



RI operator Dan Sabin, age 16, at Manly in July 1969. Photo from Sabin collection.

Of dispatcher Rosey,
a howling snowstorm,
and an
almost-cornfield-meet

A 17-year-old Rock Island relief operator has a close call at Iowa Falls • By Dan Sabin

I was raised in a railroad family in Manly, Iowa, literally at the Rock Island depot, and spent most of my first 17 years riding trains of the RI, the Chicago Great Western, and the Minneapolis & St. Louis. I started my working career at age 15 as a Rock Island student telegrapher at Manly, and worked as a section laborer during the winter of my junior year of high school and as an operator through most of my senior year. At age 18, I would become the youngest train dispatcher in the U.S. I dispatched the main line through Manly many times and enjoyed having tours of duty with my dad and brother Dave, who were engineers on back-to-back southbound freights out of Inver Grove, Minn., RI's Twin Cities area yard. My brother Mark would be a conductor on Chicago & North Western train 19, a former M&StL operation, between Manly and Albert Lea, Minn. During 1969-70, I worked at 29 locations on the Rock Island, and I was one of the road's first dispatchers to have worked every trick and chief dispatcher's office on the system.

It was not uncommon during my junior and senior years at Manly High School for the railroad to call the principal to request that I come to work in an emergency staffing situation. Manly, with fewer than 2,000 people, was a railroad town, and it helped that the principal, Hartwick Roslien, had many relatives on the Rock Island and that my mentor, C. J. Stoffer, the Manly station agent, was also president of the school board.

On occasion, Mark and I would get a call to recruit a dozen of our friends and get down to the yard to sweep switches. One time, we were hired to grab enough helpers to shovel out the turntable pit at the old roundhouse. Another time, Stoffer hired Mark and me to transfer an entire carload of 100-lb. bags of potatoes from a bad-ordered PFE reefer, inside the diesel shop, to another car. Jobs like that introduced me to the concept of inside work.

One morning in December 1969, Mr. Roslien called me out of a boring English class to tell me the depot had just called him. The chief dispatcher needed me to work the second-trick operator's job down at Iowa Falls, south of Manly on the Des Moines-Minneapolis main line. Since the job transferred on at 2 p.m. and it was snowing pretty hard, he suggested that I get home right away to pack a lunch and head out. I "always listened to my principal," so I soon was in my '62 Ford, heading south on Highway 65 for Iowa Falls, 52 miles away.

After a long drive busting through drifts, I turned into the snow-packed driveway behind the grain elevator that led to the Rock Island depot on Iowa Falls' east side. The first-trick operator was Russ Menning, who worked a five-day swing with four days at Iowa Falls and one third trick at Manly. Russ was an easygoing, soft-spoken guy and always good to work with. There was not much going on, so Russ took right off. As he was pulling away, he swung his car around on the platform and honked. I went out through the waiting room and opened the door, feeling the icy blast of the snow as I stuck my head out to see what he wanted.

Russ rolled down the window on his Mercury and called out, "I almost forgot to tell you, the light on the order board is burned out. The maintainer knows about it, but he's at Bradford with the section gang changing out a broken rail. With this weather, I don't think he'll get to it today, but we should be okay. The dispatcher knows about it, and there's nothin' much goin on here." With that, he drove off.

