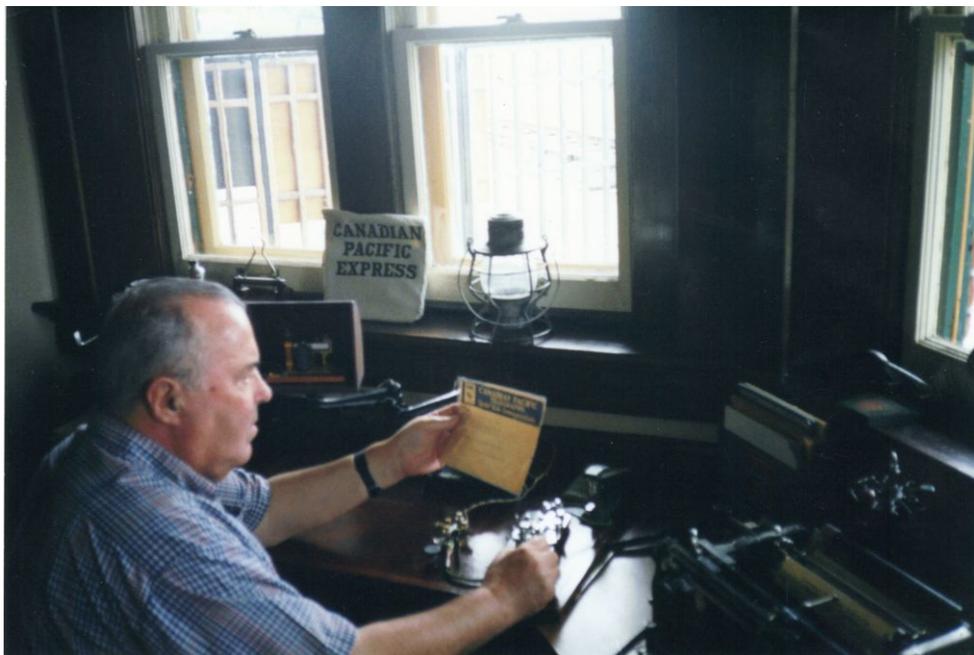


## Telegraphing



CN's old Vars railway station is now part of a Heritage Museum in the Ottawa suburb of Cumberland. The museum features a church, school-house, general store, blacksmith, firehall, sawmill and scale-model, working steam engines. The station at the museum entrance, along with the caboose just down the track, are prominent features.

As I worked as a CPR telegrapher back in the 1950's and still remember Morse code, the museum's directors call on me and a couple of my old railway buddies to perform telegraphy demonstrations, from time to time, on site.



One of us works in the station, while the other sets up in the caboose. People write messages in longhand and we transmit them in Morse code to the telegrapher at other end, who types out the message on a telegram blank for them to pick up. People get a big kick out of that. Young kids even get a kick out of the typewriters, we use.

## **Station Agents**

Next to the local postmaster, the railway station agent was the most important and popular person in small-town Canada, back in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. With rare exceptions (including Vars) the agent lived upstairs (i.e. above the station). And, they knew everyone in town and everything that was going on. During WWII, for instance, it was they who had to deliver the sad news to the family that a son or daughter was missing or killed in action. This and other news came to them by telegraph. That skill was a must, although their job required them to perform many more duties.

They had to provide information and sell tickets to passengers. They made sure that box cars, gondolas, or whatever, were available to shippers, when required and, when the time came, they drew up the bills-of-way and made sure those shipments were picked up by the local wayfreight. However, their most important job was to assure that train traffic was safe.

Accurate timing was critical. Scheduled trains couldn't just depart whenever the crews felt like it. They had to respect the clock....that is, the railway station clock, which had to be accurate within seconds. This was accomplished by sending out a daily telegraphic time signal to all stations on the network. Station agents would make sure their clocks were accurate. Conductors would match their pocket watches with those clocks and, later, match their watches with the engineers'.

The semaphore signal atop the station was a vital piece of equipment. Vars, like many more stations, was on a single track. That meant that trains, travelling in both directions, were using the track. How to keep them from plowing into each other? Well, that was the dispatcher's job (in Ottawa and later Belleville for CN and in Smiths Falls for CP) and he needed the local station agents and other telegraph operators to relay train orders to the engineers and conductors of passing trains. The agent or mainline telegraph operator would first place the semaphore signal in the proper position and write out the dispatcher's instructions to train A to take the siding at a certain point to allow train B to pass. The orders were attached to a hoop, which was held up for the engineers and conductors to put their arms through.



It sounds primitive and maybe it was. But, it was vital and it worked.

**Richard Inwood**