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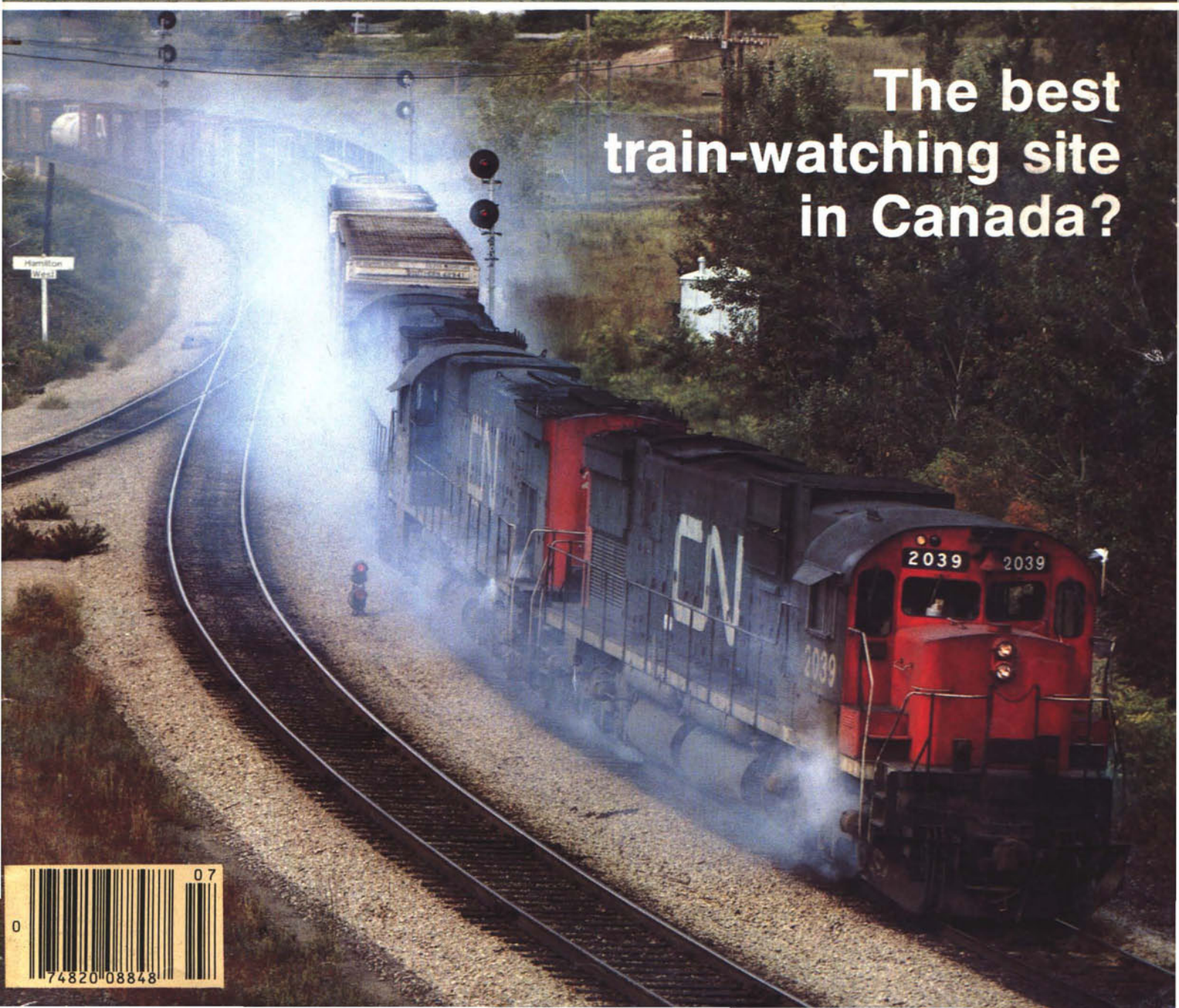
# Trains

THE MAGAZINE OF RAILROADING

The train order  
as an art form



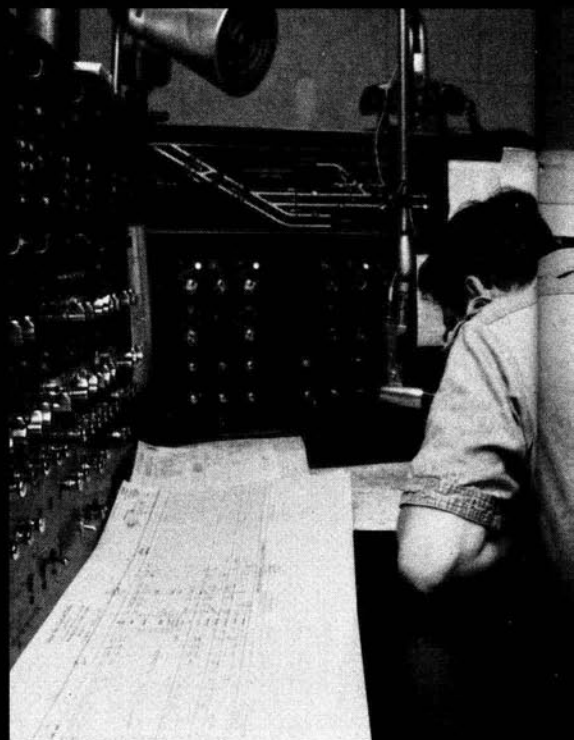
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DISPATCHING ON THE ROCK ISLAND IN THE 1970's

# *Of Rule 93, Form S-C, and the bow and arrow country*



*Why I'd much rather s*

**EDWARD J. BRUNNER**

photos / **R. B. OLSON**

I I ONCE STARTLED a friend by insisting that, given the choice between a cab ride on the Rock Island from Chicago to Silvis, Ill., or a chance to spend eight hours with a Rock dispatcher in Des Moines, I'd unhesitatingly choose Des Moines. After the first half hour or so, a cab ride starts to pall (especially if you're standing up). The rails are gliding below in a hypnotic effect; the conversation is down to an occasional nod or grunt (as everyone's throat, sore from straining over the throb of the engines, refuses to open); and the jarring constant "hunt" of the engine is creating a longing for the pliancy of rubber-on-pavement. Even the autos and gasoline trucks darting across the right of way start to seem tame. (My favorite cab-riding story concerned the night No. 5, the *Quad Cities Rocket*, was to have a visitor on the head end, a friend of the trustee. The dispatcher was dictating a message to the operator at Blue Island, advising the crew of their visitor, and the message ended: "Please show Mr. — every consideration." "What does that mean?" the operator asked. The dispatcher thought for a minute, then said, "I guess it means let him blow the whistle.")

A dispatcher's office, on the other hand, is never dull. While the crew on No. 5 is innocently gliding along,

whistling for crossings and setting the air, the dispatcher alone knows that 6 miles ahead, a drag freight is trying to outrun No. 5 to the crossover at Milepost 148. The drag freight can cross over to the other main and clear No. 5 if 02X, a perishable train, gets east of the crossover in time. No. 5 moves through the night, an isle of calm and serenity, oblivious to the drama unfolding around it. From the cab of No. 5, all is serene—green signals at every curve. From the office in Des Moines, though, a scenario involving three trains is working its way to its own resolution. And, no sooner will this be resolved than the center of attention will shift to 02X, which unbeknownst to it, has an Ottawa Turn ahead of it, with work on both tracks at Morris. Then there is the threat of 201, just leaving Joliet, which soon will overtake the Ottawa Turn...

