wrong. This redemptive quality is the very core of many railroad short stories. Regeneration is even more conspicuous in the tales of Spearman and most emphatically in those of Packard.

One wonders how far and in what direction Bedwell could have gone if he had branched out more in his writing. He wrote a few feature articles with varying success. Most of the evidence, nevertheless, seems to point out that his *forte* was fiction based on fact. What Herbert S. Pease did in portraying yesteryear's telegrapher in *Singing Rails,* or Joseph Bromley in telling the saga of a locomotive engineer in *Clear the Tracks* or Edgar A. Custer in depicting the robust life of a railroad shopman in *No Royal Road,* Bedwell did in limning his own experiences in fiction. Messrs. Pease, Bromley and Custer did their r e c o u n t i n g in free-wheeling autobiographical sketches, factual stories, if you will. Bedwell did essentially the same thing except for altered names, places and situations—actual experiences, none the less, imaginatively fashioned. Perhaps no one, least of all Bedwell himself, could tell exactly where fiction started and fact faded. But he admitted, and a little research will sustain this admittance, nearly all the incidents he described either happened to him or to those of his kind. Railroad men are great storytellers; and their yarns, discounting a degree of exaggeration, are true. Call it fiction-based-

on-fact, or fact-in-fiction, the two are intimately related in Bedwell's works.

In reviewing the scope of the Railroad School of writers, one has to concede that their total output in the stream of American literature has not been great. Why? Perhaps it is because the railroad is only a hundred and twenty-five years old. Sea tales, on the contrary, go back to the time of the printing press—indeed, even to the beginning of man. But this is scarcely a satisfactory answer. The airplane is a half-century old, and already some promising novels have appeared on flying. Maybe it is because the mariners of other years were at the absolute mercy of storms at sea. Their fate was in the hands of God—and a skilled captain. Also the period of crisis may be a day or even a week depending on the duration and ferocity of the storm. No such time-span is evident in railroading. Accidents usually come quickly or not at all. This may account for the lack of introspection and philosophizing in railroad novels. Sailors were often on the high seas for weeks, whereas most railroaders seldom remain on trains more than a few hours. And yet is this the complete answer? I think not. Perhaps the reader has a more adequate explanation.

It is, however, better to be thankful for what there is, be it ever so modest a contribution, than rant at circumstance. To quote Dr. Knight in his study of early twentieth century literature: "Books, like persons, can be loved even if they are not great." Bedwell aimed solely to tell the railroad story and to tell it well. Therein lies his "greatness."

In the future, railroad tales will be preserved in collections as a slice of a phase of American life. A few will continue to be written as long as there is the flanged wheel on the steel rail. But the reading public will probably be aware of trains more in passages of Willa Cather's novels, in selections of Thomas Wolfe's autobiographical fiction or in Christoper Morley's essays.

Others interested in the industry may resort to straight business histories, spirited "railroad biographies" by Edward Hungerford or the pictorial panoramas of Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg.

Finally, there will be readers who will want to vicariously live the day of the nomadic care-free railroader of the legendary past. They will turn to the Iowa storyteller who was at his best in presenting the colorful pilgrim of the rails—the boomer. Here they will get shrewd bits of the itinerant's philosophy, pungent pages of the past, a nostalgic picture of a way of life—and of railroading—that was and can never be again. The day which Bedwell so fondly delineated was a time when man and beast, and the products of farm, forest, mine and factory went almost exclusively by rail.

Today the highway, airway, and to a limited extent, the waterway have taken their toll. The branch line passenger train is practically extinct. Centralized Traffic Control, pushbutton yards and diesel motive power make for efficiency but not for individuality. Harry Bedwell is one with the steam locomotive. May his memory live as a page of Americana which is turned forever.

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Frank P. Donovan, Jr.

