

# Giving hand signals

The sandhouse gang has been around forever, it seems. It probably takes its name because sanding facilities had heaters to keep sand dry, making a sandhouse as cozy a place to gather in chilly weather as a seat in baseball's hot stove league.

Hand signals might well be a topic of discussion. Rulebooks contain the most common. For example, a highball, or proceed, has the hand raised and lowered vertically. Back up has the hand make a circular motion at half arm's length. Stop has the hand swing horizontally at a right angle to the track, as if closing a gate.

Many variations occur, of course. Holding a hand high and waving satisfies proceed. Waving it in a circular motion indicates back up. These are handy when an engineer and conductor are near one another, and subtle motions are plainly visible.

On the other hand, a conductor signaling from the back of the train needs the full motion. Night or low visibility often make a lit fusee better than a lantern or lamp, swung high in the air to give a highball.

Variations exist. Waving the hand with the palm facing the engine says, "go away from me." The same motion with the palm facing the body says, "come to me." Bumping fists together asks for the engineer to bunch cars so they can be uncoupled. Pulling hands apart while grasping one's fingers in similar manner to couplers asks to stretch the joint to test that a good coupling has been made. I bet our professional readers can describe many such local forms. The only requirement is that all crew members have a mutual



A classic J. Parker Lamb photo captured a hotbox signal and appeared in *Trains*, inspiring Craig Wilson to re-create the scene on Jack Ozanich's Atlantic Great Eastern. Craig Wilson photo

understanding of a signal's meaning. To the point, a Michael Sawyer post on *Trains.com* this past April described how a Burlington Northern engineer mistook the fusee he tossed for an emergency stop.

**Radio reduced dependence** on hand signals, but they're still useful when several crews work nearby one another, as in a yard. A familiar cartoon hangs on many crew room walls. It has a conductor grumbling: "I'm looking right at you, and you talk to me on the radio instead of using hand signs." I'll side with him. We humans process visual info faster than audible, especially when static or careless use of a push-to-talk button garble transmissions. However, a quick PTT click-click can draw an engineer's attention to signals. When

using radio is necessary, it's important to listen before transmitting to make sure the channel is clear. "Stepping on" another crew, interfering with their transmissions, compromises safety if they're counting down to a coupling.

I remember a sandhouse session that took place in our dining room long ago. A tableful listened attentively as a long-service conductor fielded questions about hand signals. Drawing his hand across his neck, raising two fingers, and patting his head indicated cutting two cars off the head end. Fingers then added which track to place the cars. I wish I had video of all the examples he gave, which he threw faster than American Sign Language.

**Two other examples** come to mind. One is a washout, urgently circling a hand at arm's length.

Rulebooks declare this "train has parted" but it's come to mean "emergency." I once washed out an engineer who wasn't watching my signals. Seeing what a 200-ton battering ram does to a bumping block makes a strong impression. There's a lesson for any hand signal: both persons must have eye contact.

The photo shows the second. Crews were always alert to hotboxes before wayside detectors became common. Journals packed with oil and cotton waste could burst into flames if the axle overheated. Even if smoke wasn't visible, the fire burned with a strong odor that lingered. An employee inspecting the train as it rolled by could alert the caboose crew of trouble by holding the nose and pointing at passing journals.

Passing hand signals is another way to bring prototype practice to an operating session. But keep it to the simple proceed, back up, and stop stuff. Holding a nose and pointing would be rude, no matter how demanding the circumstances. **MR**



SEEING WHAT A 200-TON BATTERING RAM DOES TO A BUMPING BLOCK MAKES A STRONG IMPRESSION. — JERRY