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2-23-2013

What's A Telegram?

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Recommended Citation

Perritt, Henry H. Jr., "What's A Telegram?" (2013). *125th Anniversary Materials*. 10.
https://scholarship.kentlaw.iit.edu/docs_125/10

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"Telegraph operator printing telegram," photo by Waldon Fawcett, c. 1908, National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress.

WHAT'S A TELEGRAM?

Henry H. Perritt, Jr.

When Chicago-Kent's predecessors were founded in 1888 there were no e-commerce, wireless access to media, e-mail, Facebook friends, or airline delays. That does not mean, however, that people did not shop remotely, enjoy entertainment, communicate with friends, or travel. They just did them in other ways, all of which sometimes spawned disputes, some of which found their way into the courts. What follows is a story of the dreams of 125 years ago. The characters are fictional. What they talk about is not.

* * *

Annie Morton, 22, had just finished playing "Now Where Did You Get That Hat?" on the piano in the parlor of the rooming house at 2210 South Prairie Street in Chicago.

"I should like to have one just the same as that!"

"Where'er I go, they shout 'Hello! Where did you get that hat?'" she sang.

Patrick Boland, still dressed in his telegraph messenger's blue uniform with red trim, sat on the couch by the piano and applauded. His cap with a prominent brass number "79" sat on the table beside him.

Annie giggled and then looked at Luther Wardell, who was sitting in a plush chair beside the couch. "What's the matter, Luther?" she asked. "You don't like it? It's one of the most popular songs this year."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Luther said. He plucked at his blue denim trousers. "I enjoyed it. I was just thinking while I listened."

"About the strike?" Patrick asked.

"Yeah. I think I'm just going to go home and help work the farm. I didn't think they'd fire *all* of us. Who knew that they'd be able to get hundreds of strike breakers to work as switchmen and brakemen within a week."

"That's the CB&Q Railroad for you," Patrick said. "They're even nastier to their passengers than to the brakemen. They're tough."

"Everyone is tough," Luther responded. "I'm sick of it. You come to Chicago to make your fortune, and everyone holds you down. There are no decent jobs."

"Sure there are," Patrick said. "I've got one, with American District Telegraph Company. When I was started, at age twelve, the pay was \$17 per month. Now, I'm one of about one-hundred boys employed, most in the La Salle Street central of-

fice, but I'm up to \$20."

"Oh, we know, we know," Luther said. "Seven long years you've been telling us your boring stories about it."

"It's not boring at all. It's exciting," Patrick said, glancing at his cap proudly and determined to gain the upper hand against Luther. "We're allowed to take on special errands for our customers. One guy who owns the livery stable up by the river paid me two dollars to follow his wife and report to him that she had spent a good part of her day with one of the stable boys." He was disappointed by Annie's lack of reaction.

"I've heard that Western Union pays better," Annie said. "They have about 140 boys, about half of them working out of the main office at La Salle and Washington Streets." Annie liked to tease Patrick almost as much as she liked playing music.

"It's not so bad," Patrick said. He liked for Annie to think well of him. "We wait on benches at the office and get called in turn, according to when we went out last. Almost everyone rides a safety bicycle now. When a customer rings his call box, we ride out and pick up a handwritten message and bring it back for transmission."

"What's a safety bicycle?" Luther asked.

“You are a farm boy,” Patrick laughed. “You ought to get one. They’ve been out for three years. They’re much better than the old kind with a large front wheel and a smaller rear one. These new ones have pneumatic tires.”

“I can’t afford one now,” Luther said glumly.

“I don’t like it that we have to pay for our own uniforms,” Patrick admitted. “They cost \$12, and they take it out of our pay.”

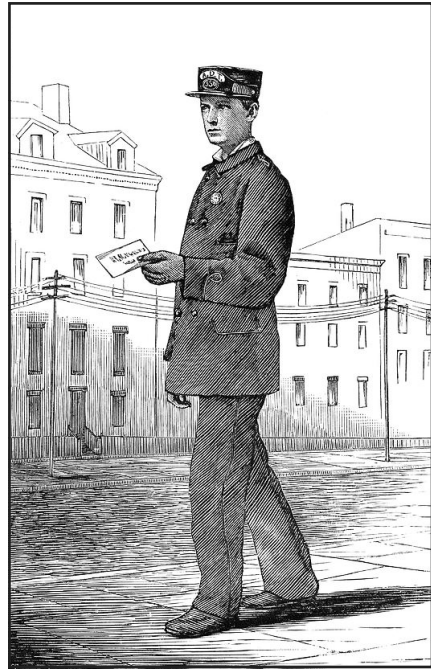
“I bet you have to buy your own bicycle, too,” Luther said. “That’s not for me. I’ve got loans to pay back now.”

“You had to borrow money only because you lived so high during the strike. You should have saved up beforehand,” Annie said.