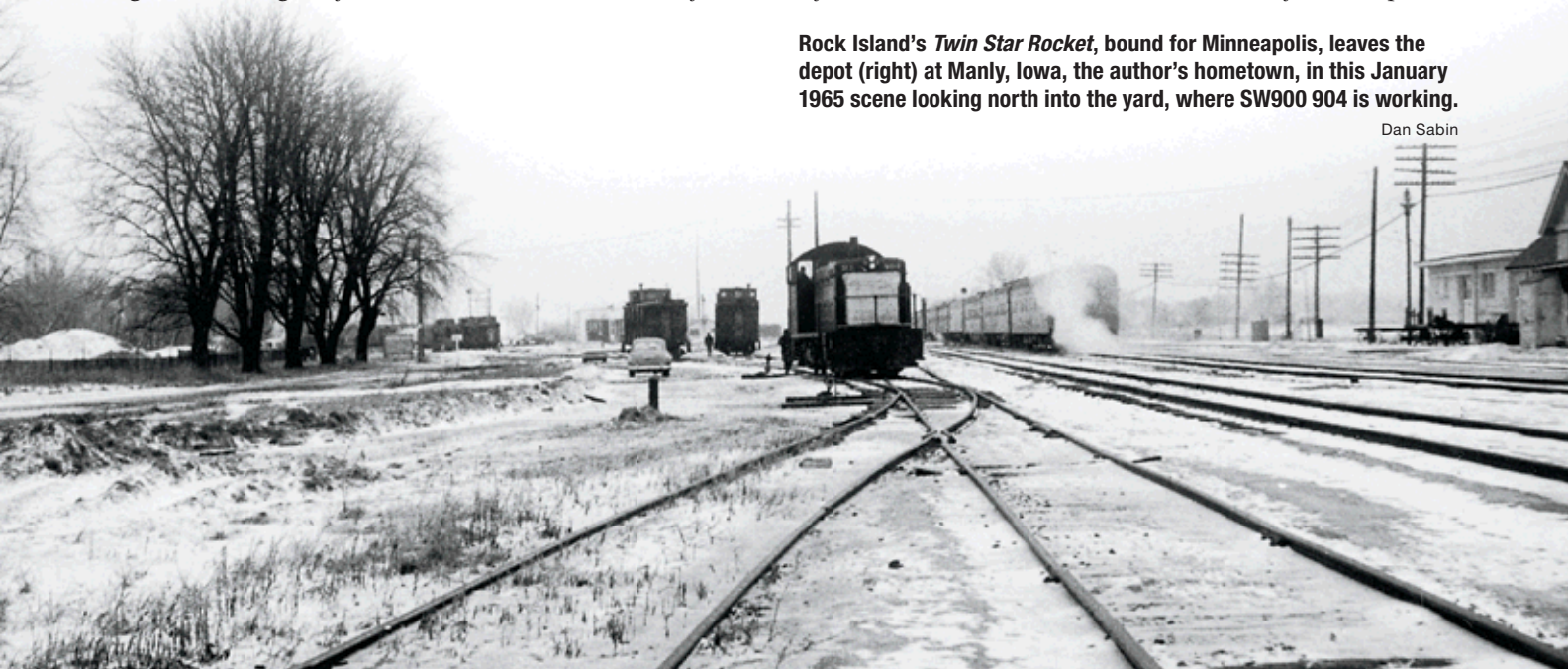
Iowa Falls is about halfway between Manly and Des Moines, so it was convenient to have an operator on duty for handling trains during the night. After about 5 p.m., Iowa Falls, whose code was "AO," was the only intermediate open station between Mason City ("DF," the joint Chicago Great Western-Rock Island office) and Short Line Junction ("WX," the tower in Des Moines where RI's north-south and east-west main lines crossed). On the first trick, agents were on duty at Nevada, McCallsburg, and Hampton besides the first-trick operator at Iowa Falls, so advancing trains or changing meets during the day was pretty easy.

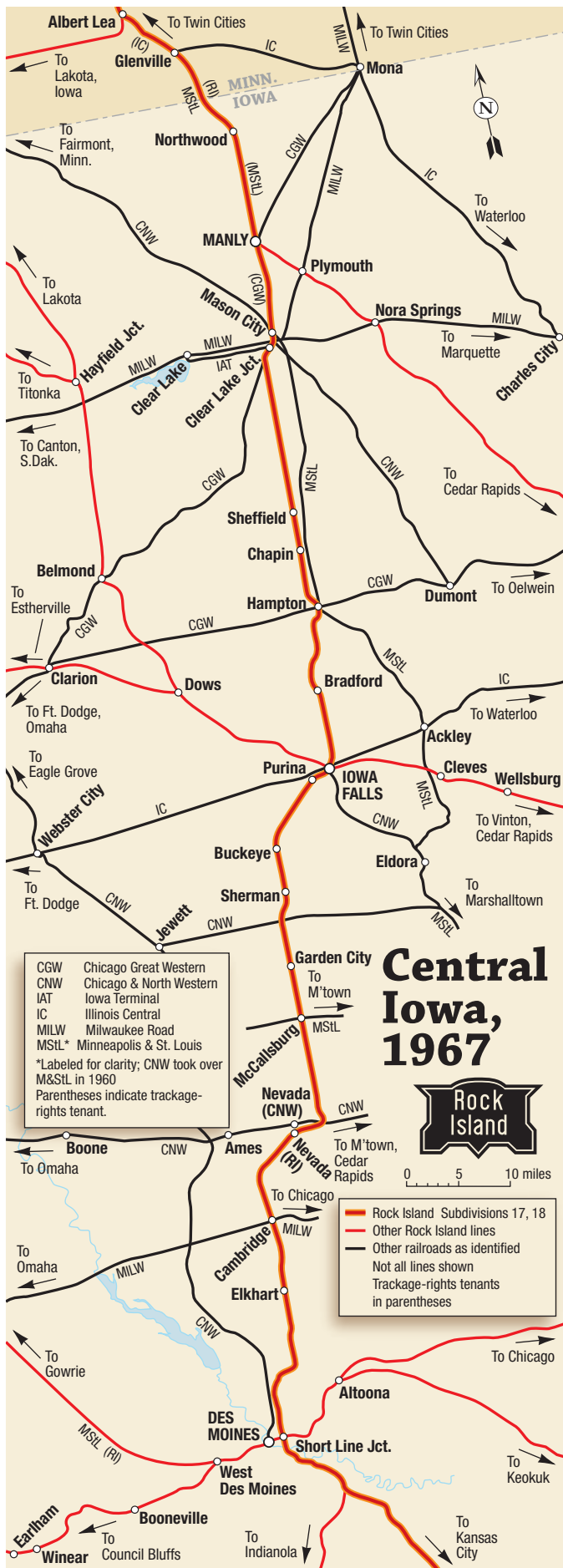
Listening on the wire

I grabbed a mug of the thick black ooze that passed for coffee and, placing the one-sided headset on, plugged in the dispatcher's phone. I listened for a while to Glen Watts (GLW), the West Iowa Dispatcher in the offices at Des Moines, talking with the operator at Council Bluffs about cattle for Menlo on No. 60 tonight. The train would take the three cars into West Des Moines and have the west local spot them in the morning. No. 59 was OS'ed (reported) by Atlantic, out toward Council Bluffs, and the agent, Charlie Anderson, asked if he could clear No. 82, which was at Hillis for 59. Following the clearance of No. 82, the agent at Melcher OS'ed an extra south by, and Allerton, south on the Kansas City line, reported