Only the dispatcher must participate in all of this, as he holds the volatile intricacy of the whole changing system in his mind. And the drama that actually unfolds—02X clearing at 148 in time to line over the drag freight and clear the signal for 5—is nothing compared with the possibilities he must entertain, thinking through all the options available. Next to this, a cab ride is a stroll in the park.

I'M NOT SURE that the Rock Island dispatchers' offices in Des Moines were typical of dispatchers' offices in general. My suspicion is that typical dis-

patchers' offices don't exist. Each railroad maintains its own distinctive offices, with the offices reflecting the overall condition of the railroad in a concentrated form. When I was applying for work on the Santa Fe, I received a fifty-cent tour of the dispatchers' offices in Fort Madison, Ia. A solemn hush pervaded the two rooms, both dominated by a wall of CTC machinery. One man handled from Kansas City to Fort Madison, the other from Fort Madison to Chicago; a third board could be cut in during rush times to oversee from Joliet east. The lighting was muted, the atmosphere redolent of a graduate school library. In one corner stood a tall, lean cabinet—like a modern grandfather's clock—with reels of tape unwinding behind glass. Everything on the dispatcher's phone was automatically recorded. "You'd be surprised how easy that makes an investigation," said the chief clerk who was showing me around.

One didn't talk to the dispatchers; if one had a question, the signal maintainer stood by, ready to answer—just as he was ready for action if anything acted up on the CTC. When I called later, hoping to talk to the chief dispatcher, he'd already gone home—at 4 p.m., just like a guy with a normal job! (In Des Moines, the chief always had arrived by 6 a.m., and he counted himself lucky if he was out at 6 p.m.) But after all, what else would one expect of the Santa Fe? Looking across the rows of neat desks in the clerks' office, I saw



*er spend eight hours with a dispatcher than take a cab ride*

Ed Wojtas

people chatting and consulting each other over coffee. (And, having worked for the Rock Island, my instinctive response was: "I'll bet they could cut one-third of these people and still do the job"—but then, I always was a company man.)

In the only other dispatcher's office I had visited, the Milwaukee Road's in Ottumwa, Ia., the atmosphere was just the opposite. The dispatcher sat in a tidy back room of a small depot. The office was the size of a generous broom closet, and he was packed in with a CTC board, an enormous train sheet, a train-order log, and a typewriter. When the agent went home at 4, the dispatcher became his own operator, copying orders directly on his typewriter as he dictated them, then writing them in the log when the other end repeated. People wandered in and out; the superintendent chatted with the crew hauler; someone brought in a load of sandwiches; an engineer showed off a trinket he'd picked up for his grandchild. Business was talked all the time, but as an undercurrent, as part of the gossip. Was 2011 still acting up? When was someone going to look at the switch at Rubio? Why did Clinton hold our trains for the North Western? There was an air of breezy professionalism, suitable for the necessary *ad hoc* quality of that part of the railroad. One exclamation—"Okay you guys, hold it down, I'm putting out some orders"—and the door was quietly closed.

The Rock Island offices in Des Moines fell somewhere in between these two. As in Ottumwa, the Rock offices were in a depot, but an enormous one, a relic of the days of *Rockets* and *The Californian* and the *Rocky Mountain Limited*. A substantial waiting room, its allure much faded, still was intact inside. The dispatchers, however, occupied only the northwest corner of the second floor, away from the tracks, as at Fort Madison. The offices were isolated from the outside world—the windows covered by wallboard. The rooms had been modern once, in the 1950's to judge from the design, but nothing had been added since. The walls were scored with the marks of lounging feet, the floors mottled with scars of crushed cigarettes, the ceilings stained where pipes had leaked.

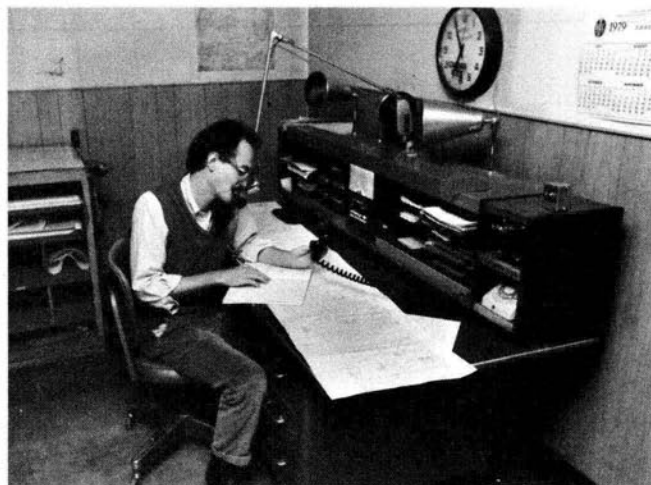
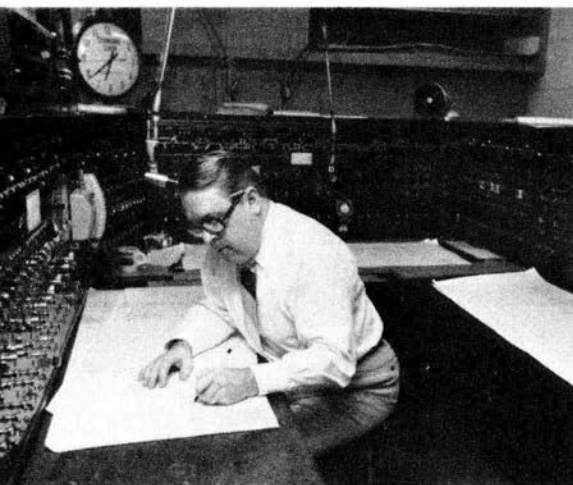
Each office was unlike any other (a quality that carried over to the train sheets, each arranged in its own way). Office No. 1, the "Missouri side," was all CTC. Territory covered: Missouri Division Junction (Davenport, Ia.) to Armourdale Yard (Kansas City); and Manly, Ia., to the Twin Cities. The dispatcher sat in a pit created by walling him on four sides with the black, silver, and olive boards (the colors dated them, revealing their post-World War II origin). Office No. 2, the "bow and arrow country," was all train orders; during second and third tricks (3 p.m.-7 a.m.), the work was done in office No. 4. Territory: Manly-Des

Moines-Allerton, Ia., and the branch-line network in northwestern Iowa.

The next two rooms consisted of desks only, surrounded by sheets, charts, train lists, and filing cabinets. The two assistant chiefs sat here, at the center of activity. Next door, in the third office, a small CTC machine had been joined to a larger one. This dispatcher worked the "Illinois side," handling movements through the throat of the system from Missouri Division Junction to Chicago, plus Illinois branches. Most of his railroad was invisible—his CTC ended at Atkinson, Ill., 25 miles east of Silvis. The main line was all double track and east of Atkinson was handled with block signals and train orders; Bureau and Joliet each had their own local CTC.

In office No. 4 stood a modern CTC machine—silent, with none of the clicking, coding relays that simmered in the other rooms. Since this office was sometimes consolidated with No. 2, there were two of everything—two train sheets, two microphones, two train-order logs, two sets of buttons to ring in operators. On first trick, office No. 4 handled only "east Iowa": Missouri Division Junction to Des Moines on the east-west main; Manly to Burlington on the north-south line; and Vinton to Iowa Falls. Newton-Des Moines was CTC, the remainder train orders; the operator at West Liberty, the crossing of the two mains, controlled his own interlocker plus the passing siding at Iowa City.





Across the hall, apart from the others (which were in a row connected by an open hallway), stood office No. 5, the "Colorado side." From Des Moines to Denver, this was entirely train-order territory. Two clocks on the wall indicated the time change that occurred, for railroad purposes, at Goodland, Kans. A mammoth train sheet, pasted together out of four separate sheets, was draped across a desk which could never accommodate it—one end of the sheet always drooped across the floor. No lights were here, no bright colors, no clicking relays, just the grey of the desk, the silver of the microphone, and the white of the train sheet.