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January 30, 1959

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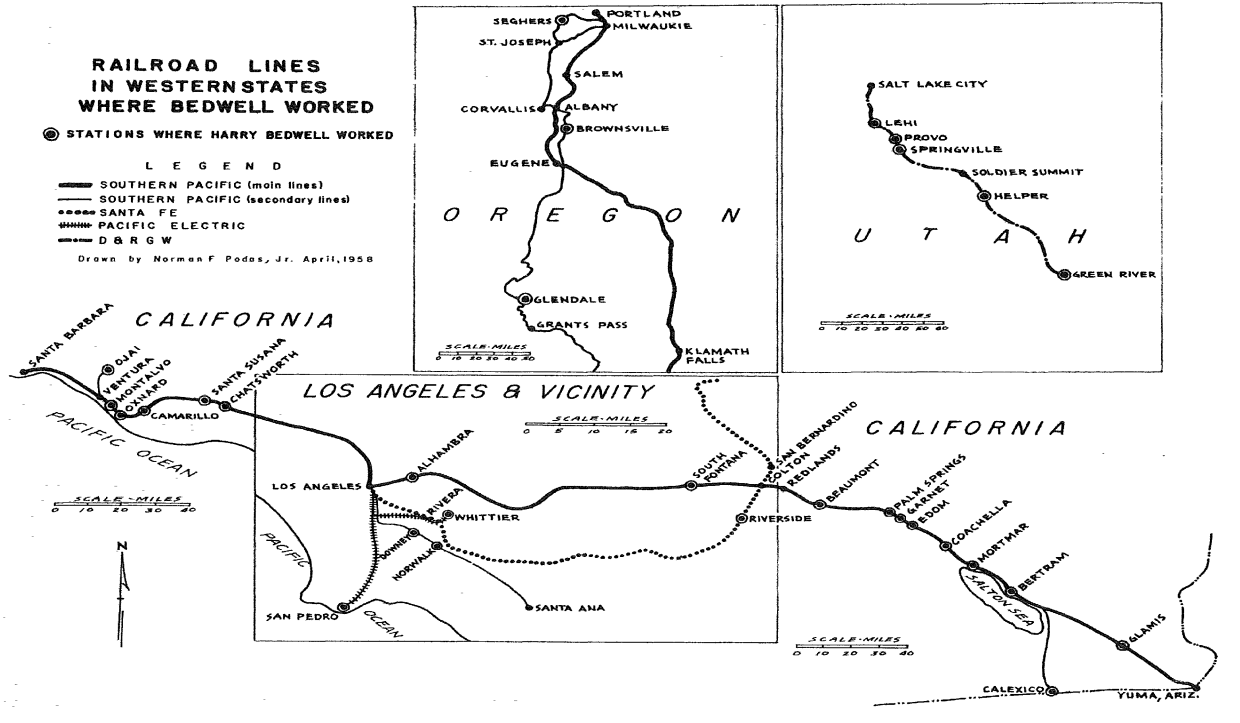
RAILROAD LINES
IN WESTERN STATES
WHERE BEDWELL WORKED
STATIONS WHERE HARRY BEDWELL WORKED
L E G E N D
SOUTHERN PACIFIC (main lines)
SOUTHERN PACIFIC (secondary lines)
SANTA FE
PACIFIC ELECTRIC
D & R G W
Drawn by Norman F Podas, Jr. April, 1958
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PORTLAND
MILWAUKIE
ST. JOSEPH
SALEM
CORVALLIS
ALBANY
BROWNSVILLE
EUGENE
O R E G O N
GLENDALE
GRANTS PASS
KLAMATH FALLS
SCALE: MILES
SALT LAKE CITY
LEHI
PROVO
SPRINGVILLE
SOLDIER SUMMIT
HELPER
U T A H
GREEN RIVER
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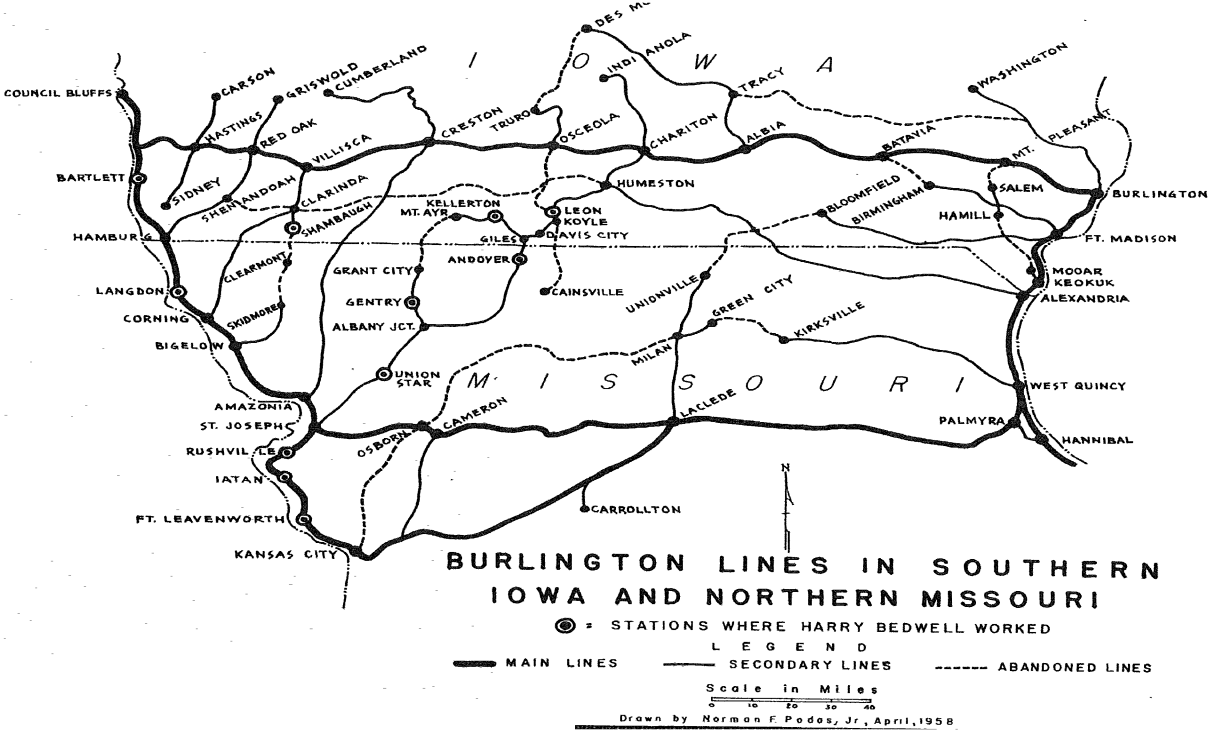
SANTA ANA
SAN PEDRO


