

The War Between the States

Reminiscences of Edward Rosewater, Army Telegrapher

INTRODUCTION

Edward Rosewater (1841-1906), telegrapher, journalist, and politician, came to the United States from Bohemia in 1854 at the age of thirteen. On the eve of the Civil War he was working as a telegraph operator in the deep South. He joined the United States Military Telegraph Corps and served with a number of outstanding Union generals, among them General John C. Frémont and General John Pope. Rosewater is credited with having telegraphed the Emancipation Proclamation in January, 1863. Before the War was over, Rosewater went to Omaha, Nebraska, in the employ of the Pacific Telegraph Company. There he established one of the first news bureaus in the Rocky Mountain area, and later became the editor and publisher of the *Omaha Bee*, a successful and influential Nebraska newspaper. His vigorous criticism of railroad abuses was a factor in keeping him from winning a seat in the United States Senate. Throughout the years he retained his interest in telegraphy and did much to popularize its use. He was an active member of the Telegraphers' Association, and was frequently invited to speak at meetings on the history and development of telegraphy, particularly during the Civil War period. Extracts from such an address delivered in 1905, describing his experiences as a telegrapher during the Civil War, are reprinted here from the Rosewater Papers in the American Jewish Archives. Like all *post-eventum* reminiscences these, too, should be used with caution.

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen:

Next Sunday, it will be forty years since General Lee surrendered his sword to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, and on Friday next will be the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

To you, young men, forty years seems to be a very long period. For



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EDWARD ROSEWATER
Union Army Telegrapher during the Civil War



Courtesy of Edward Rosewater, Elkins Park, Pa.

EDWARD ROSEWATER
In His Later Years

myself, it appears like a span. The past rises before me like a dream, and I see myself, first at the age of nineteen, at the crossing of the Memphis & Charleston and Memphis & Chattanooga Railroads, in north Alabama, as a telegraph operator. To give you a reminiscence of what I was then and how I appeared, I will present you with what they called an amber type [photograph], taken at Stevenson, Ala., at that time, with the telegraph instrument and table. I was in the heart of the Southern Confederacy, in one of the great Secession states, in the midst of the boiling cauldron that characterized the campaign in which Abraham Lincoln was elected President. I heard the orators assail him. I met Stephen A. Douglas at that time, campaigning in Tennessee and Alabama, and I very distinctly remember on election day a man was shot and killed for expressing himself, for expressing even a sentiment favorable to Lincoln.

I passed through the ordeal, in the capital of Tennessee, that followed the opening of the war, and was there employed in the main office of the Southwestern Telegraph Company which became the Western Union I was in Nashville during the battle of Donelson and after the place was taken by the Union Armies, and immediately after the battle, I had already left the [commercial] telegraph service.

I was called on, one day, to get the body of a young lady twenty years old, who had dropped dead from fright when she heard that Bowling Green, Ky., had been captured by the Union Armies. Her father, whose name was Hardy, lived in that town. The Cumberland River bridge had been destroyed by the retreating Confederates. I got a skiff and crossed the river. The first troop of Ohio cavalry had made their appearance on that side of the river and they said halt, "Nobody can cross that river again." I said: "I did not want to cross. I wanted to have communication with Bowling Green over your military line." I was informed that General [Robert Byington] Mitchell, the commanding general of the advance division of [General Don Carlos] Buell's army, had not yet arrived I was informed that the military telegraph corps had not arrived and nothing could be done to get the communication I wanted.

I remained over night in the home of the chief operator of the Nashville office. The man's name was Fisher, who, I think, until recently has been manager of that office. He was an intense Secessionist, and when he put his children to bed, he said: "Now go to sleep or the Lincolnites will come."

The next morning a body of soldiers called and asked us to report to

General Buell's headquarters. The headquarters was a large farmhouse in the neighborhood of the town. We were received by a man who appeared in a very common, ordinary civilian suit of clothes, and looked very much to me like a clerk or bookkeeper. The inquiry was all about the telegraph, the wires, and their condition in Nashville at that time. Mr. Fisher, who was older than I, made all of the responses and gave a great deal of misinformation in response.