BUT these were the offices as they never appeared—vacant and quiet. There was always a buzz of activity. The assistant chief was roaming about, searching for up-to-date information. Other dispatchers wandered past, tracking down trains that would be leaving another's territory and coming onto their own, or trying to run down the chief who "was here a minute ago." There was an endless babble of background talk, as the conversation from one office filtered into another (some stations broadcast loud and clear, while others were barely audible). Underneath this babble was the mutter of radio transmissions; since three of the offices handled trains in and out of Des Moines, dispatchers had to keep one ear open to the radio. And somewhere, always, a telephone was ringing.

Dispatchers were talking or talking and writing, or trying to listen, or leafing through the pile of various-sized papers that were the record of previous messages, or reaching up to line a switch and code a signal, or staring at a blinking light on the board, or hastily calculating on a piece of scratch paper, or recopying slow orders. One or two sat smoking, sipping coffee, gazing off into space with a glazed look, waiting for the chief to return their train sheets, or thinking what next to do, or simply, thankfully, resting.

ABOVE, left to right, in offices 1 through 5 in Des Moines: Chuck Winship on the CTC "Missouri side"; author Brunner on the "bow and arrow country"; Brunner chatting with D. L. Stowe on the "Illinois side"; Lyle Sohm on the "east Iowa side"; and George Williamson on the two-time-zone "Colorado side." Dispatching elsewhere goes on, but with the Rock Island gone, these rooms are empty, alas.

Why, you may ask, would that man be so tired? Why is he rubbing his eyes and kneading his brow? Why is he turning back to his desk with a slump in his shoulders? What about the excitement of three trains clearing a track for each other, right in a row? Where is all the drama of railroading, that drama of which the crew on No. 5 remained so blissfully ignorant?

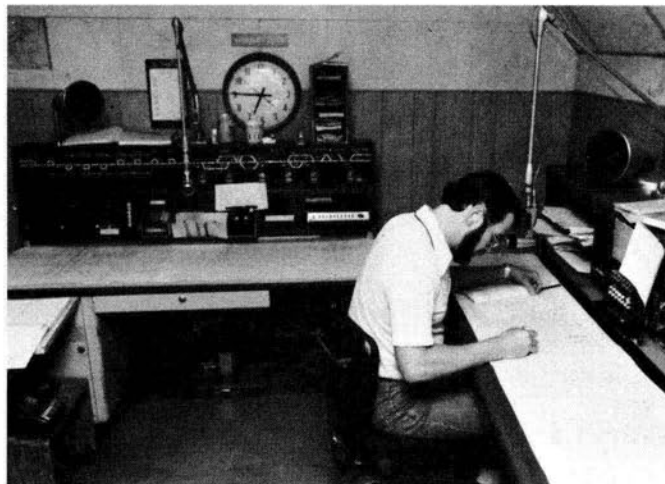
A large part of a dispatcher's life is detail work. Is the train-order log up to date? Is every OS\* in? Is the delay on 56 written down? Has 43 got a message to pick up? What time will 62 leave

\*OS, which stands for "on sheet," is a report of a train passing a certain point.

Manly (better walk down the hall and find out if it's called in)? *Dispatcher, I've got a slow order to repeat.* (Hold on just a second.) *OS, Iowa Falls, on 53, and a call on 54 and a 411; 411 has work at Dows* (better find out if Estherville has anyone figured against 54, if there's anyone at Estherville—he may be out checking the yard). *Dispatcher, dispatcher, this is the brakeman on 56 at Brooklyn. 43 is doubling the hill at Homestead.* (Marengo's gone home; maybe Iowa City can talk to 43.) *How long are we gonna be at Brooklyn? Can we go to Marengo? I've got something to write an order on* (won't be any good unless 43 comes to the phone). *This is*



ROLLING through Marengo, Ia., in May 1979 was 43's extra. This Davenport-Des Moines section of the main was one of the Rock's busiest, but this portion was train-order territory. Condition of the depot reflected the Rock's financial straits.



*train 82, dispatcher, the conductor speaking. Look, we got a message to pick up at Argon, but one engine is dead and we've already got 6300 tons. Now I'll pick up if you really want me to but I can't guarantee . . .*

IT'S NOT ENOUGH, though, to point out the stress of the job; most railroad jobs are stressful at one time or another. The dispatcher, however, remains the medium for everyone's problems. To provide a true insight into dispatching, it is necessary to cross that dark divide that separates dispatchers from operators and engineers and conductors. It is necessary to examine that most cumbersome, that most outmoded, that most traditional aspect of railroad operations—the train order. The crew need only know how to follow it; and the operator need only know how to type it; but the dispatcher must know *everything* about it.

One of the difficulties of learning train orders (at least when I was on the Rock Island) was that there was no set method of instruction. The apprentice system was in effect. The student sat alongside a dispatcher for the first day or two, watching him work. When conditions permitted, it was proper to ask questions. After a while, the student was invited to "sit down," though he at first performed only bookkeeping functions—taking the call on a crew, writing a delay report, getting an OS, perhaps updating a slow order. If a train order was required, the dispatcher usually dictated it to the student as the student dictated it to the operators. By the end of a week, the student was in the chair the full eight hours and the absences of the dispatcher became more frequent and less noticeable. (There were a few dispatchers whom I avoided like the plague, for they simply sat you down on your first day, then vanished—the "sink or swim" method of pedagogy. One man, who later went to another railroad, was apparently a master at literally hiding from his students. The

helpless student, stuck on some fine point of the rules, would wander the halls in vain, searching for his mentor who was—someone confided to me—holed up in the furnace room on the first floor, reading *Playboy*.)

The end result of the method I went through is that one learned train orders in a haphazard, catch-as-catch-can manner. I wasn't really able to think clearly about them until I'd worked as a student for a month and happened, one morning, to work with a dispatcher on a light day. "Two kinds of orders can get you in trouble faster than anything else," said B.S.F.,\* "the flagging order and the right-over order."

I could see how a flagging order might cause problems. This type of order, introduced to me by B.D.K. as a "foot-ease" order, is designed to relieve a conductor from protecting the rear of his train with a flag when the train is stopped. Quite simply, it restricts all trains from passing a set location before a specific time, and it was used frequently on the "bow and arrow country," the portion of the Rock Island in northwestern Iowa that was a spiderweb of branch lines to grain terminals.

