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The Local Freight Agent

An Address

Before the
American Association of Freight Agents
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By

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THE LOCAL FREIGHT AGENT.

As common carriers it is our business to accept freight from the shipper and deliver it to the receiver, whether on the originating line or on some other line, with reasonable promptness and in as good condition as when it was entrusted to us.

The Local Freight Agent starts and stops every pound of business we handle, and—in the language of the forceful and efficient Superintendent of Agencies of Southern Railway Company, who is known to many of you—"If it don't start right, it's dollars to doughnuts it won't stop right." You and I both know the consequences. If a package of freight does not stop right a dissatisfied shipper, a disgruntled receiver and a loss or damage claim are inevitable. It follows that efficient service by the local agent is one of the most effective forms of solicitation, and that efficiency in his office shows directly on the balance sheet.

The most important part of your duty is undoubtedly that connected with the receipt and handling of money and the keeping and rendering of accounts—for substantially all the revenue of the railroad passes through your hands—but next to this my own belief is that your opportunity for success lies largely in starting a shipment right. I shall not attempt to give you technical advice as to how to do this because you probably all know more about it than I do, but shall make some brief philosophical observations as to efficiency in railroad employment which apply with special force to the local agent.

The local agent is the man on the railroad with whom the public comes most in contact and the opinion which his neighbors have of him is apt to become their opinion of the Company. His realization of this will inspire him with a determination to maintain the good name both of himself and of his company. Uniform courtesy in dealing with the public should be the rule of every railroad officer and employee. It is of supreme importance to the local agent, for discourteous treatment may lead a shipper to give his business to a competing line or to short-haul that of the man who has offended him, and it is well for the agent to remember that in reality there is no such thing as a "non-competitive" railroad station. Though the business may have to start by his line, a

disgruntled shipper may turn it over to another at the first junction point.

There are many ways in which the local agent and the shipper may co-operate to their mutual advantage, and the most successful local agent will be one who strives unceasingly to bring about this co-operation and especially to secure the intelligent interest of the shipper in the proper packing, marking and loading of his goods. You may make a life-long friend for yourself and for your company by explaining to a shipper just how certain goods may have been lost or damaged as a result of improper packing, marking or loading. On the other hand, if goods have been lost, damaged or delayed through the fault of the railroad, is it not better to go to the shipper and frankly tell him the whole truth, accept full blame, tell him just what happened, why it happened, what you are doing to prevent the same thing happening again, and show him what he may be able to do to help you? It is human to err, but the wise man profits by his errors and will not make the same mistake twice.

I yield to no one in appreciation of the difficulties of the agent's job. He probably comes into contact with as much meanness and petty dishonesty as any man in business, but where he is successful he probably earns as much esteem and good opinion and gets as cordial co-operation from the great majority of business men who are honest and straightforward as does any public servant.

He must, however, be a versatile man. In addition to having the qualities which make for success in the management of a general merchandise store he must be usually a telegraph operator, a rough and ready lawyer, a first aid surgeon, a substitute for a certified public accountant, a pretty good bank president, a political economist, a peace maker, a captain of men in action, and an organizer of victory. He must interpret and do his best to enforce a multitude of detailed and often obscure regulations prescribed by law and by public regulating authority as well as those which originate at the railroad headquarters. He must have a patience and good humor which will qualify him for a robe and a harp and a seat in Heaven along side of Job himself, and, with all this, he must be a self-respecting citizen, a church-member and rear a family on a modest wage. It would seem that if every local agent qualified in all of these respects the political parties would all go to your Association to find candidates for President of the United States. But seriously your job is an important job in every railroad and no self-respecting managing officer fails in respect and esteem for the successful agent.

The German army is the wonderful fighting machine that it has proven itself to be not because the individual soldiers of whom it is composed are in any way superior in natural ability to an equal number of men of any other nationality. Its superiority is due to the fact that, from the time of von Moltke to the present, there has always been at the head of the German General Staff a man of the highest efficiency, who would be contented with nothing but superior service throughout the entire organization, from a general commanding an army to a private in the ranks. The same rule holds good in every human organization, including the local agency of a railroad. As the agent is, so will his force be. If he is a man of efficiency himself, who will not be content with anything short of superior service from his entire organization down to the office boy and truckers, he will get that kind of service. There may be different ways of doing this in different parts of the country and in different railroad organizations, but I believe that the best way will uniformly be for the agent to be a leader of his men and not a driver. I know it is the best way on the Southern Railway, for the Southern man is hard to drive, but there is nowhere that he will not follow a leader who has his full confidence and respect.

There are three requisites for advancement in railroad service—loyalty, efficiency in your present job, and preparedness for larger responsibilities. Efficiency and preparedness for higher place go together, for that man will be most efficient in his present job who is not content with mere mechanical performance of his duties but who has an intelligent understanding of them in their relation to the service as a whole and who has qualified to take over the duties and responsibilities of his immediate superior on a moment's notice. Applying this to the local agency, it follows not only that the agent should be a man measuring up to these requirements for advancement, but that he should carry out the principle in the organization of his force. I suggest that a young man who gives evidence of a desire and a determination to make the most of his opportunities should not always be passed over for one whose present qualifications may seem to be superior, but who would probably develop into nothing higher than the mechanical, clock-watching type of employee. Starting with the best material available, every man in the agency should, of course, be expected to perform his immediate duties efficiently, but, in addition to this, he should be encouraged to familiarize himself with all the business of the agency, to qualify himself for any place in it and to make suggestions for the improvement of the service.

The right kind of an agent need not be afraid to have men under him qualified to take his place, for if he is the right kind of an agent no subordinate will be so well qualified for his place as he himself, and, if his subordinates are all qualified for promotion along the lines I have suggested, by efficiency in their present jobs combined with an intelligent understanding of their relation to the service as a whole and with preparedness for larger responsibilities, the agent's mind will be relieved of details, he can be a constructive leader, and the work of his agency will be of such high grade that it can not avoid attracting the attention of his superiors.

The interests of the railroads by which you are employed are largely in the hands of the members of this Association, and the work which you will do here in the way of perfecting methods ensuring the proper handling of the freight entrusted to our care, the reduction of loss and damage claims and the proper accounting for the cash which you receive will be reflected in the balance sheet of your companies and appreciated by their general officers.