

PASSING A GOOD JOKE ALONG THE WIRE

NOW that's something I've often wondered about," said the old commercial traveler. "How does a new joke travel over the country so quickly? I've heard the explanation that it is we commercial travelers who spread them. But that isn't how it's done; it doesn't make any difference if we travel on a through express, we frequently find that a brand new story we heard in New York has reached San Francisco ahead of us."

"The explanation is simple enough," said the old telegrapher. "It simply means that electricity is faster than steam; while you were traveling to 'Frisco on the railroad, the joke was traveling there on the telegraph wire."

"Do you mean to say that there are people so anxious to spring a new joke that they will go to the expense of tele-

graphing it to their friends?"

"No; no one goes to the expense—that's on the telegraph company. You see, it's this way: The operators at all the big telegraph centres over the country have a speaking acquaintance with each other. They call each other by first names, though the chances are that they haven't the slightest idea of each other's appearance. During the night the wires are often quiet. Now, suppose a message has just been sent from New York to Buffalo; for the time being there is nothing more to be dispatched, and no other operator is trying to get the wire. In this case the telegraph instrument in Buffalo is very apt to click off, 'Say, Jim, I just heard a new story. It's a good one.' and the story follows."

"When Jim at Buffalo gets Jack at

Chicago or Pete at St. Louis on an idle wire, the new story is passed along. And so in a single night a cracking good story may be passed from New York to San Francisco.

"But I'm afraid that stories won't circulate now as quickly as they used to. You see, the companies have wakened up to the fact that many of their wires are idle during the night, and so they have instituted the 'night letter' service—telegraphing at night a fifty-word message at the same price that dispatches a ten-word message in the day. When the public once begins to really use this night letter service there won't be near so many jokes cracked over the telegraph wire as there used to be. And so it looks as if we were going to enter a period having far less humor than before."

The New York Times

Published: June 12, 1910

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