The bow and arrow country deserves a lengthy aside, if only to serve as an example of how the Rock Island could be flexible. Except for on the main stem between Iowa Falls and Estherville, most speeds were restricted to 25 mph or less. A train crew simply could not make a round trip—especially if its objective was to gather up a unit grain train—within its 12 hours. A train could be out on the line three or four days. One member of the crew, therefore, would follow the train in his auto, and at the end of 12 hours, the working crew would tie up at a convenient point and ride home in style. Just where a train would be on any given day was known only to the crew until the next

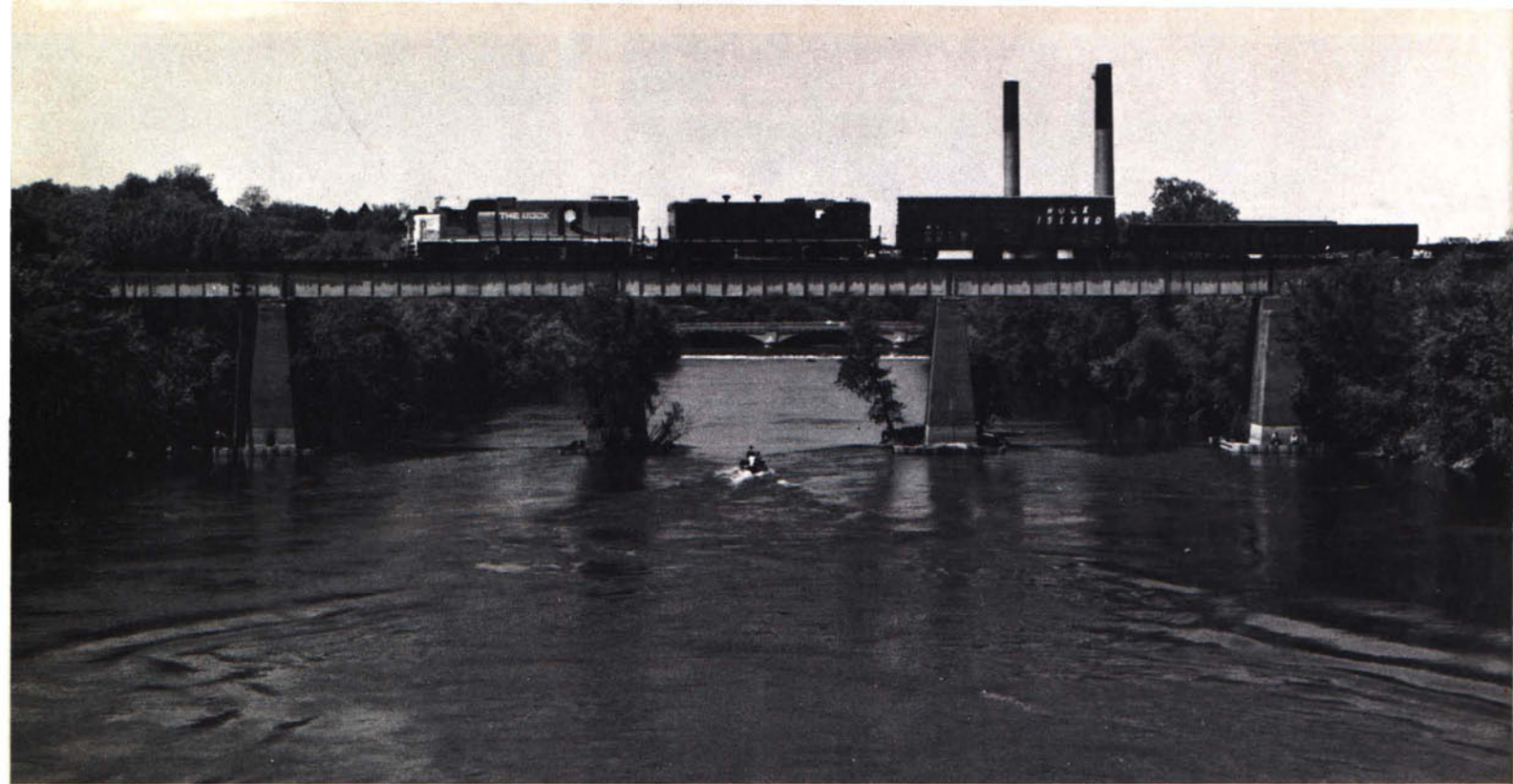
morning, when the dispatcher's telephone would ring (there was no wire left in this area; all work was handled over a WATS line), and an agent somewhere would ask for orders for a train at, say, Hayfield Junction en route to Round Lake. As may be imagined, train lineups for this territory were arranged with room for trains that might surprisingly appear: EXTRA EAST LEAVE EMMETSBURG NOT BEFORE 1001 AM.

The objective in dispatching is to move trains without yielding control of any line. Yet in the bow and arrow country, where everything was under train order, a train could appear at any moment anywhere—Dows or Emmetsburg, for example—and ask for orders. If the main line was owned by another train, not due to arrive anywhere for another four hours, there was no way to change orders without complications. I once made the rash confession to an assistant chief that I was finally beginning to understand the way things worked in the bow and arrow country. "Oh my," said C.B.K., "now I *know* it's time for you to take a day off!"

B.D.K. SEEMED expert at adopting the flag order (Form Y in our Book of Rules) to a variety of conditions. One time I'd worked third trick with F.W.A., and I thought we'd done a careful job, but when we turned the transfer over to B.D.K., he spotted a mistake right away. "How's it look?" asked F.W.A., ready to bounce out the door. "Well, not too bad," said B.D.K., "except you've got 'em lapped up here." "Lapped up" are the ultimate words of censure. They derive from the phrase "lapse of authority," which is the result of a dispatcher having two trains in operation, one of which knows nothing of the other. To "lap 'em up" is, classically, to set the stage for a collision, and while I'd heard the phrase bandied about as a nervous joke ("Don't bother me now, I'm on orders and I'd rather not lap 'em up"), I never thought I would participate in a real-life situation.

\*Dispatchers are universally known on a road by their initials, which they append to every order. To protect these employees, fictitious sets of initials for each person are used.





AT Iowa City, 59's extra crossed the Iowa River. Although carded with numbers, all Rock's freights were run as extras. Series denoted route (e.g., 50's were Chicago-Denver).

Our mistake was simple, once it was explained. We had two westbound trains running on the main stem from Iowa Falls to Estherville. The first, Extra 4300 West, had left about 4 a.m., and since it had no work, we had not felt it necessary to give the train a flag order. The second train, Extra 4314 West, called about two hours later, had cars to peddle and had received appropriate protection. Our Form Y order read: WESTWARD EXTRA TRAINS EXCEPT EXTRA 4314 WEST WAIT AT IOWA FALLS YARD UNTIL 1201 PM. "How have we got 'em lapped up?" F.W.A. asked belligerently. "I don't see it."

"This second guy's got a flag order, right? He's not expecting any trains behind him—no one can follow out of Iowa Falls till noon. So he's boogying on down the track, doin' his work. Meanwhile, this first train gets hungry, or maybe he's got a bad order to set out. Whichever, he decides to get in the hole at West Bend. First train's in the hole; second one goes around him. No problem, right?"

"Nothing wrong with that."

"All right, second train is now first. But it's not got a care in the world—it's

got a flag order. It stops to do work at Emmetsburg; the conductor stays inside where it's warm. Meanwhile, the first train, which is now second, finishes up the flapjacks at West Bend, takes off, and bingo—there's your lap."

