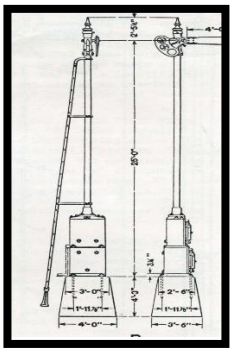
O&W Ramblings
Number 59 in a Series - Semaphore Signals

While the collective "we" of the fraternity of railroad cognoscenti understand a common descriptor for that lineside train control signal known as a "semaphore" in terms of the equipment produced by Union Switch & Signal Company.

Here a single lower quadrant interlocking signal –an example of a most recognized semaphore



The broader sense of the term "semaphore" is simply to describe a method of communication via some visual positioning. Long used in ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore marine communication with flags positioned by a signalman; -quite essentially a visual letter-by-letter communication. Railroads employed lineside semaphore fixtures to control train movements by communicating track conditions ahead.

Semaphores also came to be used to control or "protect" tracks of railroads crossing at grade. In visual signaling practice (of any sort) there are two components: - Aspect and Indication.

Aspect is the position of the visual indicators; -- blades, flags, lanterns, etc., and in the case of lighted signals, by the color or position(s) of the illuminated roundels (lenses) while Indication is the message imparted by the visual indicators. In the simplest usages of signals there are only two aspects and two counterpart indications: STOP or GO / CLEAR.

The well understood so-called "Ball" signal has been commonly used in railroad stop-go/clear visual railroad signal usage protecting track crossings at grade or clearance to occupy a certain track. Boston & Maine Railroad fans well know about the last of the B&M Ball Signals at Whitefield Junction, N.H. that survived well into the diesel age. Rutland aficionados are well acquainted with the multiple Ball signals that populated the Rutland R.R. yards at Rutland, Vermont.

Ball Signals hoisted in the rigging of sailing ships were a well understood signal of distress in that era. Whaling ships hoisted Ball Signals when furnaces were lit during processing and reducing whale blubber to whale oil.

A technological advance (at least for small values of that expression) on the Ball Signal was the so-called "Tilt-Board" signal, most often employed to protect track crossings at grade. The Aspect of a Tilt-Boad indicated (according to Employee Timetable ("ETT") "Special Instructions") which of the routes involved was clear to cross the diamond of intersecting tracks.

This image is of the historic hotel, depot and freight house at Central Square, New York. Here the O&W and the RW&O cross at grade. The O&W referred to Tilt-Board signals as "Semaphores" in the various "Special Instructions" included in Employee Timetables. The semaphore aspect (image center far left) is the normal) indication for the RW&O to cross the NYO&W tracks. Author's Collection.

The semaphore in this image is at Schuyler Street in Oswego, NY., also protecting the track crossing at grade of the NYO&W and RW&O successor New York Central. The signal aspect, this image indicates that the O&W is NOT cleared to cross the RW&O/ NYC track. . . . that "Normal" aspect being for the NYC to cross O&W track. Slide image form the Collection of the late OWHRS member "Rusty" Recordon.

The O&W encountered Tilt-Board Semaphores at several other Oswego locations: -- NYC crossings (originally RW&O) at East 9th Street, and "Shop track." That the use of these Tilt-Board Semaphores as peculiar specifically to the RW&O, either in the O&W service area or elsewhere along the RW&O is a mystery to this author at this late date; -- but it is in

connection with RW&O crossings that reference to these signals appear in the O&W ETT editions.

There is reference, in certain O&W ETT “Special Instructions” to the employ of these types of signals in the Scranton area where there were so many track crossings at grade over the highly congested mine branch trackage(s) of the several resident “Anthracite” railroads, along with the O&W. However, to date, the capture of “tilt-board semaphore” images along those mine branches has escaped this author.

As for operating these signals, the O&W ETT Instructions require that train crews stop, dismount, and operate the signals after making the local judgement of operating safety, absent an operator on-the-ground (analogous to the historic operating rules affecting Ball Signals). How the signal aspect / indication (represented by the “tilt” (or not(!)) of the pivoting “board”) was changed was a matter of either pulling down one or the other of equilateral control cables and fixing either to a cleat or “spooling”/ “un-spooling” up / down via simple windlasses.

ETT Instructions specify that these semaphores display red lamps after sundown (as did the Ball Signals) and given the era of initial usage, NOT by means of electric lamps. However, and whereas the Ball Signals were lowered to ground to light or affix lamps, ‘t’was not so easy with a tilting - board semaphore. Purely upon practical assumption, I’m guessing that someone had to scale the ladder (as appearing in the immediate image above) to lean over and out to light the lamps.

So much for the interesting peculiarity of “tilt-board” semaphores. . . as equally interesting footnote to the “texture” of the NYO&W; -- and as the conclusion to this “Rambling. . . More later.

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