

The Montour Railroad Telephone System

By Bob Ciminel - Montour Railroad Historical Society

Although the Montour Railroad used a telegraph system between Montour Junction and Imperial in its early days of operation, the additions of the Mifflin Extension (1914), the Muse (1921) and Westland (1928) branches required a more complex communication system to control operations along the 42 miles of main track, mine sidings, and branches.

The answer was a party-line telephone system connecting the entire railroad to the dispatcher's office at Montour Junction. The system originated in 1903 when the Pittsburgh Coal Company created the Montour Telephone Company and installed 105 miles of telephone line to connect its mines and headquarters building in downtown Pittsburgh. It was a simple matter to piggyback the railroad's telephone system onto the network.



A railroad telephone booth sits beside the west switch at North Star Junction.

The 1940 Montour Railroad Employee Timetable lists 48 telephones installed between Montour Junction and Mifflin Junction. The major sidings had telephones at each end, and additional telephones were installed at North Star Junction, Clinton Block Junction, Gilmore Junction, Muse Junction and Library Junction, plus the stations at Imperial, Champion and Southview and the mines on the Solar Branch, McDonald Transfer and at Hills. On the Library Branch, the telephones at Gould and Penmont allowed Montour and Pennsylvania Railroad train crews to contact the Montour Dispatcher for authority to operate on this jointly used track. The track was owned by the PRR, but that company only used it to service the Bertha Consumers and Knothole mines at Gould. From the east end of Salida Siding to Mifflin Junction, the telephones connected with to Pittsburgh & West Virginia Railroad Dispatcher, who controlled the P&WV-owned track the Montour train crews used to access Mifflin Yard. The telephone at the west end of Salida Siding, allowed P&WV train crews operating between Salida

and the Pittsburgh Terminal No. 8 Mine at Coverdale to receive their train orders from the Montour Dispatcher to run on the Montour tracks and reach the mine.



A Monotur Railroad wall-mount telephone

According to Tim Sposato, a former Montour employee, the original telephones were located in boxes mounted on the telephone/telegraph poles that lined the railroad. These telephones were eventually installed in telephone booths to protect them (and the users) from inclement weather. The telephone booths, which were patented in 1894, were built on site or in the Carpentry Shop at Montour Junction and maintained by the Bridge & Building Department. A pair of wires ran from the nearest telephone pole through the rear wall of the telephone booth to a double-fused knife switch. The fuses protected the booth and telephone from current surges caused by lightning strikes. Each telephone booth contained a set of dry cell batteries for power and a small magneto (generator) for the ringer. A door equipped with a standard Montour switch lock was used to keep unauthorized people from using the telephones.

Because it was a party-line system, closing the knife switch allowed anyone to listen in on conversations. A hand crank and a series of long and short rings (ring code) provided the means for contacting the various telephones in the system. The ring code identified the party being called. For example, the ring code for the Dispatcher at Montour Junction was different than the code for the Yard Master at Champion.

According to Tim, these “crank phones” were still in use at Montour Junction when the railroad discontinued operations, and were used to communicate between floors in the office building and with the Engine House, Car Shops, Champion Yard Office and the foreman’s office at the Champion Coal Washer.



Fortunately, Gene Schaeffer, a former Montour Railroad Dispatcher, took a photograph in 1975 of the telephone booth that was formerly at the west end of Scott Siding, located along Montour Run Road, east of Trail Milepost 5.



Tim and the folks at the Age of Steam Roundhouse in Sugar Creek, OH, have built an authentic replica of a Montour Railroad telephone booth (above) from photographs (and memories). The knife switch and insulators came from the telephone booth located at Jewell, and the telephone was a gift Tim received from Jim Lane, a former Montour Railroad engineer.

If it were not for Gene's photographs and Tim's dedication, these remnants of the Montour Railroad would have gone the way of so many other things that represented the railroad before its skeletal backbone (the Montour Trail) became the only permanent part of the railroad left to future generations.

This column appeared in the November-December, 2012 Montour Trail Newsletter.
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