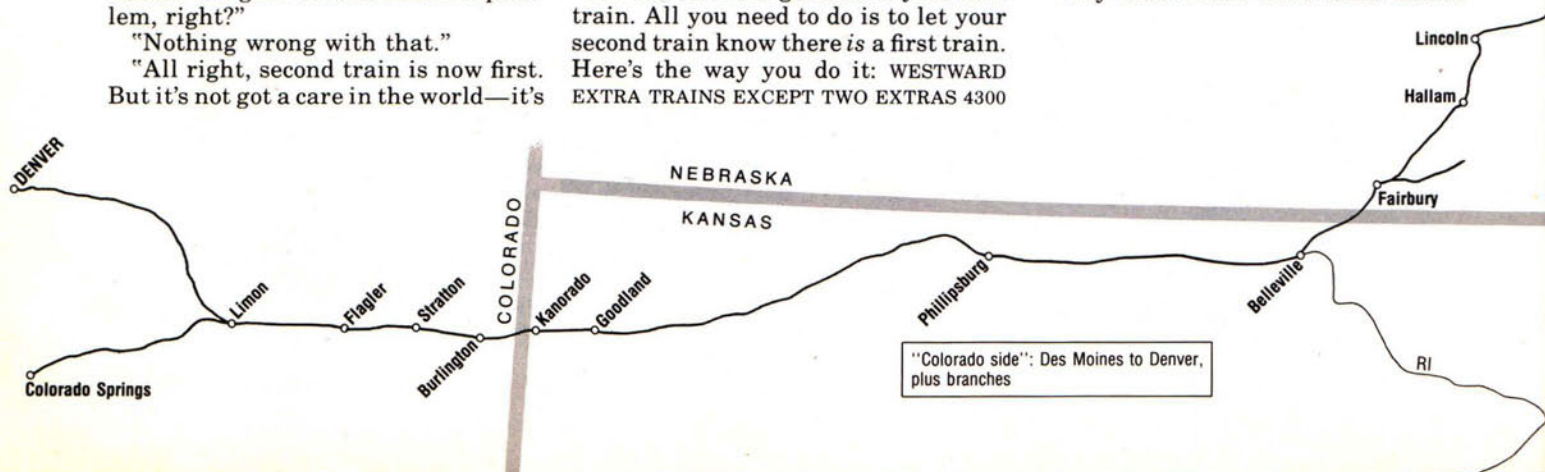
He was right, of course. The second train, if it somehow became first, would be excused from protecting its rear end, expecting nothing westward behind it. But there was the chance that the first train could turn out to be behind it. It was a lapse of authority. No matter that F.W.A. had brushed it off ("Aw, nothing can happen—that track's all twenty-five mile an hour anyway"), the principle had been violated. And if it could happen here, under circumstances which were benignant, it could be allowed to happen elsewhere, on fast track.

F.W.A. shrugged it off, but I was new enough to be shaken, and so I hung around to find out how we should've done it. "Very simple," said B.D.K. "You don't need to get hold of your first train. All you need to do is to let your second train know there is a first train. Here's the way you do it: WESTWARD EXTRA TRAINS EXCEPT TWO EXTRAS 4300

AND 4314 WEST WAIT AT IOWA FALLS YARD UNTIL 1201 PM. EXTRA 4300 WEST HAS LEFT IOWA FALLS YARD. The trick is to include that final sentence, which informs train two that train one is out ahead. Now, train one never has to know about this order, which is okay; if train one stops, it'll send out a flag as a matter of course. Everyone is adequately covered; if train two passes train one, train two will know there is a live train behind it—not simply some dead train tied up on a siding waiting for a new crew."

If a simple order, the Form Y, can tie up the railroad, imagine the problems created by a complicated order, the Form S-C, which is often combined with another form, S-E, the time order. Form S-C ("S" for single track), the "right-over" order, is frequently used, especially on main lines, unlike the Form Y, which usually is restricted to branch lines and locals.

Any train must have some knowl-





edge of traffic opposing it, even if that knowledge is that there is no traffic. On the Rock Island main line between Iowa City and Newton, for example, trains operated under train orders on single track with sidings. A westbound leaving Iowa City (or an eastbound leaving Newton) usually would have one of three kinds of train orders. Example: 59's train, Extra 199 West, rolls past West Liberty, and the engineer scoops up his orders. Aside from the Form X orders (slow orders indicating reduced speed zones not listed in the timetable), he may have a straight Form G order: ENG 199 RUN EXTRA IOWA CITY TO NEWTON. Along with authorizing his train as an extra (and all trains on the Rock Island dispatched from Des Moines in 1978 were extra, with the exception of the two *Rockets* until their demise), the order informs him that he

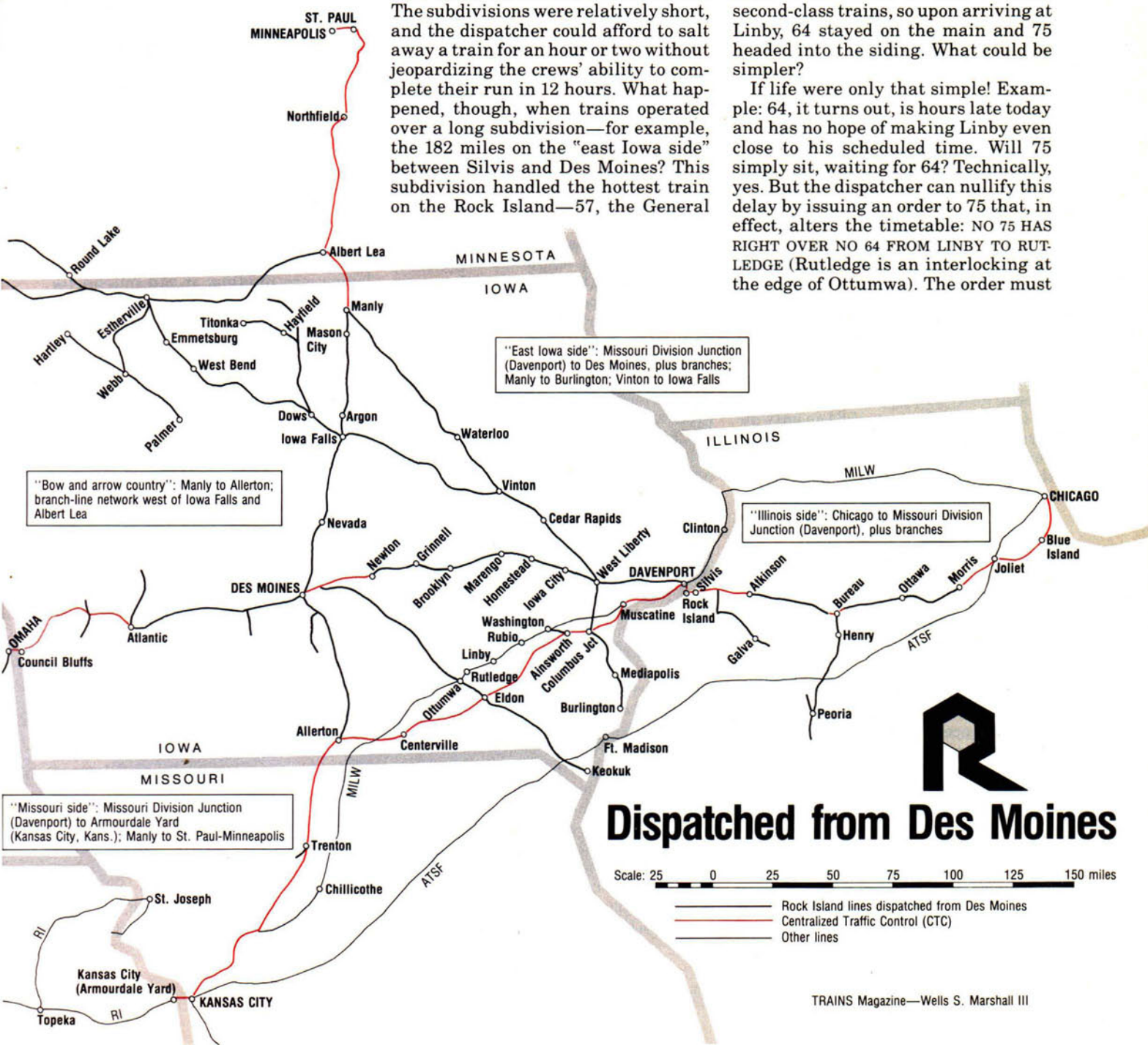
has no opposing trains to counter: 59 owns the track to Newton. Suppose, however, that 56 has been called at Des Moines; if that is the case, the engineer would likely receive, in addition to the Form G running order, a Form A order, a straight meet with 56, Extra 4308 East: EXTRA 199 WEST MEET EXTRA 4308 EAST AT GRINNELL. EXTRA 199 WEST HOLD MAIN TRACK AT GRINNELL. Result: 199 knows there is an opposing train, Extra 4308 East, but no problem—both will meet at Grinnell and neither must pass that location until the other has arrived.