In passing out, I asked the orderly or guard: "Who is this man in that brown suit?" He said: "That man is Thomas A. Scott, Assistant Secretary of War." So I went back and said: "I am a Union man, and this man who has been telling you these stories about the condition of the wires did not tell you the truth. The wires are in much better shape, and they can be restored easily." He said: "Can you restore them, and put the wires across the Cumberland? Our telegraph corps has not yet arrived." I said: "Yes, you put a sufficient number of troops at my disposal, with wagons, and what I need, and I will put the wires across." He said: "Very well, you come with me and General Buell across the river."

I crossed the river with General Buell and Thomas A. Scott. We went to the telegraph office. There was a guard on it, and Thomas A. Scott knew the countersign. There was no trouble in getting what we wanted, and in about twelve hours I had the wires across the Cumberland. I then asked for a passport, by Government steamer, up the Cumberland River, from General Buell, and after I reached Cleveland, where my parents resided, I remained about twenty days. I decided then to enter the Army Telegraph Corps and went to Wheeling, where I was sworn in, and mustered as an army telegrapher.

The opinion among most people [was] that, after all, the army telegrapher was only an adjunct to the civilian portion of the army, that he was principally found in the buildings occupied by army officers, and at stations or depots where railroads were operated, or that he had no real risk to run, and occupied no position that required military vigilance or training of any kind. As a matter of fact, it was quite the reverse. The army telegrapher, when he was in the field, was either always in the front of the army with the advance guard, planting his wires as well as he could, or, communicating as fast as he could to the various parts of the field where wire communication could be gotten, or he was in the rear of the army. When there was a retreat he was the last man to leave the field, because he wanted to keep

up communication. He was really exposed to more danger than the average soldier in the field.

Before the outbreak of the war, there never had been any telegraph communication between different parts of the army, and the military telegraph had not been thought of. Some experiments had been made in Europe with telegraphy, but it was purely technical and not complete in any war before the Rebellion in the United States. At the outbreak of the war, a few operators only were called to Washington, chiefly from the neighboring offices in Baltimore, Harrisburg, and along the Pennsylvania Railroad. Simon Cameron, who was the first Secretary of War, utilized them for communication between the forts that were established, running to Washington, on the Union side. As the war progressed, the demand for army telegraphers continued to increase, until, about the middle of the war, in 1863, there were about twelve hundred men, all in all, in the army military telegraph, covering the entire field of operation from the Ohio River to the Gulf and from Missouri almost across the continent. The military telegraphers, however, were not given any status of position in the army. When they were mustered in, or enrolled, they were required to take . . . [an] oath . . . as solemn as any oath that any soldier or any one enlisted in the navy were required to take during the war.

When I was before the Congressional Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, some years ago, I pointed out the fact, and called attention to the fact, that on the 26th of February, 1866, the Quartermaster-General, by direction of the Assistant Secretary of War, turned over 15,000 miles of land lines and 3,000 miles of cables, and all the instruments, wires, and everything pertaining to the military telegraph, to the telegraph companies, under the pretext that they had a claim against the government for interfering with their lines during the war. They had interfered a great deal more with the government through their lines than the government had interfered with them. I remember when I was in Nashville, that the Southwestern Telegraph Company's manager kept a big stove going for two days, burning the dispatches that had been transmitted disloyally to the northern states and, surreptitiously, by these Confederate managers, after Abraham Lincoln issued his proclamation forbidding these dispatches between the North and the South. New York and Boston were filled with Confederate sympathizers. They were giving aid and comfort to the enemy in every way they possibly could, and they had been advised to mail their telegrams to

Louisville, and there they were secretly forwarded and finally transmitted through the southern lines. . . .

