Railroad telegrapher uses old Morse code key to keep in touch

By Jim Eadie

The rythmetic, musical ?clickity-clack? sound of a train as its heavy cars passed over the joints in the railroad track rails has connected deeply with songwriters and storytellers over the past century on this continent. Now, with new continuous rails without joints, it is a sound that has disappeared from our repertoire.

Also gone is the ?clickity-clack? if the railroad telegrapher's sounder, musically narrating messages from one end of the wire to another as the operator simultaneously typed the coded messages on a mechanical typewriter. This method of communication was not retired until the 1960s, but it had absolutely revolutionized communications across land, sea and air during the century before. In fact, data is still transferred the same way in this modern age, but just at a speed billions of times faster.

Ted Sprackett was a young boy growing up in Gilmour Ontario during World War Two. His grandfather James H. Sprackett was a farmer and sawmill operator who was a municipal councillor for 16 years, and then Reeve for 29 years including time as Warden of the County of Hastings. Also serving the municipality as councillor and Reeve was his Ted's father Ross. Young Ted Sprackett's family lived in the former hotel property within eyesight of the railway station, and the family sawing operation.

Young Sprackett worked in the family logging operations where his grandfather had a private railroad line extending from the CNR tracks in Gilmour, for 18 miles into Grimsthorpe Lake. Leaving home with a lantern to work in the bush, he returned at night with the lantern lit again, ?dead tired.? Using a small wood burning locomotive, the logs were drawn out of the bush using small trailers to be sawn at the family operation.

In his time off, Sprackett and several friends were not above getting into a bit trouble with the station agent in Gilmour. They were eventually caught tying one of the small flatcars on behind the parked northbound CNR train using binder twine, and going for a ride

north being pulled by the train. Upon reaching Mawson's Store at Steenburg, Sprackett and his co-conspirators would cut the binder twine, and the trailer would be set off the tracks. After getting ice cream cones, the young men set the flatcar back on the tracks.

?A couple of kicks, and we were off,? he said. ?The railway line ran down hill all the way back to Gilmour.?

Sprackett was also a popular local piano player, and made the rounds of parties and community celebrations. As a musician, he also noticed the rythmetic sound of the telegraph sounder at Gilmour, as he was spending a bit more time hanging around the station now, having apparently had made up with the station agent.

?It amazed me that he could make words out of those sounds,? he said.

But Sprackett had another thought on his mind.

?You know, working in the bush .. well you get home at night, and you would be so tired that you couldn't care if you lived or died.?

The telegrapher position was looking good to the young man. ?I could just keep working in the woods,? he said, ? but this looked like the perfect job for me!?

As it happened, a job posting for telegrapher training caught his eye, and the station agent agreed to put in a good word for him.

?The station agent was Mort Baker,? said Sprackett, ? and he had one prosthetic leg.?

In 1951 Sprackett received his training at Stirling Ontario, and there followed numerous postings over the next four years as telegrapher in Hastings County; Gilmour, Coe Hill, Bannockburn, Madoc Junction and Bancroft.

?Bancroft was a very busy station at that time, as the uranium mines were in full operation,? he said. ?Coe Hill was very quiet .. there was the odd fuel car for Clark Rollins .. the gas station, and some saw logs and pulpwood.?

Then followed a series of appointments as he moved through the seniority system with Canadian National Railway until 1961 when he was appointed as telegrapher in Belleville, Ontario.

?In the 1960s and 70s, Belleville was the major terminal between Toronto and Montreal,? he said. ?There were 4000 employees including up to 70 train crews stationed there. With the last of the steam engines ? trains got big and long .. and there was less and less need for the Belleville yard.?

?I could read 50 words per minute .. a good operator could do that,? he said. ?And I would type it with two fingers!?

That is almost as fast as the fancy new Teletype machines that replaced the telegraphers in 1964. It is pretty amazing what a human can do.

Sprackett continued to be promoted within the organization, until his retirement in 1986... as director of marketing for CN Express. He continued to work for seven more years with Meyers Transport as their Director of Marketing.

Sprackett still keeps in touch by ?clickity-clack? with some of his old friends. The Morse Telegraph Club has an Ontario chapter, and he remains an active member. The club holds meetings, and offers demonstrations at community events.

A system has been designed whereby he and his friends across North America can connect their Morse code keys and sounders to their telephone line through a device, and communicate with each other the old fashioned way.

?I had a great life with the railroad,? said Sprackett.

?I wouldn't trade it for a million dollars!