Rock Island's *Twin Star Rocket*, bound for Minneapolis, leaves the depot (right) at Manly, Iowa, the author's hometown, in this January 1965 scene looking north into the yard, where SW900 904 is working.

Dan Sabin





there was a set of bunk cars to move to Carlisle on No. 66. GLW had a deep, gruff voice, and barked and grumbled a lot on the “d.s.” phone, sometimes demonstrating impatience with the operators along the line.

There was a loud buzz on the dispatcher’s phone, so I called “Beanie” (George Bean, the lineman) on the radio to see if he could check it out. He said he was coming by Purina (the siding adjacent to the feed mill about 2 miles south of the depot) and would be in there in about five minutes. He figured there was a “line wrap” somewhere because of the wind and could work with the relay office in Des Moines, using the circuit board in the office to patch around it.

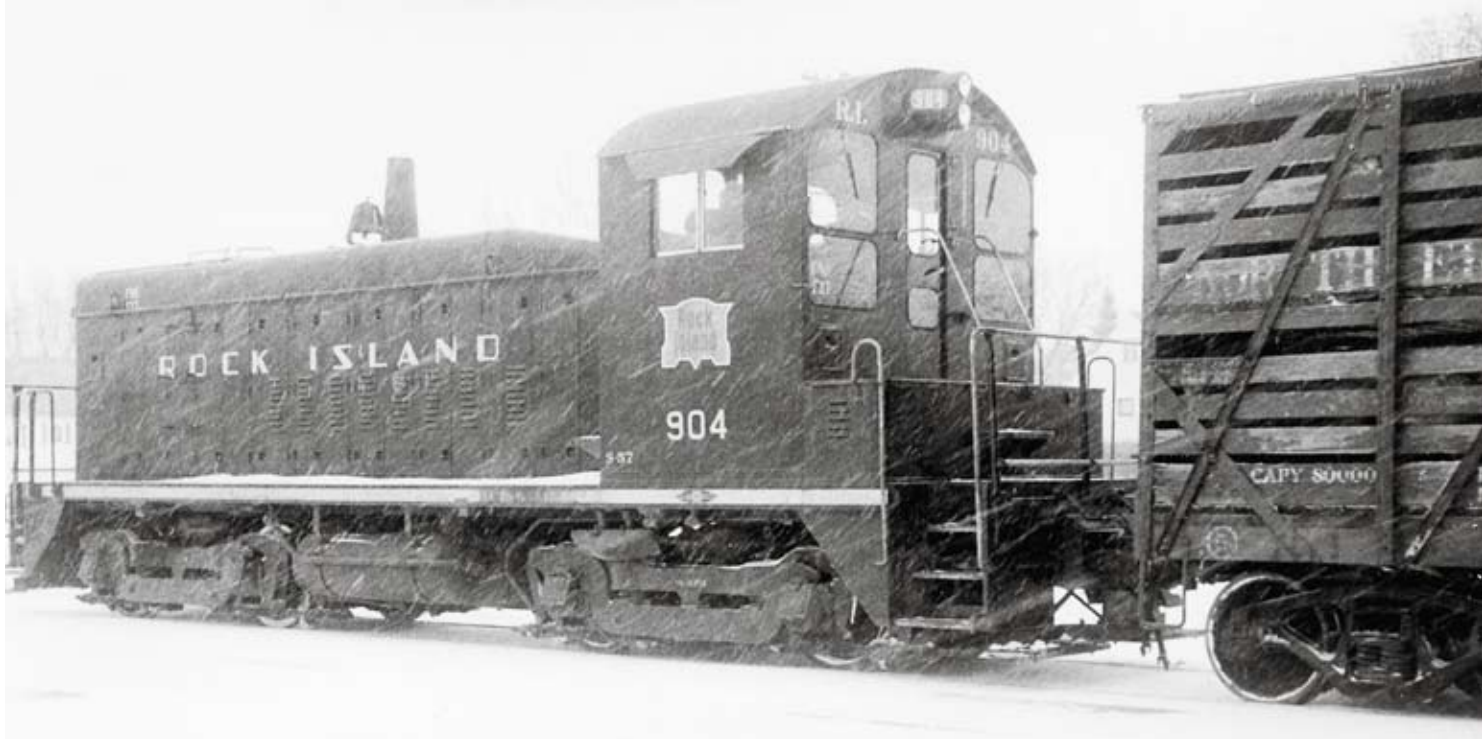
There were no train orders on the hooks for the main line, but I made additional copies of the slow orders for the Estherville branch (Subdivision 12-A) and for the Vinton line (Subdivision 19). Stu Erickson, the appointed agent, dropped by with some company mail and a fistful of wires for me to punch out on the teletype. He told me that the outbound Estherville job, No. 53, would have to wait for a unit off a Vinton line train (also numbered 53, but on the Illinois Division), and a unit off of 218, coming in off of the Dows branch. Everything was late and heavy, mostly owing to the snow, and outbound 54 wouldn’t be made up for Cedar Rapids until after midnight. We were supposed to have an Iowa Falls turn behind 68 tonight, and he’d probably have another Geep to go back to Cedar Rapids during the night. Northbound 66 had been gone for some time, and I heard the CGW (actually, by this time, the C&NW) operator at Mason City OS him by