She shifted her attention back to Patrick. “You’re a thing of the past,” Annie said. “What do people need with telegraph boys when they can just use the telephone?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Patrick said. “Telephones will never replace the telegraph. Everyone knows that. Did you see the article in the January 1, 1888, *Chicago Daily Tribune*?”

“Frank, the Telegraph Boy,” illustration (uncredited) from The Telegraph Boy by Horatio Alger, Jr., 1879.



“No.”

“It was headlined, ‘Telephones a Nuisance.’ It quoted the Reedy Elevator Manufacturing Company as saying, ‘The service we receive is not at all satisfactory, and if all instruments could be removed we would have ours fired at once. Would much prefer the old system of messengers, letters, or dispatches, as frequent costly errors are made by telephone, which you cannot trace to any reliable party. We don’t think the telephone company has sufficient assistance in their offices to wait on calls promptly. Frequently we ring three or four times before we hear the lazy “hello?” and more frequently they reply, “Busy now—call again,” or “Busy; will ring you up when through.” But they nev-

er ring. We consider it very poor service. But as our neighbors and customers have the phone we must keep up with the procession.”

“That’s not fair,” Annie said. “I work very hard. So does everyone else.”

“We’re all getting screwed,” Luther said. “And now, that robber baron, Benjamin Harrison, stole the election from Grover Cleveland.”

“He’s not a robber baron,” Annie said. “I wouldn’t think you would favor Cleveland. He vetoed pensions for veterans. He’s not for the common man. And he’s a sympathizer for the South. He would have never supported the women’s suffrage movement. We’re poised to get something done, now, on the amendment. The two main organizations merged last year.”

“Women’s suffrage—pshaw!” Luther said. “Next thing they’ll want is to shut down the saloons.”

“It would help you save money for a bicycle, if they were shut down,” Annie said. “Anyway, I’m going to do my part. I’m going to become a lawyer.”

“A lawyer!” Patrick said. “You can’t be a lawyer.”

“Yes I can. Did you see the story in the September 7, 1888, edition of the

Chicago Daily Tribune? Miss Emma Baumann and Miss Ada Dalter applied for admission to the Chicago Evening Law School. Several of the seventy young men already enrolled objected and went to Judge Moran, one of the founders, who rebuked them and said that the precedent was well established that women could be admitted to the bar. I’m going to apply.”

“Even if they let you in,” Patrick said, “and even if you get admitted to the bar, no one will give a girl lawyer any work.”

“I hope you won’t borrow any money for that,” Luther said, laughing. “You’d be better off borrowing it to go to saloons.”

“I’ve already got a promise of some work,” Annie said. “One of the mechanics at the telephone company wants me to help him get a patent for his idea for a new switchboard apparatus. It’s a good idea. The days of making a telephone call by signaling a switchboard operator and giving her the name of the person to be called are over. They have just introduced five-digit numbers to accommodate the rapid growth in subscribers. Now automatic dialing is being introduced in Chicago—”

“Because of the rude and lazy operators,” Luther said.

“What does this guy look like?” Patrick asked.

“Jealous?” Annie teased.

“Well, you ought to think about it,” Patrick said. “You’re on the verge of becoming an old maid.”

“And all the inventiveness is already producing lots of lawsuits—more work for lawyers,” Annie argued. “Alexander Graham Bell and Western Union are suing each other. Morse’s patent for the telegraph is always being challenged.”

“Keep your job, but organize,” Luther said. “Launch a strike against all this mechanical foolishness, taking away jobs. It was bad enough on the railroad.”

“Oh, right,” Annie said. “It’s a wonder you still have all your fingers. They need to make the Janney automatic coupler mandatory.”

“I guess I don’t have to worry about that anymore,” Luther said, flexing the fingers on both hands and looking at them. “That’s another thing a union could do for us. The most basic goal, though, is to insist on what the Congress just did for mail carriers: making eight hours a full day of work, with overtime pay for hours worked over eight.”

“That’ll never happen,” Patrick de-

clared. “And they shouldn’t have done it for the post office workers. They don’t work as hard as we do, and we damn sure don’t have a deal like that.”

“They deliver mail twice a day to residential customers and four times a day to businesses,” Luther said.

“It would be quicker if they rode bicycles, like we do,” Patrick said.

“Just wait,” Annie said. “Bicycles aren’t the future. Self-propelled carriages are. The Wisconsin legislature just awarded a prize for a steam-propelled carriage that completed a race from Green Bay to Madison, a distance of 201 miles at an average speed of six miles per hour.”

“That was nine years ago,” Luther said. “And nothing has come of it. There’ll be flying machines before horses and railroads need to be afraid.”

“Better try to get a union for the horses,” Annie said. “There will be flying machines. Four years ago, a man named John Joseph Montgomery made a glider flight near San Diego.”