You can get an idea or glimpse of what use the telegraph was put to in the war. I will relate a few of my own experiences. Perhaps they will enlighten you a little. When I joined the Military Telegraph Corps at Wheeling, West Virginia, I was assigned to the headquarters of General [William S.] Rosecrans, who was then occupying a large building opposite to the convent. The room used for the telegraph communication was in the top floor, and my duty was to remain in the room night and day. And so every night when the big flag was hauled down from the top of the building, I wrapped myself up in the American Flag and slept on the floor, waiting the next day for any communication that was wanted. In a very short time, about two weeks, I was ordered to report to General [Robert Cumming] Schenck, who was operating with the army in West Virginia. I passed down the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad from Wheeling to a place called New Creek where there was a large encampment of troops. There I took an ambulance through the mountains, with one soldier alone, for General Schenck's headquarters, about fifty or sixty miles in the interior. We camped the first night by Marfield. . . .

I got to Marfield in the night time. I had but one man with me driving the ambulance, and the soldiers said, "Don't go any further. The country is full of gorillas [guerrillas]." I said, "My orders are to proceed," and we proceeded. The gorillas did not interfere with us. After a time we reached Franklin, W. Va., and soon after joined General Schenck. In the morning Stonewall Jackson attacked our camp. The General [Schenck] was the greatest swearer I ever heard in my life. We got out, and the troops were put into line for the attack, and the batteries placed on the line. I said: "General, where do you want your wires?" He said: "We don't want them here at all. I am going to send my message with those over here," pointing at his batteries. I went up to the Ohio Battery to see how men looked when they were in front of death. When I got up close to the guns, when they were firing, the men were pretty well smoked and faces covered with powder, but otherwise they looked the same as you do. That simply showed that it is all humbug this talk about being scared and how they feel. I do not know how dead men feel, but I know that live ones do not show any such signs as people have talked about.

Presently General [John Charles] Frémont came to join the army of

General Schenck. A very large force, something like 25,000 men were assembled there, and we proceeded towards Winchester. I was ordered to remain with General Frémont's staff, and on that staff was Colonel [James W.] Savage, who became Judge Savage in Omaha, who was a partner of General [Charles F.] Manderson for many years.

One night we stopped at a farmhouse, and I wanted to put the wires in direct communication. It was very dark and I went out; I hadn't got my counterwire. I was walking along trying to trail the wire. I soon had a gun right up in my face, and some one said: "Halt! Who comes there?" I said: "A friend with the countersign." He said: "Advance and give the countersign." I advanced. The fellow grabbed me by the collar. I said: "I have no countersign." So he dragged me along to the campfire, not the kind we get up here, and the staff officers recognized me and said I was all right. I presume if I had made any motion to get away, I would have been bored through with a bullet or a bayonet. I finally marched down back by way of Marfield, and the army deployed from there and got away from the telegraph lines.

Among the twelve messengers who carried messages for me was an Indian who had been brought from California and who accompanied the General [Frémont] through his campaigns. We found that there were about 300 gorillas surrounding the place, and we expected every night we might have an attack. There was only one company of infantry stationed at the place, so I arranged with my messengers or cavalrymen, [since] there was only one roadway through the middle of the town, and we knew that that was the route that the gorillas would have to come, and we had a wire strung across the road between the two houses and the cavalrymen in the upper story, so we would have a chance to fire at them. After General Frémont's campaign was over, I had orders to report at the War Department in Washington. . . .

My experience later on was in the field with a different army and more extensive operations. We received so many reports at Washington that General [John] Pope was a great fighter, [that] when he was made commander of the Richmond forces I was anxious to go with him. I was assigned to the staff of General Pope and made the campaign with him from Warrenton to the Rapidan and back. I did all the telegraphing from the Second Battle of Bull Run for three days and three nights. There was a relief of operators who were always with the staff, but they kept going

and coming. I was practically pinned down there and remained there during the battle. And after the battle, the last thing that was done was to open a telegraph office in a boxcar standing on the tracks. On account of my residence in Alabama, I was taking very great risk. The proclamation of Jefferson Davis ordering all persons not in sympathy with the Rebellion to leave the Confederate states placed me in the position of a disloyal Southern citizen. And although I left Alabama soon after that proclamation was issued and located in Tennessee, Tennessee seceded while I was in Nashville, and I made up my mind not to be captured, as I was known to all the operators in the Southern country.

