

The
Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind - the Eclectic Engineer

FROM THE TRENCHES

Western Union's Time Was Up Years Ago

By Don Kimberlin



The year 1962

The place: Fort Lauderdale, FL - when "Miami" was still a separate market, and people listened to local radio. However, there were no network affiliates in Ft. Lauderdale, only Miami.

The prelude: I was CE of a 10 kW AM and a 33 kW FM in Ft. Lauderdale. I'd be bothered when I drove to Miami and ran out of range of my own station, finding my watch was a couple of minutes off, and have to set it. Then, I'd get back to Ft. Lauderdale and have to set it again.

But, nothing ever clicked.

The scene: We used WUTCo clocks, but never really joined a network program, so the jocks never griped about the clocks.

The action: One day, I get a "pink letter" in the mail from the FCC Monitoring Station about 12 miles west of Ft. Lauderdale, citing us for violating Section 73-whatever-it-is - "Transmitting False Signals," stating they had observed our announcements of time and they were *two minutes off*. I of course tune in WWV, and by golly our WUTCO clocks *are* two minutes off. Now, the mystery of my watch comes clear!

Second act: I call WUTCo at Ft. Lauderdale. That's a whole `nother story! Suffice it to say WUTCo's rules for people that answered the phone seemed to require they did not answer for 189 rings, then sound like they were 125 years old and be totally uncommunicative.

The Dialogue: (after 189 rings for 20 minutes)

"Hullo?"

"Is that Western Union?"

"Yup."

"My clocks seem to be two minutes slow here."

"You'll have to talk to the Wire Chief."

(long silence)

"Well, may I speak to the Wire Chief, please?"

"He's not here."

"When will he be back?"

"Never."

(To reduce the time for this typically painful exchange with WUTCo, I'll revert to summary mode.)

It finally ensued that I learned the magic of WUTCo clocks was a "Master Clock" in each local area. It ran like an old schoolhouse clock with a punched paper tape to ring the bells -- except that a WUTCo local master clock had only one set of holes at the top of the hour. When it ran past the holes, it sent a two-second pulse down a local telegraph loop with all the clocks around town wired in series like teleprinters. Receiving this current pulse would operate a solenoid in the clocks that pulled their second and minute hands up to the top of the hour, in some models illuminating a red light while the pulse was on. (Some radio stations had their own relay wired into the circuit, using it to put a time tone on at the top of the hour.)

The way the synchronization operation worked was that in each local area, it was the distinct "job" of the Wire Chief to be there at noon daily, to get a "click" on the sounder of one national wire, and set their local Master Clock to the once-a-day time from the national "click."

However, at Fort Lauderdale, the Wire Chief had been promoted out of town *TWO YEARS* previously, so it was nobody's job to set the local Master Clock.

Well, I had my answer for the FCC. "Dear FCC I have investigated the source of false signals you observed and found they were caused by erroneous information supplied by the Western Union Telegraph Company's failure to maintain its tariffed Clock Service. Since Western Union personnel have told me they do not intend to correct the error in their tariffed service, we have instituted measures to obtain correct time from WWV. There should not be a recurrence of the false signals."

Well, it took about two days for the phone calls to start -- from inside every crack and crevice of Western Union, from Upper Saddle River, New Jersey to Hudson Street, Manhattan to Washington. DC to Atlanta, GA to Jacksonville, FL to Miami. A hundred or so insects came out of the WUTCo woodwork.

"Mr. Kimberlin? This is _____ from Western Union. Why didn't you call ME about the problem with your clocks?"

"Where did you emerge from? Who are you? How the h--- would I ever even know you existed?"

"Well, that's all beside the point now. I want you to know that *I* have taken personal steps to see that your clocks will function perfectly from now on. If you EVER have ANY problem with ANYTHING at Western Union, I want you to call me personally. Here's the unlisted direct in-dial number at my desk."

I collected a huge list of names and numbers, and it seemed from that day on I never failed to get responsive service from WUTCo.

The point: Our story actually has a point It doesn't matter if it's telegraph, phone, electric, gas, water, sewer or bus company. If you take the time to find out what they are really selling, and you can couch your complaint in the terms of their tariffed deal with the public, you can make it stick if you have to ... and from then on, you'll have a whole different relationship with them. They WILL know your name and they'll WANT to make you happy the next time you call ... kinda like the famous joke about the Quaker with the mule!

(I only used this trick four times in 34 years -- on WUTCo, Southern Bell (twice), and GTE of Florida -- but it sure works!)

If people would learn enough to use it, they'd find a whole new relation with the Phoneco; the Waterco; the Gasco; the Powerco; the Cableco, and the You-Name-Itco.

Donald E. Kimberlin is semi-retired in Florida after a long career in telecommunications. You can contact Don at: donkimberlin@gmail.com

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