The meet order is blatant. On the "Colorado side," between Council Bluffs, Ia., and Limon, Colo. (Limon to Denver was on Union Pacific track), where trains were enormous, meet orders were almost always used. A straight meet was a necessity because each subdivision had only one place that could accommodate two trains. The subdivisions were relatively short, and the dispatcher could afford to salt away a train for an hour or two without jeopardizing the crews' ability to complete their run in 12 hours. What happened, though, when trains operated over a long subdivision—for example, the 182 miles on the "east Iowa side" between Silvis and Des Moines? This subdivision handled the hottest train on the Rock Island—57, the General

Motors auto-parts train. That called for the subtlety and finesse of the right-over order, coupled with the time order.

THE right-over order has evolved considerably since its initial usage. When timetables were supreme, all eastbound (or northbound) trains were superior to westbound (or southbound) trains. At its most elemental, this simply determined which train held the main at a meeting point. The Milwaukee Road timetable I used as an operator at Culver Tower in Muscatine, Ia., showed No. 75 leaving Culver at 10:40 a.m. and meeting No. 64 at Linby at 12:10 p.m. Likewise, the timetable showed No. 64 leaving Ottumwa at 11:35 a.m. and meeting No. 75 at Linby at 12:10 p.m. The timetable also stated: "Eastward trains are superior to westward trains of the same class." Both 64 and 75 were second-class trains, so upon arriving at Linby, 64 stayed on the main and 75 headed into the siding. What could be simpler?

If life were only that simple! Example: 64, it turns out, is hours late today and has no hope of making Linby even close to his scheduled time. Will 75 simply sit, waiting for 64? Technically, yes. But the dispatcher can nullify this delay by issuing an order to 75 that, in effect, alters the timetable: NO 75 HAS RIGHT OVER NO 64 FROM LINBY TO RUTLEDGE (Rutledge is an interlocking at the edge of Ottumwa). The order must







OPERATOR at West Liberty, Ia., "copied three west" (above) for 57's train, the Extra 351 West, which picked them up at speed from the order stand (right). To ease dispatchers' load, Rock had several local-control CTC installations like this.



also be addressed to 64 at Ottumwa. No. 64, of course, cannot leave until 75 arrives, because its superiority has been temporarily borrowed and bestowed upon 75. It is contrary to the timetable, but that is precisely what a train order is—a momentary deviation from the strict (and ideal) realm of the timetable, a modification necessitated by exceptional events.

Variations on this order are endless, since the dispatcher can assign right as he pleases. The timetable imposes, but the dispatcher disposes; or, What the timetable giveth, the dispatcher taketh away. He can move 75 against 64 for part of the way, if 64 is only delayed for a short spell. But he must never forget that eastward trains rule the road as a matter of convention. If 75 is hours late, 64 needs nothing, because 64 is top dog; 75 stays out of 64's way. A student dispatcher can raise quite a chuckle from his operators by issuing 64 right over 75. Since 64 already has right over 75, operators find this highly entertaining, at least the first time (response is disappointing the third or fourth try).

Right-over orders are invaluable when one wants to assign floating meets that can change depending on circumstance. With 57, Murphy's Law ("If anything can go wrong, it will") attained a certain refinement. The railroad corollary of Murphy's Law is: If a hotshot westbound is running, then a hotshot eastbound also will be called. Example: How does one move 57 against 56 without taking the cowardly option of holding 56 at Newton until 57 arrives, or running 56 to a siding and salting it away for an hour?

The solution is to create a temporary schedule for 57's train, a schedule it can well live within, but which also will give 56 an opportunity to move against it. First requirement is to give 57's train (say, Extra 4337 West) right over 56's train (Extra 4326 East), because 57 is hotter—57 doesn't see an approach signal, let alone handle a siding switch. (The first time I, as an operator, stopped 57, to call attention to sticking brakes, I received in rapid succession a call from the chief dispatcher, a call from the power bureau at Kansas City, a call from the assistant superintendent, a call from the area trainmaster, and a call from a man in Chicago who never did identify himself [the prerogative of being a high official].) The next step is to calculate the approximate time that 57's train will arrive at the three sidings where 56 can meet it. The calculations result in an order that might read:

EXTRA 4337 WEST HAS RIGHT OVER  
EXTRA 4326 EAST FROM IOWA CITY TO  
NEWTON AND WAIT AT  
MARENGO UNTIL 615 PM  
BROOKLYN 640 PM  
GRINNELL 701 PM  
FOR EXTRA 4326 EAST

Hence 57's train has been given its own unique schedule. The use of the word "wait" in the order is euphemistic: 57 cannot realistically run to fulfill its unique schedule. The schedule is actually for the benefit of 56, which now knows approximately where 57 will be. More specifically, 56 knows precisely where 57 will *not* be: 57 will not pass Marengo before 6:15 p.m. Therefore, 56 has until five minutes before that time to be in the clear at Marengo. If 56

cannot run that well, it may be able to make Brooklyn by 6:40 and wait there for 57. Just where 56 ultimately goes for 57 depends on how well it can accommodate itself to 57's "schedule."

There is a further twist in this order. As it states, Extra 4337 West is to wait for Extra 4326 East. Once 57 has met 56, the time restrictions in the order no longer are binding; it can outrun its schedule, if it dares, because, as the order specifies, it was to "wait" at the locations for a specific train. Once the train is behind it, the order has been fulfilled.

UNDERSTANDING the Book of Rules would be simple if the rules were applied in a strict, legalistic fashion. Any one rule by itself is (relatively speaking) clear, concise, and to the point. But in its application, a rule can become charged with nuances, implications, and innuendoes.

My favorite example of this centers on Rock Island's Rule 93. Every railroad has a variation on Rule 93. In its simplest form, it states that within yard limits, the main track may be used by trains or engines that can move in either direction. Most railroads add a few extra clauses: regular trains must be cleared, but not extras; any train moving within yard limits must proceed "prepared to stop short of train, obstruction, or switch not properly lined."

To begin with, Rule 93 was the center of a small controversy because the Uniform Code of Operating Rules had a form T order which could establish "temporary" yard limits. Every day but Sunday, the "temporary" yard limits





went into effect at Lincoln, Nebr., and Waterloo, Ia., and woe to the third-trick dispatcher who neglected to issue this order: 801 AM UNTIL 401 PM (DATE) RULE 93 IN EFFECT BETWEEN MP (SUCH-AND-SUCH) AND MP (SO-AND-SO). The reason was that switch engines at both locations had industry switching for several miles along the main. Without the rule, the switch crews would need to work under track and time limits or with a flagman. Just why the rule was only placed temporarily in effect at

these two locations was a puzzle, but the real rub of contention, I believe, was that no dispatcher liked the idea of a snake-wagon [switcher] out on "his" main line, especially since both locations were in train-order territory. If a meet turned sour, was it because the snakes delayed a mainline train for an hour while they happily switched?

Rule 93 worked wonderfully well under one set of circumstances, though. Various branch lines throughout the Rock Island system saw only one train a day. Why not decree these to be yards? A train running from Iowa Falls to Titonka would require orders only to Dows; after Dows, the train would operate exclusively on subdivisions 12B and 12C, both of which were annotated in the timetable: "Trains and engines will operate per Rule 93." The whole branch was a yard, and any train on it would need to move at "Restricted Speed," watching out for open switches, obstructions, and other trains (which didn't exist except in principle).

