

OLD TIME TELEGRAPH REMINISCENCES.

[BY R. C. CLOWRY.]

[The following interesting and graphic sketch of the first telegraph in Nebraska was written by Col. R. C. Clowry, and but for an unexpected call to the East, would have been read by him at the Omaha Reunion a year ago:]

I suppose that it is allowable on an occasion of this kind to indulge in personal reminiscences, and this must be my apology for alluding to myself in connection with what I am about to say. With the exception of the statistics and sketches compiled in the "History of the Telegraph" by that good man—James D. Reid—the early records of the telegraph and the experience of our pioneers have been, in a great measure, lost to our fraternity and the world. It may be well, therefore, and not out of place for those of us who are "Old-Timers," to recount at our reunions some of our personal experiences. I claim to be an "Old-Timer," having entered the telegraphic service in April, 1852. Of course, it must be understood, especially by my lady friends, that I was very young at that time. In fact I always feel young no matter how old I may look. I think it was a Frenchman who said, that "we are only as old as we feel."

I began my telegraphic career as a messenger boy and student in a small country town in Illinois. I was compelled to give six months' free service as messenger for the privilege of learning to telegraph, and while I tried to perform my duties faithfully, I managed to have a good deal of spare time for boyish amusements—such as swimming in the summer, skating in the winter, etc. My tutor was an austere Scotchman, and I well remember his first lesson after I entered the office. It consisted of instructions how to wind up the register, which was as simple a task as winding up an ordinary clock.

I also vividly remember what a solemn operation he made of it. It was my duty to deliver telegrams to our customers, and also to deliver billet-doux to the manager's best girl; to sweep out the office, and to clean the local Grove Battery. The good manager was not far enough advanced in chemistry to clean the zincs by dipping them in a weak solution of sulphuric acid and water and brushing the mercury over them—he had never heard of such a thing and neither had I. I was compelled to pour the quicksilver on to a broad board and rub the zincs on it for hours at a time until the mercury adhered to the surface of the zinc. I afterwards told him about the acid plan, but he hooted the idea as an absurd innovation and a ruinous waste of zinc. He did not believe in such nonsense, neither did he believe in the modern practice of reading by sound. Even

after I had taken a message by sound while on a visit to his office sometime after I had graduated, he tore it up, started the register and had the message repeated! but notwithstanding all these peculiarities he was a most excellent and honorable gentleman, and I can heartily say "Peace to his ashes."

I believe that I was amongst the first, if not the very first, operator in St. Louis who regularly received messages by sound. In those days all messages were written by the operators with a pencil on soft paper and afterwards copied in ink on the telegraph blanks by an expert penman.

One day Judge Caton, my employer, asked me if I thought I could write the messages in ink upon the blanks as I received them from the sounder and thus dispense with the copying process. I told him that I would try to do so, but feared that the sharp points of the steel pen would stick in the paper. I well remember his reply—he said, "Robert, go right out and purchase a first-class gold pen to suit your hand and I will pay for it." The gold pen was purchased, my boyhood friend, the copyist, lost his place, and the Judge saved forty dollars a month, which was a large amount of money in those days. The old gentleman is hale and hearty with hair and beard as white as snow. He has attained wealth and honor in his old age, and he well deserves them. During the strike of 1883, I was greatly affected by a visit from the Judge at my office in Chicago. He said he heard I was in trouble and he wanted to assist me; that his eyesight was not as good as it used to be and he did not think he could receive and copy a message, but he knew he could send just as well as ever. I found it unnecessary to put him at the key, but if his eyesight had been good at that time he would have noticed that my eyes were decidedly moist.

I feel that I have a peculiar right to welcome you to Omaha. As Superintendent of the Missouri and Western Telegraph Company I brought the first wire here, and on September 5, 1860, opened the first telegraph office that was established in this city. The wire was brought into a vacant room over the store of William Ruth, in the old pioneer block on Farnam street. Our terminal, or pioneer operator, Richard Ellsworth, who had in his possession a full set of instruments, was detained on a steamboat which was stranded on a sand bar in the Missouri River below here. I accompanied the builders who brought the line in on the highway and had with me a pocket instrument which I placed on an empty dry goods box and opened up telegraphic communication with the outside world for the first time. The following, which I find in my scrapbook, was printed in the Daily Nebraskan of Sept. 8, 1860:

"We are indebted to R. C. Clowry, Esq., the gentlemanly and efficient

superintendent of the Missouri and Western Telegraph Company, for gratuitous despatches furnished today's paper. The storm of last evening interfered with the working of the wires, and the despatches are more highly prized from the fact that by the special favor of the gentleman named, they were received today. The publication of the first regular despatches is quite an era in the history of Omaha, and we may be pardoned a little vanity over the Nebraskan being the medium through which they are published. Our despatches are the same as published in St. Louis papers this morning.

"Omaha is in telegraphic communication with St. Louis, and from there with all parts of the United States. We make the announcement with some little pride. The wires were put up at this point on Wednesday evening, the 5th inst., and the last link—thanks to the Missouri Telegraph Company—that was to connect Omaha with New York, supplied. A small battery was put in operation the same evening, and one or two unimportant despatches from Brownville received and answered. On Thursday the connection eastward was completed, and now we can employ the flashes of electricity to communicate with our friends in eastern lands.

"Who will dare say now that Nebraska is too far west, and that Omaha is in a wilderness? Why, we have a telegraph here! Omaha is the farthest western telegraph point now, it is true, but the poles are nearly up and the wire on hand, so that two months will not elapse ere the same communication will be had with Fort Kearney, nearly two hundred miles to the west of us.

"Westward the star of empire wings its way, and westward speeds every enterprise the developed resources of a young empire may demand. Some one has said that 'the emigrants' way over the western prairies is marked by camp fires long consumed and bones that bleach in the sunshine.' But the experience of later years has demonstrated that the winds have scarcely scattered the ashes of the emigrants camp fire, ere the human sea which follows deposits in their last resting-place the remains of the unfortunate who may have fallen by the way, and in the place of the camp station we find cultivated farms with comfortable dwellings and enterprising occupants—and in some instances note the flourishing village spring up as if by magic. Who shall set a limit to Anglo-Saxon enterprise?

"Six years ago the site of Omaha was a favorite camping ground of the tribe of Indians whose name it bears. Four years since, the dwellers here watched the arrival of a boat with an anxiety grown feverish by long waiting. In those days of slow coaches and bad roads, letters that effected a transit from New York to Omaha in three weeks,