**“By the way,
the hoghead says to
tell you that they’ve been
bucking 8-foot drifts.”**

Clear Lake Junction, on the south side of town where RI and the old CGW parted ways.

By this time, the 3 p.m. transfer of dispatchers had taken place on the West Iowa, and I could hear the old-head dispatcher, Harold “Rosey” Rosenberg (HMR), talking to the operator at Short Line Junction. Until I became a student dispatcher in 1970, I thought Rosey was a mean s.o.b. He didn’t have much time for young operators and had chewed me out a few times over little stuff. He spoke with a nasal voice and was typically very sarcastic on the dispatcher’s phone. I was eager to please him, though, primarily because I really wanted to be a dispatcher and needed all the good recommendations I could get from the trick guys, so I always listened pretty carefully, even when he was chewing my butt for some nit-picky thing.

About 3:15, the phone rang. It was the first-trick East Iowa dispatcher, Chuck Lamb (CCL). He was always very patient and a good, calm kind of guy with an easy Kansas drawl. “Say, young man, what are you doing at AO?” he asked. We had a quick chat about the second-trick man having the flu, and he said he needed to make his transfer, but the Illinois Division Chief Dispatcher, Pat Mankins, asked him to find out where the Vinton-to-Iowa Falls job (No. 53) was. The superintendent in Silvis wanted a report of snow conditions on the Vinton branch. I called the train on the radio and passed along to CCL that 53 was bucking some pretty heavy drifts between Wellsburg and Cleves but thought he would be



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into Iowa Falls Yard about 4:50 p.m.

"By the way," I said, "the hoghead says to tell you and the roundhouse foreman that they've been bucking 8- and 10-foot drifts since they left Grundy [Center] and the 1353 (a GP18) has been kicking a ground relay ever since." I told CCL that Erickson said they were pulling a Cedar Rapids unit off 53 to go to Estherville tonight and I heard the trainmaster on the radio say that 53 would need another unit with a pilot plow. The crew might not be able to be called back on their rest if we didn't have the power lined up. I also told him to tell his relief, Tony Knight (WAK), that I needed to repeat some slow orders whenever he could listen. He told me to "call Tony back about 7 and he'll listen to them then." We hung up.

By this time, Rosey Rosenberg, the West Iowa dispatcher, was pretty busy, fixing up No. 43 at West Des Moines and taking down yard reports from agents along the line before they went home. I heard the agent at Stuart talking with him about the cattle on No. 60, and the agent at Earlham wanted to fix up the "Rock Roller," who was already at Winear and ready to come out on the main line to head for Short Line Yard. "He should be able to make West Des Moines for 43 if he can leave Winear ahead of 60." Rosey grumbled something and gave him his orders.

Misplaced euphoria

Meanwhile, up at Iowa Falls, outside the bay window I saw nothing but white. This was the life, I thought. I couldn't get enough.

About 5:15, I heard Jim Porter, the swing operator at Manly, give Rosey the call on No 67: two units, with engine 127 (an F7A) on the point and a B unit. He was extremely light this night, with only 14 loads and 5 empties for 1115 tons with caboose 17177. He was called with a full five-man crew, including a fireman. I knew the crew well—they were a good, solid bunch of guys. Most of them had just lost their plush turns in July when the line's last passenger train, the Minneapolis-Kansas City *Plainsman*, had been discontinued. The fireman, Dick Armstrong, was a tall, thin guy who was an old-car nut and was always telling me he wanted to buy my '62 Ford Galaxie. He'd been a fireman on the passenger trains between Manly and Des Moines for many years. Porter continued, "On duty at 7 p.m., has no work at Manly except to change crummies." (The Rock Island had pool cabooses by

Manly, as the first terminal south of the Twin Cities, often caught the duty to provide "feed, water, and rest" for livestock en route to western feedlots. An SW900 sets out an NP stock car in early 1965.

this time over most of the system, but not between Manly and Inver Grove, so every train changed cabooses at Manly.)

