

Delivering train orders

The operator jumped to answer the order wire when it rang at the station. “Mayfield, 19 copy east,” said the dispatcher, briskly. The op pulled the levers controlling the train order signal, reached for a manifold of blanks always kept ready, and replied, “Stop displayed.” Soon, after all stations being addressed acknowledged, the dispatcher (DS) began dictating the order, a cadence so rhythmic it could be musical. Let’s unravel this description.

Telegraphy first handled the transmission of train orders, the origin of “order wire.” The term continued when telephones took over. “Mayfield” names the station copying the order. “19 copy east” instructs the op to make three copies: one each for the conductor and engineer, and one kept at the station as a record. DS would give the total number needed, as “19 copy 5 east,” if that station would deliver the order to more than one train. “Stop displayed” confirms that the op has positioned the order board so that it signals eastward trains approaching Mayfield to receive an order.

The op wrote or typed orders on onion-skin paper, so thin that orders became known as “flimsies” or “tissue.” This made it easy for a crew member to read in dim light without illumination that would interfere with night vision. Instead, holding the order before a lantern, a gauge light, or an open firebox door allowed low light to shine through. Double-sided

carbon paper interleaved the manifold, imprinting copies on the back side intentionally.

19 refers to one of the two forms of train orders. A Form 19 order could be caught on the fly, without stopping. The photo at right shows a Santa Fe trainman grabbing an order at Isleta, N.M., in 1943. The op tied the order on the hoop, seen where the hoop joins its stem. The trainman extends his arm so its crook catches the hoop as the train passes. He’ll remove the order and toss the hoop back on the ground for the op to retrieve. Where there was no delivery stand, the operator held the hoop up at trackside. I’ve had the experience of grabbing one like this at slow speed; it’s hard to imagine doing so at high speed. It must have been hair-raising for the operator, standing so close to an onrushing train.

Form 31 was the second type of train order. Delivery required a physical stop for the engineer’s and conductor’s signatures. 31s were reserved for critical orders, typically holding the train at the point where it received the order. Southern Pacific and Santa Fe are two prototypes which stopped distinguishing between 19s and 31s. Theirs became simply train orders. We’ll put 31s aside because they rarely appear on model railroads.

A typical train order signal was an upper or lower quadrant semaphore with two blades, one facing each direction. Color light signals




Jack Delano, whose rich documentation of railroading resides at the Library of Congress, photographed a crew member on a Santa Fe freight leaning out to snag an order hoop at Isleta, N.M. in March 1943. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress

were also used. Some railroads favored three indications; others, only two. Also, some railroads made the normal position the stop position while others made it the clear position. As usual, results may vary so follow your prototype railroad’s system.

Most layouts simplify matters. Manual operation is easy: the operator walks to a station and nudges the board into position. Servos and signal drivers make possible controlling order boards from a central location. Orders aren’t hooped up; instead, they’re often hung on a clip at the order board. Delivery might take place by walking to the operator’s desk, too.

Perhaps this edges you closer to timetable-and-train-order operation, even if only

to learn more. Two interesting titles backgrounded me: Tom French’s *Railroad Telegraphers Handbook* and Thomas Jepsen’s *Ma Kiley: The Life of a Railroad Telegrapher*. Both are easy reads with a perspective that makes you feel like you’re standing in the depot. Here’s one for a rainy day, every bit of which you’ll need: loc.gov/photos/?q=jack+delano+railroad.

Jack Delano was a Farm Security Administration photographer during the Great Depression and war years whose photo appears above. The Library of Congress houses his railroad images, many of them evocative, some even intimate in the way they depict railroading and railroaders. 



PERHAPS THIS EDGES YOU CLOSER TO TIMETABLE-AND-TRAIN-ORDER OPERATION, EVEN IF ONLY TO LEARN MORE. — JERRY