One afternoon I walked over to the Missouri side to visit with K.F.N., an opponent of the Form T order. "Ever see an order like this?" he asked me abruptly, holding up the train-order log. I had to squint to read his writing, notoriously casual, but it appeared to state: "Rule 93 is suspended from Ainsworth to Washington . . ." "It's an anti-Form T order," I said. "Is this the beginning of a new campaign?" "Horsefeathers," he said (or some such phrase). The explanation was odd, indeed. On this day, the branch from Ainsworth to Washington would see not only the usual one train a day but

also a second train, a Rock detour over the Burlington Northern from Washington to Mediapolis. Two trains would occupy the branch, thus the rule had to be suspended and the dispatcher had to revert to the regular routine of train orders. But the purpose of Rule 93, ostensibly, or at the very least originally, was to permit a number of trains to move in the same area of designated limits, each watching out for the others.

I summed up my lesson. "The only time Rule 93, which covers two or more trains, is legal, is when there are not two or more trains?" "You're finally catching on, kid," K.F.N. said (he called almost everyone "kid"). "I have hopes for you yet." I shook my head in wonderment and bewilderment.

MUCH to my surprise, I realized one day that a few dispatchers had their own distinctive ways of composing train orders. Not every one slavishly imitated the examples given in the Book of Rules. Most dispatchers believed the formulae therein were sacrosanct, but a few deliberately roamed as far as possible from established models.

One of the finest train-order dispatchers, S.K.S., had the unusual tendency of combining a slew of train-order forms in one order. The Book of Rules sanctioned this, up to a point; a footnote advised which forms were allowed to combine with others. Very few dispatchers combined more than two forms in one order—except S.K.S. It was characteristic of him to jam all his information into one staggering order. Here is an extreme instance:

ENG 211 RUN EXTRA GOODLAND TO LIMON WITH RIGHT OVER TWO EXTRAS 298 AND 4324 EAST AND MEET EXTRA 298 EAST AT KANORADO INSTEAD OF BURLINGTON WAIT AT BURLINGTON UNTIL 115 AM  
STRATTON 145 AM  
FLAGLER 225 AM  
FOR EXTRA 4324 EAST

In one order, Forms A, S-C, S-E, G, and P.

I think he positively relished deviating from the obvious examples in the Rule Book. One morning, three east-bound trains were called out of Fairbury: 56's train, Extra 4317 East; a Lincoln Turn (346), Extra 4314 East, which would turn at Lincoln and become a westbound; and 58's train, Extra 4315 East. The problem: the Lincoln Turn had to receive all its orders at Fairbury, including orders permitting it to return as a westbound (yes, the agent could've been called out to copy an order, but that would've been the easy way out). His solution, an order unlike the way anyone else I know would've done it:

ENG 4314 RUN EXTRA FAIRBURY TO LINCOLN AND ARRIVAL EXTRA 4317



TAKING SIDING for 43's train in May 1979 at Iowa City was 42's train. The passing siding here was remotely controlled by the operator at the West Liberty depot.



EAST RETURN TO FAIRBURY WITH  
RIGHT OVER EASTWARD TRAINS AND  
MEET EXTRA 4315 EAST AT HALLAM

Quite simply, he combined the return trip running order with a meet: 4314 can only return to Fairbury after the arrival at Lincoln of Extra 4317 East, and en route, 4314 meets 4315 at Hallam. The conventional way would've been to issue a meet with 4314 and 4317 at Lincoln, but S.K.S. always opted to be as brief as possible.

This order resolved a messy situation so compactly—and was so dazzling to me, who would've issued a half dozen orders—that I immediately began to rifle through my notebook, looking for a spare corner to write it all down. S.K.S. heard me turning pages hurriedly and said over his shoulder, "If you're lookin' for an example in the Rule Book, I wouldn't bother. There isn't any."

At an opposite extreme from S.K.S. was C.M.T. While S.K.S. reduced his orders to the bare minimum, compressing them so not one nonessential word appeared, C.M.T. created orders that attained, in my mind, a certain degree of elegance. They were unusual for their subtlety and sophisticated knowledge of the rules. At the time, he was working on the Illinois side, where little opportunity existed for writing orders, except on one subdivision—the line between Bureau and Peoria. This not only was single-track, train-order territory, it also was the last part of the system having a scheduled train. The *Peoria Rocket*, Nos. 11 and 12, had the honor of holding the final regular run on the Rock Island. The *Quad Cities Rocket*, Nos. 5 and 6, also had a timetable schedule, but since the train did not operate in unsignaled train-order territory, the designation was meaningless.

The *Peoria Rocket* was a thorn in management's side. For several years, applications for abandonment of the train had been postponed or denied, often at the last moment. About 1977, the word went out—freight trains on the Peoria branch were not to be delayed by the passenger train. The crews on 11 and 12 rankled under their revised status and came to believe the dispatcher's motives were all malignant. C.M.T. strived to live within the edict of management while at the same time working to give the passenger trains every break. It wasn't always possible, though, and when push came to shove, No. 11 came out on the bottom. But 11's crew still had plenty of fight left in them.

One night, 11 arrived at Bureau a few minutes early, a frequent occurrence owing to improved mainline track condition not reflected in a revised schedule. At Bureau, the crew saw the following order: ENG 202 RUN



**AUTHOR BRUNNER** hands up orders at Bureau, Ill., to train 11, the *Peoria Rocket*, in May 1978. Train was the last on the Rock to have a "regular schedule."

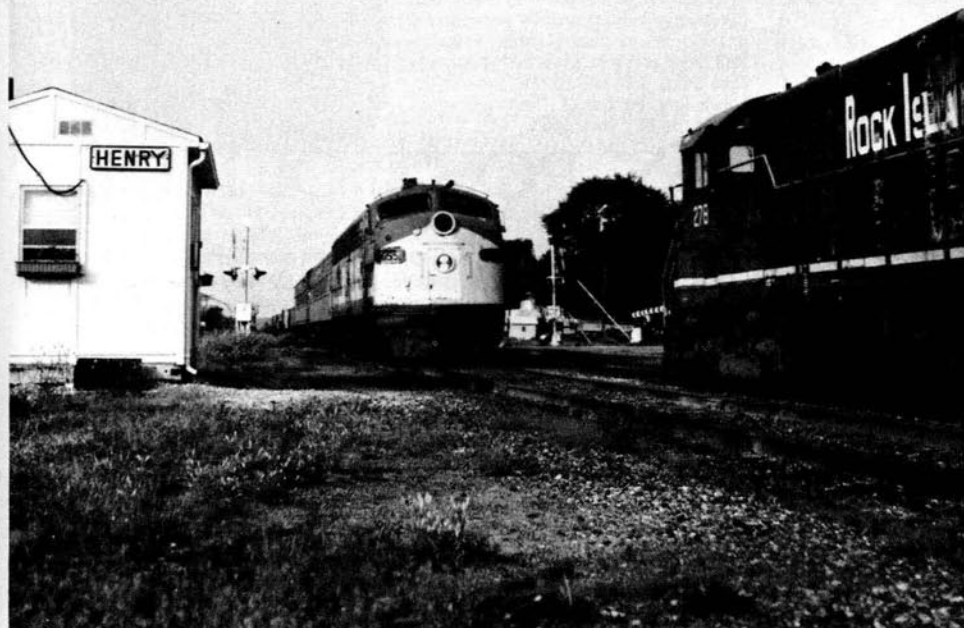
EXTRA PEORIA TO BUREAU WITH RIGHT OVER NO 11 PEORIA TO BUREAU. The crew decided that, because No. 11 was a scheduled train and Extra 202 East was no more than an extra, No. 11 could run down the line to Henry and clear Extra 202 East there. This was nonsense—the order plainly stated the extra was running with right over No. 11, period. (Possibly the crew was confusing this order with another kind of order, an order that would read: ENG 202 RUN EXTRA PEORIA TO BUREAU, NO 11 HAS ENG 652. Under that order, Extra 202 East could move against No. 11's scheduled times in the timetable. The engine number of the regular train must be mentioned so Extra 202 East will know when it has passed No. 11.) Fortunately, the crew decided to inquire whether their interpretation was correct. C.M.T. went up in smoke. "The order reads, 'with right over,' not 'has right over'; 'has right over' is the wording for a Form S-C order to an intermediate point on a subdivision, while 'with right over' confers superiority for the entire subdivision." I can't believe the crew understood this technical explanation, but they could surely guess from the dispatcher's tone of voice that they had strayed from the fold.