Porter told Rosey the weather at Manly was heavy snow, strong northwest wind, and 17 degrees. He gave Rosey an OS on No. 66 arriving, and the delay report, and asked him what it looked like on No. 68 out of Short Line Junction. Rosey grumbled and rang WX and asked the tower operator to get on the intercom to find out from Virgil Rupe, the yardmaster, how much time they needed tonight to work No. 68 at Goody Brick & Tile, a spur south of Short Line Junction. The WX op said he would call him back "on the Bell" (city telephone) when he knew.

Rosey was not too patient and told WX to "copy five," meaning a train order with five copies. He then rang DF, the CGW operator at Mason City, and told him to copy five. Without giving the operators much time to get the order forms into their typewriters, Rosey started: "Order number 248 to WX to C&E number 68, DF to C&E number 67, period. Number 67 engine 127 has right over number 68 engine 360 Clear Lake Junction to Short Line Junction. HMR." I listened as the operators repeated the orders and Rosey instructed DF to copy another order telling No. 67 that No. 66 with engine 263 had arrived Clear Lake Junction.

Every number, direction, and location had to be spelled out by both the dispatcher and each copying operator, a requirement of the Uniform Code of Operating Rules. It all sounded like a foreign language to an outsider, but I knew the language well—I'd been practicing since I was 8 years old and could spell most of the stations so fast I sounded like an auctioneer. Spelling Marshalltown, Minerva Junction, Mason City Yard, West Des Moines, Booneville, and Mitchellville were favorites. I always practiced copying every order I could, even when they were not meant for my station. I thought I was pretty good.

It sounded like I wouldn't be copying any mainline orders tonight, and I regretted not being busier. This was pretty cool, though. Here I was, just turned 17, making \$3.20 an hour, out of school with permission, working as an operator during a snowstorm. It wouldn't be long and I would be out



Douglas R. Stevens

In a February 1953 view from Mills Tower in Iowa Falls 16 years before author Sabin's harrowing evening at the nearby RI depot, train 911, behind an F2/FTB-A trio, hits the Illinois Central diamond.

of school forever and could achieve my goal since childhood of becoming a train dispatcher for the Rock Island. Even so, I wished this night was busier, for with 67 going all the way to Short Line to meet 68, there wouldn't be anything interesting happening tonight. Boy, was I mistaken!

Recalling my first round with Rosey

As the evening wore on, I listened to the action on the West Iowa dispatcher's phone. The weather west of Des Moines over to Council Bluffs was starting to get worse, and the snow kept piling up on the north end. We'd had about two feet of snow on the ground when it started today, and it had been snowing hard since before noon. We must have had 8 to 10 inches of new snow, and the wind was pretty strong. South of the depot, it was drifting heavily, but we were sheltered behind the big grain elevators just northwest of the low, cinder-block building.

North of Iowa Falls, wind-driven snow was always bad, with a long stretch of straight track from Hampton all the way to Flint, near Clear Lake Junction, and nothing but corn stubble in the open fields to stop it. I had grown up hearing stories of the bad drifts between Hampton and the open areas around Chapin. If I was really lucky, I thought, I'd get snowed in and have to miss school the next day. Better yet,

maybe I'd be needed to stay on and be useful to the dispatcher through a good blizzard. I could stay all week if I had to. Ah, the dreams of a 17-year-old.

Tom Sawyer, the Illinois Central operator at Mills Tower just down the street east of the two depots where the lines crossed, called me on the Bell phone and we exchanged train information. He was a great old guy, having been closed out of the agency at Webster City after two decades and now working second trick at Mills. His old-head operator stories were something I always looked forward to hearing. He wanted to "go to beans" and wondered when No. 53 would be showing up off the Vinton branch.

The trains were getting later over the entire division, and 67 dropped back at Manly, finally leaving there at 8:15 p.m. after taking a pretty bad delay up at Gordon, Minn. They took a beating on the CTC territory for C&NW No. 1, whose crew was on short time after a broken train line, and then took siding at Northwood for No. 66. I remembered that my dad was the engineer on 66 north of Manly tonight. By the time they were ready to leave Manly, Rosey was getting more information on 68, and it looked like something would have to be done to set up a meet north of Short Line Junction.

Rosey told Mason City to clear No. 67 with what he had and he would catch him at Iowa Falls to get No. 68 out of Short Line for him. My heart started pounding a little, knowing that I would be copying a meet order and handing it up to the men in the F unit on No. 67 on the curve here at AO, with a fast engineer at the controls. "Let me know when he

clears Clear Lake Junction, DF.” “Okay, Rosey,” said the former Great Western operator. Then it was quiet for a while.

A few weeks earlier, I had worked at AO for several days, and on the first night, I had an order for No 67. When the train hit the block at Bradford, I told Rosey, and he barked, “Dammit! I don’t get paid this big money to know when they get by Bradford!” So the next night I didn’t say a word until 67 pulled to a stop at my order board, when I told Rosey that 67 arrived at 8:15 p.m. I was afraid to tell Rosey when the indicator light showed 67 was by Bradford, and now he was sitting here waiting for his orders and had not been cleared. Knowing that he had caused the delay to an important train, Rosey went berserk. “You’re supposed to tell me when they get by Bradford! Don’t you have a lick of sense? Do you think I have nothing better to do than sit here and guess what time 67 will go by Bradford? Clear him up, dammit! Tell the conductor to find a car number in his train and show an airhose problem on the delay report.”