DES M
INDIANOLA
IOWA
WASHINGTON
COUNCIL BLUFFS
CARSON
GRISWOLD
CUMBERLAND
TRACY
HASTINGS
RED OAK
CRESTON
TRURO
OSCEOLA
CHARITON
ALBIA
BATAVIA
PLEASANT
MT.
VILLISCA
BARTLETT
SIDNEY
SHENANDOAH
CLARINDA
HUMESTON
BLOOMFIELD
BIRMINGHAM
SALEM
BURLINGTON
KELLERTON
MT. AYR
LEON
KOYLE
SHAMBAUGH
HAMILL
HAMBURG
GILES
DAVIS CITY
FT. MADISON
CLEARMONT
GRANT CITY
ANDOVER
MOOAR
KEOKUK
LANGDON
CAINSVILLE
UNIONVILLE
GREEN CITY
ALEXANDRIA
CORNING
SKIDMORE
GENTRY
ALBANY JCT.
KIRKSVILLE
BIGELOW
MILAN
UNION STAR
MISSOURI
WEST QUINCY
AMAZONIA
ST. JOSEPH
CAMERON
LACLEDE
PALMYRA
OSBORN
RUSHVILLE
HANNIBAL
IATAN
CARROLLTON
FT. LEAVENWORTH
KANSAS CITY
N
BURLINGTON LINES IN SOUTHERN IOWA AND NORTHERN MISSOURI
= STATIONS WHERE HARRY BEDWELL WORKED
LEGEND
MAIN LINES
SECONDARY LINES
ABANDONED LINES
Scale in Miles
0 10 20 30 40
Drawn by Norman F Podos, Jr, April, 1958