It was unfortunate that C.M.T. worked under these strained conditions, for the crews on 11 and 12 were so sensitive to any unusual order that they misinterpreted his motives. A classic example occurred one evening. Peoria had called a freight train east for 6 p.m. Normally, this would have meant that the freight might arrive at Bureau about 9:30, knocking a half-

hour hole in 11's schedule. But the engineer on this job was exceptional—with a bit of luck, it was possible he could make Bureau by 9. No. 11 was due out of Bureau at 9:02. Still, intangibles were involved. Would the freight depart Peoria soon? Would it develop trouble on the way? C.M.T. knew the freight could make Henry, but he thought that, with the engineer pressing it, there was a good chance the freight could get to Bureau. How to keep open this possibility of running from Henry to Bureau? There was no operator on duty at Henry, and if the crew stopped to copy an order by radio, they would lose just enough time to render the order useless. The problem was solved in this particularly elegant manner: ENG 213 RUN EXTRA PEORIA TO BUREAU, HAS RIGHT OVER NO 11 PEORIA TO HENRY, NO 11 HAS ENG 655. With right over No. 11 to Henry, 213 owns the line up to there; beyond Henry, 213 can run against 11's schedule, if time permits. As things worked out, Extra 213 East ran in superb fashion, clearing Bureau by 8:55 p.m. There even was time to annul the orders that would have informed No. 11 of the move, which left one and all blissfully unaware of the tight squeeze.

NOT ALL CREWS appreciated these subtle orders, especially one—nicknamed "the stinger"—which was usually reserved for branch-line operations. A stinger is a sentence added to a running order that annuls the order after a certain time. Typical situation: Engine 238 will be working on the line between Albert Lea and Estherville for





**NO PASSENGERS** are in sight — a common plight by summer of mid-1978 — at Henry, Ill., as 12 ambles through. Waiting in the hole is a Silvis-Peoria freight.

at least three days. Instead of allowing its running order, authorizing it to move as an extra without any opposition, to remain in effect for a long three days, the dispatcher issued it a running order with a stinger: ENG 238 RUN EXTRA ESTHERVILLE TO ALBERT LEA, THIS ORDER IS ANNULLED AT 330 PM. (The time in the order is 12 hours later than the call time of the crew, the hour when the crew is dead under the Hours of Service law.) The stinger accomplished a number of things. At 3:30 p.m., the order was dead, and the dispatcher could consider it fulfilled. Furthermore, the crew had to have its train off the main and in the clear by 3:30 p.m., for quite simply, their authority to exist ceased at that time. After 3:30, the dispatcher could assume he had his main line back. And the next morning, when the crew resumed its work, they would have to call in for new orders, thus advising the dispatcher of their location, and in addition, giving him the opportunity (in the unlikely event he had an additional train to run opposing them) to issue a meet, if necessary.

On main lines, a stinger on an order was a rarity because, of course, crews were supposed to complete their runs well within their 12 hours. They weren't always able to, though, for a host of reasons, and nothing annihilates the operation of a railroad more thoroughly than a train tying up on the main, dead under hours of service. Most railroad slang is obsolete, if indeed it ever existed (K.F.N. was fond of asking, "I've never heard a sectionman called a 'gandy dancer'—have you? We

call them 'sectionmen,' goddamit!"). The exception involved train crews who have run out of time; it is no accident that the most contemptuous terms are reserved for such occasions. A crew is "hog-lawed" (one of the rare times when "hogger" is resuscitated from the past) or "goes to the dogs"—a result of the crew dogging along, or dogging it. A relay crew for the stranded one is called "a dogcatch crew."

C.M.T. introduced the stinger to the main line, and when he did it he was experimenting. By automatically attaching a stinger to the running order of mainline trains, he created a situation where a train crew couldn't simply lie down on the main when their 12 hours expired. They had to be in the clear, off the main, before their authority to exist evaporated—no more tying up the main and pressuring the dispatcher to call a dogcatch crew quickly.

This policy, exclusively maintained by C.M.T., came to a bitter end one day. A westbound had a bad trip—getting no further than the siding at Iowa City, where it tied up. The dogcatch crew, arriving to take the train on to Des Moines, received the characteristic running order with its uncharacteristic stinger. Since the crew had been called for 5:30 p.m., the stinger annulled the running order at 5:30 a.m. But the engineer balked. "I have a running order," he explained, "dated August 14 which states that 'this order is annulled at 5:30 a.m.' It is now 7:18 p.m., and therefore my running order has already been annulled." Efforts to convince the engineer that the 5:30 a.m. figure applied to August 15 were

made to no avail. The engineer demanded a new order; C.M.T. maintained the order was adequate as it stood. An intermediary finally suggested that the superintendent would decide—later. Much to everyone's amazement, the higher authority sided with the crew. The order was ambiguous, he maintained, and besides that, what was the point? No one attempted to question the judgment or explain how a stinger could keep the main line free.

It would be perverse to conclude that the situation in Des Moines was the very condition under which dispatchers thrive. Certainly with the Rock Island financial situation, there was an alarming amount of attrition, with the Burlington Northern a special beneficiary. "Someone could make a lot of money," one dispatcher said, "running a shuttle bus between Des Moines and Alliance." The Rock's financial condition aside, the dispatchers who chose to remain became, of necessity, exceptionally skilled individuals. My guess is that the Milwaukee dispatchers at Ottumwa could discern the attractions of a job in which the unexpected is a daily occurrence. And with all due respect to the Santa Fe men at Fort Madison, I submit that the anxiety of having your every word taped is nothing compared with the anxiety you feel hearing that the eastbound is down to one unit and doubling the hill in front of the hottest westbound on the road.

As it happened, I decided that the dispatcher's life, at least at Des Moines, wasn't what I wanted for myself. Yet the decision was difficult to make. I still look back on the job with nostalgia and affection. Two remarks stay with me, hauntingly; they seem to sum up, as nothing else can, the whole of my experience. The first was made one morning by K.F.N., after he had sat down in the middle of a particularly messy situation on the Missouri side. "I make more decisions in one hour," he said, "than the president of Monkey Ward makes in a year."

The other was made by a young dispatcher who arrived a few months before I did. He already had the reputation for excellence—a scrupulous and thorough worker. We had just spent an unbroken four hours together on the Iowa side, overseeing 57, expediting 56, untangling a derailment tying up subdivision 12, prodding the West Liberty local, and wrestling with the usual tangle of trains in the bow and arrow country. It was 7 p.m. and the system was, at last, in fairly good shape; now, time for supper. I handed him his lunch box, but he ignored it. He was lost in thought, surveying the train sheets, shaking his head and saying, to no one in particular, "It's impossible to do a good job; it just can't be done." I