Tonight, I wasn’t going to let that happen.

It was now going on 8:45 and I hadn’t heard Mason City OS No. 67 by Clear Lake Junction yet. With bad weather all over the Des Moines Division, I could tell that Rosey was on edge and not in a great mood. Finally, about 9:05, the DF operator came on and told Rosey 67 had just gone across the Iowa Terminal, the electric short line at Clear Lake Junction, having taken a delay at North Yard by the C&NW switch crew. He also said the conductor threw off a message that there were no working radios on either the head end or the

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caboose. Rosey seemed upset and yelled, “AO!”

“AO,” I answered.

“Copy five south,” he barked.

I popped the switch to red on the train-order signal for southbound trains. “SD South. Did anyone tell you the train-order signal is out?”

“Yeah, I see it on the train sheet. WX copy five. We have a rule in the book that says the absence of a signal means the most restrictive, remember?”

Did Rosey know that it was a block-signal-type train-order signal instead of the traditional semaphore? When was the last time, I wondered, Rosey had even been to Iowa Falls, or even ridden a train?

I had a lump in my throat. “Well, you know, normally the office closes at 10 . . . will he be here by then? He won’t be looking for a light in the order board after 10.”

“Hell, no—he won’t be there before 10. And you’ll stay there until I let you go.” Rosey was losing it, and I wasn’t about to get in an argument with a train dispatcher, especially Rosenberg.

“WX, where the hell are you? Copy five!”

“WX is ready,” replied the op at Short Line Junction.

Rosey was quieter now. “Order number 279. T-w-o s-e-v-e-n n-i-n-e.” He continued with the order as the operator at Short Line Junction and I typed it out on our typewriters. “AO to C&E number 67, s-i-x s-e-v-e-n, WX to C&E number 68, s-i-x e-i-g-h-t, period. Number 68, s-i-x e-i-g-h-t, engine

360, t-h-r-double-e s-i-x n-a-u-g-h-t meet number 67, s-i-x s-e-v-e-n, engine 127, o-n-e t-w-o s-e-v-e-n, at Cambridge, c-a-m-b-r-i-d-g-e, number 68, s-i-x e-i-g-h-t, engine 360, t-h-r-double-e s-i-x n-a-u-g-h-t, hold main track at Cambridge, c-a-m-b-r-i-d-g-e. HMR, AO.”

I was nervous now, but I still repeated the order flawlessly. This was my passion, and I did it well. I issued this same order at school a million times as I was ignoring a teacher, pretending I was a train dispatcher quietly issuing orders to a long subdivision of pretend operators. Rosey couldn’t stump me now. He gave me the time complete, and I signed the order with what I thought was an old-timer’s flourishing signature. WX finished with his repeat of the order and cleared 68 with just the meet at Cambridge with 67. Normally, 68 was superior by direction and did not have to be told to hold the main track. In this case, however, an earlier order had given 67 right over 68, so on this night, 67 was superior by right and did not have to clear the track for any train unless specifically told otherwise.

Handing 'em up to No. 67

No. 68 got out of Des Moines in good shape, and I could hear static on the radio that I thought was 67, but I couldn’t be sure.

Finally, I saw the indicator light come on, telling me a southbound train was by Bradford. I didn’t want to screw up tonight. I cleared my throat and stepped on the foot pedal as I spoke into the ancient operator’s mike, “AO, No. 67 is in the block, by Bradford.” No answer.

It was well past my normal time to get off duty when I heard the Illinois Central’s eastbound passenger train, No. 12, the *Hawkeye*, whistle through Rocksylvania Avenue and rumble over the diamond at Mills Tower. He must have hit some bad weather between Sioux City and Iowa Falls, because it sounded like his horns were nearly frozen. The



Dan Sabin

Ancient wooden cabooses, each assigned to a specific conductor, were the rule on the Rock Island at Manly until about 1967. Local 99 from Cedar Rapids arrives in Manly in 1964 with a big train to be worked.



William J. Husa Jr.

A leased Northern Pacific F3B splices Rock Island F7's on a southbound freight entering Manly on March 26, 1966. C&NW (former M&STL) owned the Manly-Northwood main line, but RI dispatched and maintained it.

snow was really blowing now, but it looked like it had stopped falling. A pretty good drift was just south of the depot, probably about 4 feet high. I heard Rosey bark at me, "AO, clear 67. What the hell, you want to stop him again?"

I was relieved he would finally realize that 67 was probably close. "Iowa Falls clear No. 67 on one order, number 279."

Rosey was ready to make his transfer to the third-trick man and anxious to get out of the chair. "Okay at 10:40 p.m., HMR." All Des Moines Division trick dispatcher desks transferred at 11 p.m., while Illinois Division trick desks transferred at 11:30 p.m. and assistant chiefs at 11:59.