There were a great many operators in that war that were constantly in touch with the army during all kinds of engagements. Before the Second Battle of Bull Run I was at Warrenton Junction, where General Pope had retreated to from the Rapidan, but we had changed our headquarters. About ten o'clock in the morning we were notified by the operator at Manassas that the Confederates were coming into that place, and we knew that the locomotives that had been running on the Alexandria Railroad had all been destroyed or derailed, and there was only one locomotive and a few boxcars standing at Warrenton siding. Nothing was done until 11 o'clock at night when one of the officers said that a reconnaissance was sent out and a member of the telegraph corps, which was myself, accompanied the reconnaissance. We started out with the locomotive and four flatcars and a boxcar. We made slow progress along the tracks. [Stonewall] Jackson had destroyed Manassas and burned all the bridges, and their army was in full possession in that vicinity. We could not work the wires.

As soon as daylight came, a battery of Confederate artillery began to open up on us, and the commander concluded we had better go back. We went back a few miles more and tried to open communication but could not, and when we returned to headquarters they were holding a general council of war, Generals [John] Pope, [Ambrose E.] Burnside, [Joseph] Hooker, and others. And when the commanding officer reported that he had seen a large body of cavalry and infantry and artillery of the Confederates, all in one large body, perhaps 30,000, General Pope said: "You are dismissed! It is nothing but a cavalry raid." So the opportunity was lost to permanently check the advance of Jackson.

The next morning I was following [General] Fitz-John Porter in his famous march. You have probably read in history that Fitz-John Porter did

not obey orders. I do not think he was in any condition to obey orders. I never have believed it. The whole country was covered with wagon trains. More than ten thousand wagons were going in every direction on roads that were good and not good. The wagon drivers were all crushing [each other]. Stonewall Jackson was driving them from one way, and we from the other. No one can get an idea of the terrible excitement and commotion. It was my impression at that time that if Fitz-John Porter had attempted that before daybreak, he would have been compelled to destroy our wagon trains, or his army would have been scattered, so that he could not have done anything with them.

Work in the War Department was the next duty that I performed after the Second Battle of Bull Run. I was stationed in the War Department ten months. It is strange that during the entire Civil War there was no wire in the White House. The President was obliged to go to the War Department, which was across the lots, perhaps two hundred yards away from the White House. He was obliged to go there to get his dispatches, or wait until they were delivered to him by cavalry men who were acting as messengers to the War Department. Lincoln had to be at the War Department from eight o'clock in the morning until evening, reading dispatches and giving directions. The old War Department was a three-story building that was not as large as this building, and was also occupied by the Navy Department. And in that comparatively small building, which is not one-fifteenth as large as the present War Department, the greatest war of the age was commanded and ordered, and the operation and movements started out their orders from that department. And the Secretary of War himself, William [Edwin] M. Stanton, who was probably the greatest War Secretary we ever had or ever will have, with his own hand he wrote out in a big bold hand every dispatch. There were no typewriters or stenographers. It was all done by each of the departments writing their own messages. So did the President. Sometimes the President stood behind the operator and directed him verbally what to say, but as a general thing he wrote his messages. We had manifold books for every one of the departments in the War Department. We kept letterpress copies of all the telegrams received by the Army and Navy Departments. . . .

I do not know that I have given you just what you expected, but I have endeavored to throw some light upon a subject that has been more or less misunderstood. During the Virginia Campaign, while I was attached to

General Pope's staff as a telegrapher, I carried the countersign for the whole army in my inner pocket for a week at a time. I do not think it was good tactics to take a young man twenty one years of age, and give him the countersign for the whole army, but it shows the confidence that was reposed in the operators.

