

MEMORIES OF RAILROAD SOUNDS

By Roger E. Shaffer

Around the railroad there are certain specific sounds of both mechanical and vocal nature that are not to be found in any other area. Some of these sounds, which I observed many times in my younger years, are still in my memory, for they refer specifically to Hanover Junction in the 1920's. I wish that recorders had been available in those days to record some of those sounds. Here are some of them, just recorded on paper.

The approach of a train, powered by a steam driven locomotive, would sound his steam-activated whistle, O-O-o-O, as a warning to users of the grade crossing just south of the station. The blast of the steam whistle often went unnoticed by the occupants of the stationhouse, as the engineer pulled on his whistle cord when passing the station with a through train. As an accommodation local train came to a stop at the station, the sound of steel brake-shoes on steel wheels emanated "noises" I heard many people say they disliked hearing, but were very important in bringing the train to a complete stop.



As the train paused at the station, sounds of escaping excess steam from the locomotive and the pulsing sound of air pumps gave the impression that the locomotive was much alive and breathing, ready to start out for the next station stop. At the signal from the conductor – 2 short toots on the air-signal-cord – the engineer would put the necessary levers into action, with the locomotive responding with it's unique "Chug-Chug" on an increasingly shorter span as the train takes off. Sounds which are so typical and profound in railroad operations can only be realized in actual train service.

If you would have lived near a busy railroad yard and heard the constant coupling of cars and the hissing sound of air hoses separating the cars, the sounds would not have seemed like musical tunes. When the banging of the coupler of one car collided with another car's coupler, the sound was a very distinctive one, and could not be confused with another type of noise.

As a rumbling steam engine with a load of 8 or 10 heavy-weight Pullman cars passed the station, making a run for the New Freedom Hill on a 1.54% grade, the sounds were rather deafening. The clickety clack of the steel wheels passing over rail joints every 39 feet apart, and over switch joints, caused a tempo of unique sounds – a railroad fan's delight to hear. This clickety-clack applies only to certain older sections of trackage today. The use of much longer sections of welded rail brings about a much smoother and quieter ride, and is in more wide-spread usage on all heavily trafficked railroads.

The Telegraph Operator's desk was home to the Telegraph Keys, emitting the tapping sounds which were quite audible and meaningful to the Operator. The dots and dahs were converted to specific messages by the Morse Code System, knowledgeable to the telegraph operator.

I remember the sound of the latches on the levers, used by the operator to control the movement of the Semaphore Signals, when they snapped into the proper position, indicating to the engineer a signal for safe operation of his train.

Another typical office sound was that of the Ticket Dater used by Station Agent Wilferd (Dad) Shaffer. When a ticket sale was made, the BANG of the Dater became a very familiar one to hear. The ticket, which was bought by a passenger, would then carry the station's identifying number and date of purchase.

The rolling sound of the wooden slats of the Ticket-Case door became one attached to the Ticket Office. On opening or closing of the case, the rasping sound was an interesting one, for some reason or other, to me.

One vocal sound attached to the office that always interested me was when Dad Shaffer would announce the approach of a local accommodation train to the passengers in the waiting room.

Other vocal sounds that interested me, as a kid, were those of the Track Repair Crew while on Snow Removal Duty around the station. The waiting room was their "Recovery room" at intervals between times when they were out in the snow storm, cleaning the platforms and the switches of ice and snow.

Since our bedroom was directly above the waiting room, I often noted the shaking of the grate in the waiting room stove. The "Fireman" was breaking up clinkers in the stove, especially after the railroad officials changed to supplying Bituminous coal, instead of Anthracite, as in times past.



Comments often heard in our living quarters were such as this:

"Did 8021 go yet?"

"I don't know," was often the answer.

Just shows how many times a train would pass unnoticed.

But when a train stopped at the station, the sound of "ALL ABOARD" was something I often heard. I still vividly recall that familiar sound, even if only in a memory.

R.E.S. 1999