I pulled the carbons out of the clearance pad and stapled the clearance to the onion-skin order. Grabbing a long-han-

My adrenaline was pumping, and the F unit seemed to be coming too fast to pick up orders.

dled, Y-shaped order fork, I slipped two complete sets of the orders into the string and pulled it tight for the head end, then repeated the same action for the caboose on a shorter-handled order hoop. Pulling on my parka, I slipped two fuses into my coat pocket, something I always did, even though most operators didn't bother. I grabbed the electric lantern and the hoops and headed through the door to the waiting room. I immediately heard the engineer blowing the horn for the crossing just north of the IC diamond. The glare of the F7's headlight was on one of the old buildings to the northeast of me, and I felt the blast of cold from the strong wind. The blowing snow stung my face as I walked the short

distance to the main track and lined myself perpendicular to it, facing the oncoming beast. The orders tied in the strings were flapping in the wind like a child's pinwheel. I had to keep an eye on them to ensure they didn't literally twist the string off the order hoop.

I could hear the units throttle off to idle, then the bang of the lead trucks hitting the IC diamond. Immediately after the units throttled up again, I saw the headlight coming around the curve. As Stoffer had taught me, I quickly measured my distance from the rail by holding the longer train-order hoop against my hip, dropped it down level to the rail, then lifted it up for the delivery to the head end. I held the long hoop and my lantern in the same hand so the light would shine directly on the yellow flimsies, giving the crew a better chance at catching the string as the engine passed me. AO was a scary place to hand up to a fast train, with a sweeping curve in front of the depot, giving the appearance that the train was headed right for you as you stood close to the tracks. The superelevation of the curve also leaned the unit to the opposite side, into the curve, raising the cab window a few more inches on the depot side.

My adrenaline was pumping, and the F unit seemed to be coming too fast to pick up orders. Don Brink was always fast. With such a short train and 3,000 horsepower, he was blasting at me like a scalded dog. I used my left hand to wave a modest highball with the lantern, but didn't get a whistle reply. As the train came closer, the rails creaked and the wind howled. I held the hoop up, arms stretched to get the order up close to the engineer's window, and was blinded by the oncoming headlight. The snow was blowing in my eyes, and my glasses were fogging over. I could hear the roar of the EMD 567's on the two covered wagons coming at me, and a chill went up my spine. The pilot smacked the snowdrift in front of the depot, spreading a huge cloud of heavy snow in every direction. I held my breath.

Within just a few feet of my body, the snow-covered nose of the F unit blasted past me, and I looked up for the familiar face of the engineer, whose son was in my older brother's class. Don Brink was a small, slender man, but he was a fearless engineer and was well known for being a fast runner.

Then I panicked. No one was at the window on the lead

unit! The window was shut tight, and no one was visible in the cab from my close and low vantage point.

A ghost train bound for glory?

A cold chill ran up my spine as I swung around and grabbed for a fusee in my pocket. With the lantern in my right hand, I swung a wild stop sign to a blind engine, then cracked open the fusee. The engine had plowed through another snowdrift about two car-lengths south of the depot, and the obedient freight cars that followed steered themselves through the curve and kept the snow swirling like an ugly white tornado. The whole scene seemed like it was playing out in slow motion, and the heavy, wet snow between the rails muffled the wheels as they sort of hissed by.

Just then, I remembered that the train was short, and grabbed the other order hoop. I whirled around and tossed the lighted fusee down on the snow-covered platform. About five car-lengths northeast of me, I saw a light, telling me the bay window of the ice-covered caboose was swinging closer, around the curve in a massive cloud of powdered snow. This bad dream would end when the rear-end crew grabbed their orders, saw my stop signals, and pulled the air into emergency to communicate their orders to the head end. I held the shorter train-order hoop up and held my breath. To my absolute horror, no one was at the caboose's bay window, and the sliding glass window was closed up tight!

I slapped the order hoop against the side of the caboose at it flashed by. The hoop hit the curved grab iron on the rear of the caboose and went flying as I swung around and reached down to the platform, looking for the still-lighted red fusee in

the snow. I waved another frantic stop sign.

There was no response.

I quickly processed what was happening. The train-order signal was at stop, but the light was burned out. It was nearly an hour after the normal time for an operator to be here, and the crew possessed an order with "right over the world" to Short Line Junction. No. 68 had left there some time ago and was heading north, planning to hold the main track at a siding in the middle of the frozen Iowa cornfields, to meet a train that had no working radio and had just missed their orders to take the siding at Cambridge. I was way too young to have caused a snowy, deadly cornfield meet.

I watched with terror and disbelief as the dim red marker on the roof of the caboose receded into the snowy night. With all my strength, and fruitlessly screaming at the top of my lungs, I passed another series of frantic stop signs, hoping someone would be looking back from the caboose.

In my mind, there was going to be a head-on collision of 67 and 68 somewhere south of Cambridge, with 68 running northward at full track speed, minding his own business, expecting to have 67 waiting patiently in the clear for him at Cambridge. The line had automatic block signals, but still, a head-on happened at the siding at Enterprise a few years back, despite the signals. In this weather, with poor visibility,

In an August 1966 photo looking southeast from Manly tower, the northbound *Twin Star Rocket* nears the Manly depot, leaving CGW-owned track from Mason City. Above the B unit is the ex-M&StL line to Mason City. Engine crews changed here, but passenger conductors and brakemen worked from Des Moines or Cedar Rapids to Minneapolis.