“Yeah, but you can’t put a steam engine in a glider,” Patrick said. He laughed. “If they could, Luther, you can make sure they hook them together with automatic couplers. A



Photo of telephone operators sitting at a switchboard, 1903, DN-0001438, Chicago Daily News negatives collection, Chicago History Museum.

flying train!”

“I’m telling you,” Annie said. “People are inventing things all over the place. Pretty soon, I won’t have to learn the new songs to play them on the piano. Thomas Edison just got a patent for a machine that plays music from grooves etched on a wax cylinder.”

“Well, I guess they can stop work on the Auditorium Theatre,” Patrick said, “even though it’s scheduled to open next year. President Harrison and Vice-President Levi Morton are supposed to come to the grand opening. They’ll be disappointed to hear that all the operas and plays are going to have to find somewhere else to perform in Chicago. Oh—I forgot—there won’t be any operas and plays. They’ll be a thing of the

past. Everyone will stay at home, sit on the couch and listen to ‘phonographs.’ They’ll all get fat, and no one will learn how to play the piano anymore.”

Annie ignored him. “And he just applied for another one: an ‘Optical Phonograph,’ capable of showing pictures in full-motion. Already, people are excited about the Kodak, the first roll-film camera just patented. And a man named Herman Hollerith received a patent for an automatic tabulating machine. You punch numbers into paper cards and his machine sorts them.”

“You must have gotten into your mother’s laudanum,” Patrick said. “Next thing you’ll predict is sending telegraph signals through the air, without wires.”

“It’s possible,” Annie said. “An English scientist, James Clark Maxwell, has already proven mathematically that electricity can be transferred through free space, and a German, Heinrich Hertz, has demonstrated it in his laboratory.”

“Things *are* changing pretty fast,” Luther said, showing a spark of enthusiasm for the first time. “There sure is a lot of stuff being invented on the railroads,” Luther said. “The Janney automatic coupler is one; airbrakes before that. Now, people are working on automatic signaling systems and even on ways to replace the steam locomotive with some kind of engine that burns fuel inside the cylinders. I’ve been coming up with some ideas of my own before I got caught up in the strike.” A hint of sadness returned to his face. “One thing I’ll miss is all the machinery.”

He thought for a moment and then rushed on: “Think about what Old Man Sears and his partner Roebuck have already done. Their new ‘Sears & Roebuck’ catalog was just published from their new office on Homan Street. It advertises watches and jewelry, which can be purchased by mail. ‘Book of Bargains: A Money Saver for Everyone,’ ‘Cheapest Supply House on Earth,’ and ‘Our trade reaches around the World,’ he brags. People are ordering them like crazy. There’s no reason they can’t include other stuff, like sewing machines,

sporting goods, musical instruments, saddles, firearms, buggies, bicycles, baby carriages, eyeglasses, clothing . . .” He looked at Patrick. “Or safety bicycles,” he said.

“She must have given you some of the laudanum,” Patrick said. “Steam powered gliders linked with automatic couplers, card sorting machines linked with vapor telegraph signals. Just imagine!” Patrick chuckled. “For that matter you could order from the catalog with a vapor telegram. Old Man Sears would track the orders by sorting the cards, and deliver the stuff by steam powered gliders and steam carriages.”

“I tell you what, Luther,” Annie said. “Don’t go back to the farm. Stay here, with us. I’ll become a lawyer and help you get patents on all the stuff you’ll invent—if you keep all your fingers. Go talk to Reverend Frank Wakeley Gunsaulus, the minister at Plymouth Congregational Church. He’s already trying to persuade Philip Armour to extend his grant for the Sunday School that Julia Beveridge is running to establish a new kind of school where students of all backgrounds can prepare for meaningful roles in a changing industrial society, to study mechanics, chemistry, architecture, and library science. They already have something like that in Boston. It’s named the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—‘Boston Tech,’ most people

call it.”

Luther looked at her.

“We’d make a good team,” she urged, with a quick glance at Patrick.

“Who knows?” Luther added. “Maybe we’ll get married.” He leered at Patrick.

“Maybe,” Annie said, “Even though Patrick is cuter in that uniform. Put on the hat, handsome.”

“Ha!” Luther said. “I can just see it. He’ll still be riding his safety bicycle around the streets of Chicago asking people if they want to send a telegram,

and they’ll say, ‘What’s a telegram?’”

Annie laughed. Patrick tried to smile, the hat halfway to his head.

“And then,” Luther said, looking at the hat and laughing harder. “They’ll say, ‘now where did you get that hat.’” ♦

Henry H. Perritt, Jr. has been a law professor for 32 years and served as Dean of Chicago-Kent from 1997 to 2002. He has worked on the White House Staff and was the Democratic candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in the Tenth District of Illinois in 2002. He has written 15 books, 80 law review articles, four plays including a musical, and five novels. He is a sailor and a helicopter pilot.