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The Bell Cord System

The general abandoning of the bell-cord system of signaling on trains recalls the amusing way in which that system had its origin. It was on the Erie about 1840. The road was then in operation between Piermont and Turner's. One passenger train, which was also a freight, ran each way on the road. The conductor was "Poppy" Ayers.

There were no ticket offices or agents in those days, and the conductor had to collect fares on the cars. There was a great controversy between the conductor and the engineer as to which was the actual head train management. "Poppy" Ayers had an engineer who was particularly obstinate in his belief that in the engineer was vested the superior rank.

In collecting fares "Poppy" frequently had difficulty in getting this money from obstreperous passengers, and he could not throw such passengers off with the train going at full speed, and as he had no way of letting the engineer know that he wanted the train stopped, a great many fares were lost by passengers reaching their destination before they could be induced to pay up.

One day, Ayers had had a particularly annoying run in that respect, and after reaching Turner's he resolved to provide some means of communication between himself and the engineer, so that he could control the management of the train between stations. After much thought he hit upon a plan. He sent to New York for a hundred yards of bed cord. To one end of this he fastened a stick of wood, which he hung in the engineer's cab, or what passed for a cab in those days.

Then he ran the rope back over the cars to the end of the train, and let it hang down so he could catch hold of it on the rear platform. He told the engineer that when he pulled that stock of wood the train must be stopped, no matter where it might be. By this innovation in railroading struck the engineer as one that would lower his rank and remove from him the dignity of being the master of the train.

So on the first trip with the conductor's signal he removed the stick of wood, and "Poppy" Ayers was as bad off as ever. But the conductor was determined to settle the question then and there, and when the train reached its destination he replaced the stick of wood, and told the engineer that if it was removed again, or was not noticed when agitated, either one engineer must lick the conductor or the conductor would lick the engineer.

The engineer removed the stick at once, and "Poppy" Ayers hit him with a blow that knocked him off the engine. The conductor jumped after him, and followed up his blow with a trouncing that made the engineer cry "enough." That settled the introduction of the train signal to American railroading, and also the question as to who was master of the train. "Poppy" Ayers replaced the stick, and it was not again disturbed, but its signaling was answered faithfully and promptly by the engineer.

The idea was soon improved upon, and the stick of wood gave way to the bell, and every railroad then in existence or that ever came into existence afterward adopted this system. "Poppy" Ayers died four years ago at Owego, aged eighty years. He was retired from the service of the road on a pension in 1868.