



Dots & Dashes

What

Hath

God

Wrought

The Official Publication of the Morse Telegraph Club, Inc.

Vol. 47, Issue No. 3 • Summer 2022

THE BACKYARD TELEGRAPH

by J. Chris Hausler

Although Morse initially had trouble convincing many folks that the electric telegraph was more than a chimera, once it was proved successful it quickly took off initiating an almost “wild west” environment of expansion. Many small telegraph companies were quickly formed even though their principals frequently had little or no idea what they were doing, nor the financial acumen to pull it off. It was a little like the “dot com” craze of the 1990's. No one wanted to miss out on the possible windfall profits that this new technology might realize. Of course we all know that within a decade or two this all settled down, just like the dot com craze, and by the end of the US Civil War Western Union had essentially become the elephant in the room.

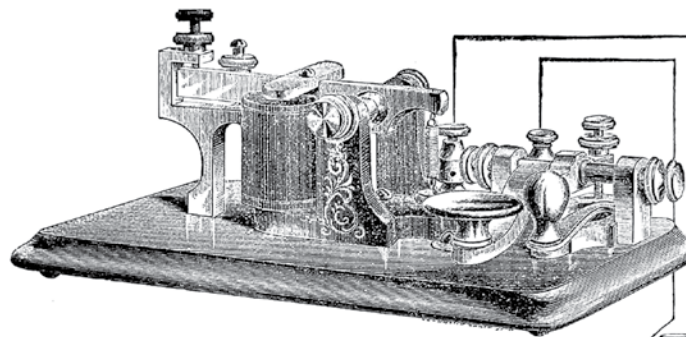
But among some people this didn't exactly end the interest in constructing small telegraph systems. For anyone with just a bit of rudimentary electrical knowledge, and the drive to learn more, the technology to implement the telegraph was readily understandable. What's more the power and importance of this rapid form of communications was evident. Further, for at least 40 years after

its introduction, the telegraph was the only such means of rapid communications available. Whether driven by just an interest or maybe an actual perceived need, small groups of individuals would set up short telegraph networks, with which they believed that they would be able to communicate. Such networks might be particularly useful in

emergency situations such as the need for a doctor or help fighting a fire. But it would also be convenient for more mundane uses such as organizing meetings or just communicating about day to day issues.

Now, how much of this use was actually realized is questionable. We all know that developing even a basic competency as a telegraph operator takes time and a fair amount of practice. But this apparently did not discourage folks from establishing such small telegraph systems. I have

never been able to establish how widespread this practice actually became but have seen references to systems of several miles, or even longer, being established by neighbors, maybe between adjacent farms. Further, it was apparently observed at least by J. H. Bunnell, a major manufacturer of telegraph equipment, that there might be enough



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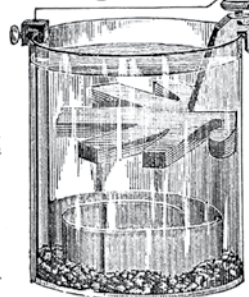
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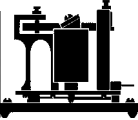
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IN THIS ISSUE

ARTICLES

The Backyard Telegraph
By J. Chris Hausler 1,5

The Adventure Of Working Forty-Two
Years On A Railroad 6-7

Samuel F.B. Morse Gave The First Public
Telegraph Demonstration 178 Years Ago
In Baltimore. The Federal Government
Was Less Than Impressed
By Frederick N. Rasmussen 12,14,21

On Halloween night, the Great Pumpkin...
Ted WB3AVD 15-17

MTC International Secretary-Treasurer,
Richard Williams, Voted a Hometown
Hero in Coronado, California..... 18

IN EVERY ISSUE

Sidewire 3-4

President's Line 3-4

Do You Know?..... 7

Letters To The Editor 8-12

Chapter News 13-14

Welcome Aboard 14

A Penny For Your Thoughts 15

Silent Keys 17-18

Book & Movie Review 20-21

House Track 22

The next issue of *Dots & Dashes* is scheduled for publication on September 30th, with submission deadline three weeks prior to that date.

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