

The station agent

Summertime saw me visit my hometown station during open hours. After inspecting the team track and its loading platform, I edged into the waiting room. It was refreshingly cool, scented with a faint woody mustiness. A tidy cabinet of cardstock blanks flanked the ticket window beside an open door from which a typewriter clattered. A casual “hello” when it paused could produce an invitation to come in.

Official-looking papers stuffed cubbyholes surrounding the agent’s desk. A circular rubber stamp holder and shelves of thick books that I learned were tariffs were at his fingertips. We’d visit a little, sometimes interrupted when he copied a train order or message and rushed trackside to deliver it.

An agent was a railroad’s commercial representative at a location. An operator was devoted to railroad operation, in communication with a dispatcher, reporting the time trains passed (“OS-ing”) and concerned with a block system or train orders. An agent operator handled all these responsibilities.

These jobs are rich in detail, some of which layout operation can imitate.

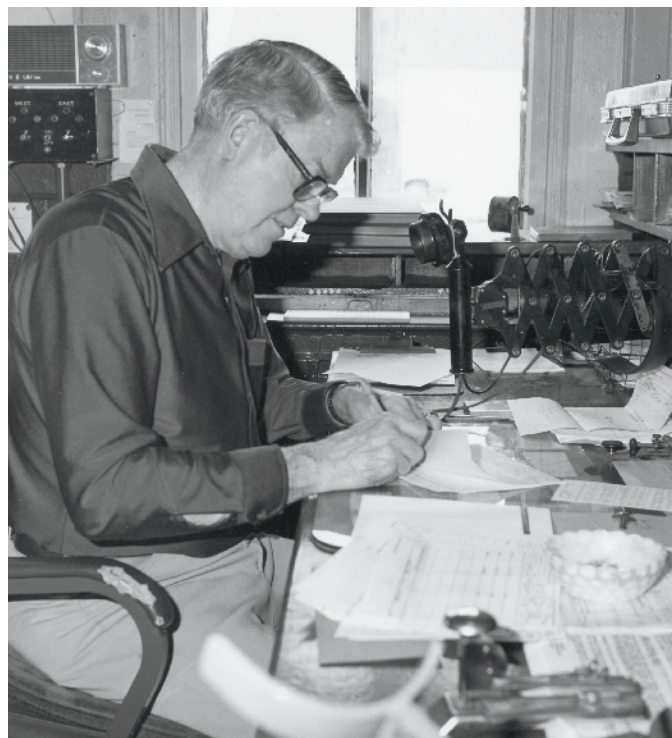
The operator’s job translates readily. Most layouts use a “system” operator, a single person who covers multiple stations from a central location. He’ll copy train orders dictated by the dispatcher and then display train order signals at the stations at

which the orders will be delivered. The signal can be the familiar semaphore type or a color light signal, manually operated or remote-controlled, but it needs no more than a simple red push pin displayed near the station involved. The order can be hung on the fascia there; instead, the crew could report to the operator’s desk to receive the order.

A prototype operator OS’d after observing a train’s passage and recording its time. Typical layout practice has a crew play the operator’s role, OS-ing to the dispatcher by phone or radio. Some layouts have crews give times to the system operator for relay to the dispatcher. Either way, “OS Middletown” (the station name) alerts the dispatcher, who replies “OS.” “Extra 53 west by at 1254 p.m.”

Much agent work is invisible to modelers. The agent collected bills of lading and prepared waybills. He collected freight charges, if not prepaid by a shipper. He phoned customers to advise them of incoming shipments and receive instructions for placement, especially where a business unloaded at more than one location. He also received requests from customers for empty cars for loading and relayed them to the railroad’s car distributor.

One duty more interesting to modelers was a daily “yard check,” an inspection of all the yard and industry tracks a station served. The agent recorded each



Longtime Milwaukee Road agent Al Paske works at his Brookfield, Wis., desk in the early 1980s, surrounded by the tools of his trade. Jerrold F. Hilton photo

car’s reporting marks and number and its condition, loaded or empty. This information helped produce a drill slip (switch list) for the local that described the necessary switching.

Many layouts see a form of yard check. Mine takes place before an operating session. I change waybills to give new destinations for cars to be moved and prepare drill slips for the local crews involved.

Two Erie-Lackawanna sources described duties like those above. Don Wallworth’s unpublished manuscript added housekeeping responsibility: cleaning windows and toilets, sweeping floors, and stoking the pot-bellied coal stove. I can imagine him rubbing his hands after unlocking the door and checking if the stove was still warm. He would poke a hole in the bank he left the night

before, watch for yellow flame to start licking through, and stand back in case the fire erupted with enough force to blow open the upper door or lift the lids in the stove top. As amusing as this might be, I suppose most modelers would choose a refrigerator for the layout room, not a stove.

Dennis Yachechak started his career as a relief agent in 1964, working a variety of agencies in northern New Jersey. This had more appeal to him than railroad operation because he learned about the business of railroading – ticket sales, freight customers, drill orders – in his words, “where the money came from.” While I’ve yet to see a model railroad where money came from anyone but its owner, depicting elements of railroad business like these makes layout operation more convincing. **MIR**



THE OPERATOR’S JOB TRANSLATES READILY. MOST LAYOUTS USE A “SYSTEM” OPERATOR, A SINGLE PERSON WHO COVERS MULTIPLE STATIONS FROM A CENTRAL LOCATION.
— JERRY