

Key and Telegraph

Horace G. Martin Part One: The Telegrapher

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Behind all the data that exists today about Vibroplex keys: the various models, their manufactured dates, and the many labels, is the story about Horace G. Martin. Without Martin's sole invention of the Martin Vibroplex, almost a hundred years ago, there would be no Vibroplex Company, and the careers of many telegraphers in this country would probably have been severely shortened. Martin's inventions in semi-automatic key design have been used by thousands of commercial, press, military and amateur telegraph and radio operators both on land and at sea for decades, yet very little has been documented about Martin himself.

Where did he come from? What or who motivated him to experiment with semi automatic key designs? What about the man? Did he seemingly come out of nowhere just to seize a marketing opportunity for telegraphers who were suffering from "telegrapher paralysis?" This was a crippling syndrome resulting from the daily abuse of manipulating a manual telegraph key. It affected the arms of many telegraphers.

I will attempt to answer these questions in a multi part article that will trace Martin's life at least to the point where he first introduced the Martin Vibroplex. This installment will cover his early years. It that will also focus on a very remarkable telegraphic event in which Martin participated as a young man.

Some of you may have heard, or suspected, that Martin was a telegrapher before he invented his famous Vibroplex. After reading this installment you will learn that Martin was not just an ordinary telegrapher, but one of the finest telegraphers in the United States.



Horace G. Martin, Inventor of the Vibroplex, at age 30.

Up front you should know that Horace Greeley Martin's roots are in the South. He was born in Adairsville, Georgia, located about 50 miles north of Atlanta, in 1873. It would appear that Robert and Sarah Martin, when selecting a name for their son, were influenced by the life of Horace Greeley, founder and editor of the New York Tribune, who had died a year earlier. He was popular in Georgia as a promoter of the south's reconstruction after the Civil War. It is interesting that Martin's career as a telegrapher, either by coincidence or design, heavily favored the press service. Martin's father was a former Confederate soldier. At the time of Horace's birth, he worked as a miller at a grain mill east of Adairsville in Pine Log, Georgia. As a youth, Horace spent his time at the train depot in Adairsville, where he first learned telegraphy. Adairsville was the half-way stop between Atlanta and Chattanooga, Tennessee for the Western and Atlantic Railroad. Martin was hired as an extra operator for the railroad when he was only nine.

He was recognized for his excellent penmanship and typewriting abilities even before he became a teenager. Because of these abilities, he was hired as a telegrapher for the Associated Press in Atlanta while in his early teen years. Later, he left the Associated Press to work for Western Union in Atlanta, advancing to the position of chief operator for the entire Atlanta office.

Still in his teen years, Martin was married to Miss Gena Stephens of Atlanta. She was the cousin of Alexander Stephens, the former vice president of the Confederacy, and the daughter of James M. Stephens. Like Martin, James Stephens had roots as a telegrapher with the Western and Atlantic Railroad. He later became the superintendent of Western Union's southern operations. In 1893, Horace and Gena Martin became the parents of Horace G. Martin Junior, the first of their eight children. The motivation behind some of Martin's later moves in life can be best understood knowing that he and his wife were from Georgia.

As Martin gained more and more experience as a telegrapher, he found opportunities to work circuits of greater importance. Telegraphers with the ability to move high volumes of copy in the least amount of time received the best pay, and Martin jumped around from city to city seeking such positions. He was re-employed by the Associated Press, this time based in Memphis, Tennessee, to work their important Memphis - New Orleans wire.

He became known on the wire by his personal "sine" (call sign) of "HM." As time went on, "HM" developed the reputation as being one of the best senders ever in the press service. Martin was also ambidextrous and had a talent as a telegrapher for doing totally different tasks simultaneously.

With this kind of reputation still better opportunities awaited him in New York City, where the nation's largest telegraph hubs were located. Early in New York he found employment with some of the brokerage firms on Wall Street or, as telegraphers referred to it, "The Street." But by the mid 1890's he was back in the press service working for various newspapers as a telegrapher, reporter, and telegraph editor. During the 1890's two major U.S. news organizations were competing fiercely for newspaper contracts. These were The Associated Press and The United Press (not to be confused with UPI, which was organized later). Both were headquartered in New York City at Western Union's 195 Broadway building. Martin's next move was to work as a telegrapher for The United Press. There, he developed important

associations with certain people that, would directly or indirectly, affect his career in the years to come. They included: General Manager Walter P. Phillips, a long time telegrapher, newspaper editor, and the inventor of a telegrapher's short hand called the Phillips code; Roderick Weiny, Lead Engineer and Electrician; and Fred Catlin, a prominent telegrapher famous for the "Catlin grip," a standard method of handling a telegraph key.

In early 1897, the United Press, losing most of their major contracts to The Associated Press, filed for bankruptcy. By April 8, 1897 The United Press had ceased operations and laid off all of their employees, including Martin. Walter Phillips went off seeking new business opportunities while Martin went back to work for Western Union. The commute from his home at 377 Seventh Ave. in Brooklyn remained almost exactly the same; he merely reported to work on a different floor at 195 Broadway.

In 1898 an event took place in Martin's life that is a story in itself. On May 14th of that year, a major telegraph competition was to be held as part of an electrical exposition sponsored by the New York Electrical Society. It overshadowed any contest of this type previously attempted and it was appropriately named "The Grand National Telegraph Tournament." No better a place could have be selected for such a competition than Madison Square Garden. Cash prizes were to be awarded to the first and second place winners in three categories for both sending and receiving : a message class, code class, and the most difficult, the championship class.

