

# “I’m Dan Thorne, and what I say goes!”

**Rulebooks, employee timetables,** schedules, and train orders weren’t all that governed railroad operation. Trainmasters, road foremen, and superintendents also had plenty to say. A fire-breathing porcupine of a division superintendent played a lead role in the 1930 film *Danger Lights*. He snarled, ending with a clenched fist and a sneer: “I’m Dan Thorne, and what I say goes around here! That means everybody, see?”

Well, somebody had to say what goes, because years went by between rulebooks. Employee timetables were typically issued twice each year, spring and fall, when clocks changed. Schedule changes could occur more frequently, but imagine the chaos if rulebooks, employee timetables, and schedules changed every day! That illustrates the usefulness of train orders, which safely accommodate variation in day-to-day operation. However, train orders would clog the system if they were used for every change in conditions that railroaders face. What, then?

John Armstrong described a priority for operating documents in his book *The Railroad: What It Is, What It Does* – train orders, bulletin orders, employee timetables, and rulebooks. Each can supersede the next: a train order can supersede a bulletin order or a schedule in an employee timetable. A bulletin order can supersede an employee timetable or a rulebook.

John compared bulletin orders

with train orders. As he explained, train orders had an hours-and-minutes life from issuance to fulfillment and were addressed only to the conductor and engineer of the trains affected. Bulletin orders lasted until termination or incorporation in the timetable and were issued to all train service employees. Also known as general orders, special orders, and road bulletins, bulletin orders held everything together.

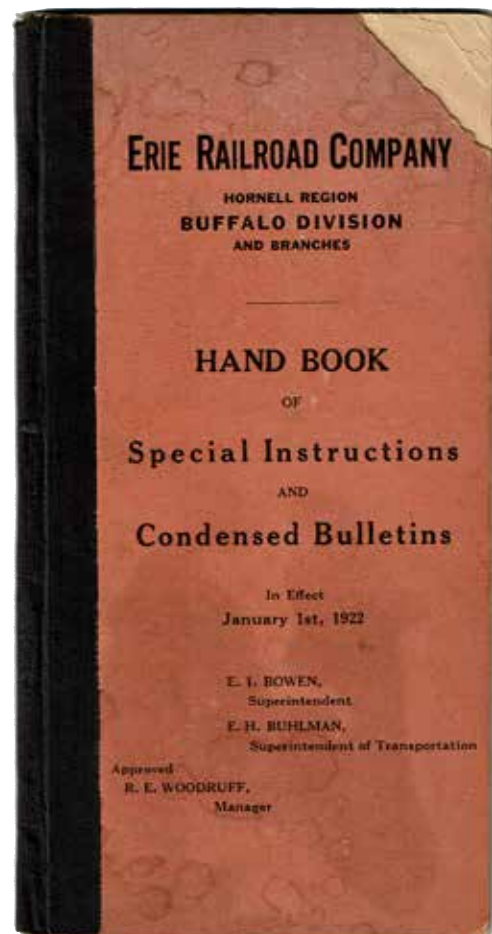
**Here’s a situation** that calls for a bulletin order. An employee timetable lists hours of operation at open stations, but the operator job at one of them has been abolished since the current issue was printed. A bulletin order might then read: “EFFECTIVE 12:01 AM, SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 1965, OFFICE AT LONG VALLEY CLOSED PERMANENTLY.” Other examples might concern retirement of a passing siding, a temporary slow order, or a schedule change. Illinois Central used a bulletin order to stop all its trains for five minutes during John F. Kennedy’s funeral.

Some rulebooks in my collection have printed stickers on certain pages. The sticker contains revisions and was pasted over the affected text. Similarly, a sticker with a new schedule could be pasted over the affected column in the timetable. Employees marked their timetables or rulebooks with such changes, as necessary, all subject to inspection to ensure that they were current.

**Bulletin orders were displayed,** sometimes hung on an arch clip board, so crews could review them when they reported for duty. Bulletins can be updated easily, making them very practical for model railroads. Why print new employee timetables every six months when the time and expense can be devoted to other projects?

Several well-known modelers who follow this practice inspired me to have my crew review bulletins and initial them at a session’s start. Mine restrict certain long-wheelbase locomotives from tight yard trackage; place a speed limit on a new, scratchbuilt bridge; remove a staging track from service; and specify hours Rule G is in effect. (2 a.m.-6 a.m., to satisfy those who are curious.) I’ll use stickers for schedule changes I have in mind.

**Officials asserted authority** in other ways, too. My collection includes correspondence of T.R. Murphy, an earth-scorching trainmaster cut from the same cloth as Dan Thorne. He erupted over yardmasters making up a train against a caboose “in direct violation of my instructions.” His copy to an assistant about the same matter fumed with “violation ... will result in drastic action.” He raged after a desk that went missing from the yardmaster’s office was found deep in a nearby swamp.



When Cliff Redanz hired on in 1958, he extended his family’s Erie Railroad service to four generations. His father Arthur, an engineman, was issued this Hand Book of Special Instructions and Condensed Bulletins. It compiles revised rules and updates employee timetable information. Cliff Redanz collection

*Danger Lights* was shot on location on the Milwaukee Road in Montana and Chicago. Extensive railroad action makes it worth seeing despite its campy plot. The movie is in the public domain, so you can watch it online. A search for “Danger Lights 1930” will turn it up. One day I’ll talk about the memorable “I’m Dan Thorne” prank a good friend pulled on my secretary and me. [MR](#)



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