Telegraphy and the downfall of the Kelly Gang

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Abstract

Four historical vignettes are provided from the period 1875 to 1880 from the Proceedings of the Telegraph Electrical Society of Victoria – the lineal antecedent of today?s TelSoc (Australian Telecommunications Society). The extracts cover Alexander Graham Bell?۪s invention of the telephone, Telegraphy at the downfall of the Kelly Gang, the speed of the Morse system, and the curious phenomenon of ?Fighting by Telegraph?.

Introduction to the historical extracts


Twenty years later in 1874 (and two years before Alexander Graham Bell patented the telephone), several like-minded telegraph workers and country postmasters formed the Telegraph Electrical Society of Victoria. The purpose was for mutual discussion of day to day telegraph problems and the advancement of their technical and practical knowledge (Credlin 1938 [6]).

The Proceedings of the Society were published on a quarterly basis and lecture pamphlets were reproduced in newspapers of the day such as The Argus. This paper features four extracts from those Proceedings, which resonate into the modern era.

The first extract, entitled ?Novel Telegraphy in Canada? [7], was published in 1876. It perspicaciously described Dr Bell?۪s invention of the telephone as ?very satisfactory? and ?[it] will certainly be the greatest mechanical discovery since the telegraph?.

The second extract, entitled ?Extermination of the Kelly Gang? [8], was published in 1880. It described two Posts and Telegraph personnel who attended the siege at Glenrowan. One bravely climbed a pole while bullets were flying to establish a telegraph connection to Melbourne, and the other relayed continuous
updates on the situation.

The third extract, entitled "Speed of Working the Morse Instrument?" [9], was published in 1875. It discussed the top speed of Morse messages on the busiest telegraph lines in New York, USA. Not to be outdone, the Victorian operators covering the Melbourne Cup demonstrated they could send messages at double that speed.

The fourth and final extract, entitled "Fighting by Telegraph?" [10], was published in 1880. It is a curious article describing the fighting by operators over telegraph lines, before reliable duplex systems were introduced.

These extracts were all published later in a Society paper entitled "Centenary of Telecommunication Societies in Australia?, written by J.E. Sander for the *Telecommunication Journal of Australia*, the predecessor of this Journal, in 1974 (Sander 1974 [11]).

**References**


The historical extracts
Figure 1 ? Novel Telegraphy in Canada
Figure 2 ? Extermination of the Kelly Gang
Figure 3 - Speed of Working the Morse Instrument
FIGHTING BY TELEGRAPH.

The proceedings before the coroner at Huntingdon, on the 2nd February, in the Abbots-Ripton collision case (says the Times) recall the existence of a curious pastime in working the telegraph. When two stations want to send a message at the same time, and neither will give way, they are said to "fight." Each operator grasps the handles of his instrument tightly, and moves them rapidly and irregularly from side to side; the result being that the needles are violently agitated, even to "clicking" loudly, and the "face" of the instrument assumes quite an excited aspect. Such, or something like this, may be assumed to have been the case when the Abbots-Ripton signalman wanted to send his message to Huntingdon for "doctors and help," and somebody else on the circuit would not let him. "Fighting" on the wires was a common practice in the early days of the telegraph, when nothing but the double-needle instrument was used—so common, indeed, that a fine used to be imposed on clerks who broke the handles of their instruments in this warlike occupation. Battles of this kind were not always confined to two persons; for when there were more than two stations "in circuit" others would join in for the mere fun of the thing, and a "free fight" would often ensue.

The improved forms of telegraphic apparatus have reduced "fighting" very much, although they have not altogether done away with it. The simpler forms of recording instruments still admit of telegraph clerks giving rein to their angry passions on the wire, the rapid up-and-down motion of the keys taking the place of the violent swaying and fro of the handles. But the arts of peace as well as that of war are studied by the telegraphist in his spare moments, and the gentler passions often find vent through the wire. It has been stated that long courtships have been maintained between persons hundreds of miles apart, who never saw each other, and that there is now a telegraphic sign for "love's first snowdrop, virgin kiss." One of the latest inventions in telegraphy, known as the "duplex" system, is a great peacemaker, for it enables the operators at either end to charge at each other as much as they please without disturbing the continuity of transmission, thus removing all inducement to "fight." What an American humorist has said of a railway collision—viz., that it is an effort on the part of two trains travelling in opposite directions to pass each other on the same track—is true of the attempt to send two messages on the same wire at the same time by the needle telegraph, but not of the "duplex" system, by means of which this feat is now very generally accomplished throughout the world.

Figure 4 ? Fighting by Telegraph

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