The ciphers were made to convey intelligence that could not be readily understood unless they had the key. The corps commander or any other commander of the entire army could not decipher. The cipher operator alone had the key that would unravel the puzzle, and upon him they had to depend to get the more confidential communications between the War Department.

One time I very nearly got into trouble over a cipher when I was at Warfield [Marfield?]. One day I received a cipher dispatch and had no other message, so I amused myself trying to find out what it meant. I read the cipher and concluded that there was a mistake in it, and I wired back and said: "Have the wire repeat[ed], there is a mistake in it." Immediately the Superintendent of Telegraph came to the key himself and said: "Who gave you the cipher?" I said: "I have not got any." He said: "It is not true, the Lord Almighty could not undo this thing unless he had a key." I said: "I am not the Lord Almighty, but I know I have found a mistake in this paper." He said: "I will have to report you to headquarters. We cannot tolerate anybody that can decipher messages." They had discovered the mistake and transmitted it correctly.

The ciphers used in the early stages of the war were discharged [changed] later on. The first ciphers were comparatively simple, but later they worked out ciphers by having arbitrary words and letters mean whole sentences sometimes. . . .

There was a mysterious bond of community between the different telegraph companies during the war. All the telegrams were censored. The head censor was Edwin Sanford, president of the Adams Express Company. It was a singular thing that the government of the United States had to have the president of the Adams Express and Telegraph Company to censor the dispatches; that nobody else was so trustworthy. It was the same as when they turned over these military lines to these [telegraph] companies. The order was issued by Thomas T. Eckert, Assistant Secretary of War, and in less than a year and a half, Thomas T. Eckert was president of the Western Union, a mere incident, of course,

but it was a very singular transaction. [Eckert was not president of a telegraph company till 1875 and of the Western Union Telegraph Company until 1892.]

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The following three notes are abstracts from letters written by young Rosewater in 1862 when he was a telegrapher in the War Department in Washington.

Washington, D. C.,

September 2nd, 1862.

I hope General [George B.] McClellan will be able to straighten things up [after the defeat of the Second Battle of Bull Run]. After all these Generals are very common men. I have seen most of them. They take things very easy, much more so than old Abe. The President gets up early in the morning and walks to the telegraph office right off to hear the news and sometimes asks all kinds of questions over the wires.

* *

War Department,

Washington City, D. C.,

September 18, 1862.

Since writing you last I have been working in the War Department Telegraph office. It is upstairs in the War Department. The operating room was formerly the library of the Secretary of War, whose office is opposite ours. The room has carpets and eight marble and four mahogany small size tables, with an instrument at each table showing twelve lines entering into the office. There are eight operators. The President, Secretary of War, and General [Henry W.] Halleck come in occasionally. The President every morning about eight o'clock comes in to read the dispatches, which are copied into books. His house being next to this, he is here often. Last Sunday he was in all day [during the Battles on South Mountain, Maryland]. With his white satin slippers, common black suit, and spectacles on, he looks queer, comes in and asks operators all kinds of questions. Sometimes he tells an anecdote or reads a story aloud and laughs (you could hear him half a mile). Well, so much for old Abe.

* *

United States Military Telegraph,
War Department,
Washington, D. C.,
January 3, 1863.

New Years is a grand Gala Day here for officials. The President's levee is the occasion for show of epaulets, cocked hats, gilt buttons, by our army and navy officers, and grand crosses and ribbons, stars and fine equipages by the foreign ministers. Then comes the common crowd, among them your humble servant (not from curiosity for I had seen and spoken to the President before), all jammed against the White House. Fine dressed ladies with children and babies, old men, young men, young misses, and beaus all try to get a shake at Mr. Lincoln's hand, and I guess after standing in the middle of the room from 11:00 to 2:00 P. M., he must have been glad to put his hand in his pocket. He looked pleasant for the occasion, his whiskers cut short, and said: "How do you do?" to this one, "How is the baby?" to that one, etc. The weather was very pleasant, cold, and clear. Have had no snow for three or four weeks. Mrs. Lincoln being in mourning did not attend the levee.

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