Invitations to officiate as judges went out to a list of distinguished men associated with the field of telegraphy. Accepting as an honorary judge was Jessie Bunnell, former Civil War telegrapher and senior partner of the telegraph equipment supply firm, J.H. Bunnell & Co.: "I will serve as a judge, but hope that you will find enough more old ' has beens ' for associate judges, to enable us collectively to read fifty words per minute.....Of course we will also do anything else that is desired, in the way of furnishing necessary apparatus...." Thomas Edison, a former telegrapher himself, had similar sentiments with his colorful reply : "I may come over and act as a judge of 50 word a minute Morse, but I am afraid I would not understand it. The Morse that I was brought up on was about as perfect as the record slip¹ on a deep sea cable. But if such fossils as Bunnell....are going to pretend to read copper plate Morse², then I may come over and look wise."



Label of early-production Vibroplex.

The main event in the tournament was the championship class competition. Six senders would send five minutes of text each--selected appropriately from The Old Testament's Book of Judges. A panel of Judges would award prizes to the fastest two telegraphers with the least number of errors. On the receiving side of this competition, prizes would be given to the top two receiving telegraphers with the least number of errors copied with a typewriter of the operator's choice. The omission or addition of any character, including punctuation marks, would count as an error. The receiver had to accurately copy the sender's mistakes. Horace Martin was one of fifteen telegraphers competing as a receiver in this class and was one of eight from Western Union of New York City.

The tournament setting was in the concert auditorium of Madison Square Garden. The contestants were seated up on the main stage among a maze of positions, each equipped with a typewriter, sounder and resonator. The judges were off in separate quiet rooms. For the first time in tournament history, permanent phonograms were made of the six senders and these could be duplicated later for play back on a phonograph or a graphophone. The majority of the telegraph equipment was furnished by J.H. Bunnell & Co. with Western Electric also helping out. Western Union and Postal Telegraph, along with typewriter manufactures Smith-Premier and Remington contributed money for the cash prizes. Smith-Premier also offered to supply a "mill" to any telegrapher unable to transport a personal machine to the tournament.

That Saturday night, The Garden was filled to standing room capacity for the start of the championship class competition. Anyone who was anybody in the telegraph business, along with every off-duty telegrapher in the New York metro area, was said to be in attendance. For previous tournaments, the spectators could listen in to the Morse being sent with various sounders placed in the crowd. For this event, three gigantic megaphones, each with a sounder mounted in its throats, were set up on the stage. They looked like three large cannons protecting a perimeter of a fort.

The Master of Ceremonies marked the beginning of the championship session and introduced the first sender. The official timer recorded the start and one by one each of the six senders sent five minutes of material. At its conclusion, Martin handed in seven sheets of typewritten copy to the judges. The results of the senders ranged from 43 wpm with 10 errors, to 50.8 wpm and one error. Martin's copy was praised by all of the judges as "being the cleanest and most perfect of all the copy handed in" and was an outstanding example of fast telegraphy and typewriting ability. But, there was a problem. Through a misunderstanding, Martin neglected to put the name of the sender at the top of each page he submitted, an omission that technically cost him seven errors. This put the judges in a dilemma. On one hand they were looking at Martin's perfect copy; on the other, the stated rules said the senders name had to be on each sheet. The judges could not come to a decision that night and sent everyone home while they deliberated over the week end for a decision. On Monday, they announced that Martin had been charged with the seven errors. The first and second prizes were awarded to two telegraphers who had three and five errors, respectively, in their copy.

In the days and weeks following the tournament, some publications talked about

the Judge's controversial decision. One of the major telegraph publications of the day, The Telegraph Age, offered their unsolicited support for Martin. They did not contest the judges' decision but, like many telegraphers who were at the Garden that night, they were clearly aware of the perfect copy turned in by Horace Martin. This publication made certain that their readers also knew about it. The "official" winner went on to become a footnote in telegraph tournament history, but The Telegraph Age documented a more important fact by stating : "It is safe to say there is no better telegraph operator in America than Mr. Martin."

Since Martin had the reputation of being one the best senders in the press service, you might wonder why he did not enter the championship class competition as a sender. A reason that should not surprise you is that, by 1898, Martin was personally suffering from telegrapher's paralysis. After years of sending nearly 20,000 words of press copy per shift, he felt that he was losing his grip.

In the months following the Grand National, Martin began to go through a transitional period in his life. He was now a 16-year veteran telegrapher who had not yet reached his 25th birthday, but the "paralysis" threatened his ability to support his growing family at the pay level of a star telegrapher. In the following year he would start "periodic experimentation" with various ideas to transmit Morse other than with a manual telegraph key and would begin to seek employment opportunities that would help him develop these ideas.

Horace Martin's efforts would ultimately evolve into an inexpensive solution that would help telegraphers afflicted with the disability and would change his career from being a telegrapher to being an inventor and manufacturer.....

Footnotes:

1. Record slip: a recording of the bipolar current pulses, representing Morse characters, received through long sea cables. The pulses were sometimes erratic in amplitude and duration.
2. Copper plate Morse: an elegant style of handwriting typical of telegraphers.