Don Hofsommer



Symbolic of Rock Island's Iowa main lines in the late 1960's, whether on the author's north-south route or elsewhere, is this April 1969 scene of a westbound at Stuart, between Des Moines and Council Bluffs.

the situation seemed hopeless. I sprinted into the depot and made a frantic call on the radio. There was no answer—not even static.

I grabbed the stem of the ancient black telephone mike on the dispatcher's phone and pulled the accordion-style holder back. My spine was wobbling like a bowl of Jell-O, and I started hyperventilating.

Slapping down the pedal with my boot, I yelled, "AO! AO! 67 missed the orders! Both ends missed the orders. Where's 68? He doesn't have the meet order!" I was screaming at the top of my lungs, I was so scared.

Rosey was still in the chair, obviously making a transfer to the third-trick man. When he answered me, he knew some-

thing serious was coming down. He yelled back, "Dammit, kid, call the agent at McCallsburg. Get him down there to stop 67."

I grabbed the clipboard with the phone listing, hung on a nail by the bay window, and picked up the receiver. I still had my gloves on and with my hands shaking so bad, I couldn't find the number. McCallsburg was only 25 or so miles south of Iowa Falls, and Iowans go to bed early. How could the agent get up, get dressed, and get to the depot in time to stop this train? Most of the roads are probably closed anyway. Could he get there at all?

I lost all sense of time. No. 67 was probably already blasting through Buckeye, so no one was going to be able to stop him before Cambridge. He would be blasting through McCallsburg before the agent had his pants on. Nevada was the next station—maybe there was time to get Glen French to the depot.



Mel Patrick

An apparition appears

I was sweating profusely under my heavy parka in the hot office and nearly in tears. Just as I was running my gloves down the wet callsheet to find the agent's home number, I looked up and through the station's bay window. I thought I saw a faint red light coming toward me through the blowing snow from the south. I looked again. It was a red light. No. 67 was backing up, and I could see the Southern Pacific-style marker light on the caboose roof and the lights inside through the window. Two lit lanterns were on the rear platform. I stomped on the foot pedal and yelled into the mike on the dispatcher's phone, "They're coming back! Dispatcher, they're coming back! They got stopped and I can get the order to them!"

Without waiting for a response from Rosey, or whoever was now in the chair, I ran out the office door and around the ticket window to the waiting room. As I opened the outside

door to the platform, I saw the conductor and the rear brakeman on the caboose's rear platform. The skipper swung down and spit a big mouthful of chaw when his five-buckle overshoes hit the snow piled high on the platform. The brakeman, hanging onto the back railing on the caboose to protect the crossings as the boxcars creaked by, waved a finger at me.

I was so glad to see the conductor step closer to me under the platform light that I couldn't speak. He walked up to me and asked what was going on. Why was I here? My eyes were salty from tears, and my glasses were completely fogged over as I told him I had a meet with him and 68 at Cambridge. He stopped in his tracks.

The two F units were now garbling back and soon were in sight through the snow. The 127 stopped with its snow-covered nose in front of the depot, and the head brakeman and fireman slid down the ladder.

The fireman was the first one to reach me. He had on a light summer jacket and a heavy hat on with earflaps, looking like Barney Fife on a hunting trip. He looked at the con-

**“AO! AO!
67 missed the orders.
Where's 68? He doesn't have
the meet order!”**

ductor as I was telling him about the meet order and broke out in a nervous laugh. He said that as they had gone by the depot, the engineer had reached behind the control stand to grab a sandwich and a Thermos from his grip. Armstrong had been looking over the train on the left-hand curve but looked up and forward when they hit the snow drift at the south corner of the depot and watched the blast of snow fly up and out, hitting the hood of my old Ford.

Why, he thought, would the Sabin kid's car be here at Iowa Falls, especially at this time of night? There's no one on duty this late here. He had run over to the engineer's side of the cab and looked back through the cab-door window and saw my frantic fusee stop signs in the blowing snow. By the time they got stopped, they were already over the Iowa River bridge, around the next curve, and nearly to the north switch at Purina, over a mile away.

No one said a word after that. I found the order hoops, now buried in the snow, gave them their orders, and they got back on the engine. Brink, still at the window, just waved. With two short blasts of the horn, they pulled slowly away; the conductor jumped on the caboose as it went by. I watched the light dim into the winter night. The snow crunched under my boots as I made my way back into the operator's office. My whole body was still shaking, and I could feel I was dripping wet. I pulled on the old accordion mike, put the headset on, and, making sure I wasn't interrupting anything on the dispatcher's phone, said quietly, "OS, AO."

The third-trick man responded, "Dispatcher."

"Number 67 arrived AO at 10:48 p.m., departed 11:06 p.m."

The dispatcher said, "Okay, AO, good night. You can go on home now." 📺

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