

# How a tower operation myth played out on a cold November night

by Wendell Greer

One aspect that caught my attention when I first entered an interlocking tower was the set of large tools located on a placard at one side of the tower. I don't remember all of the tools that were there, but I do remember a large spike maul, a lining bar, and a large track wrench, which would fit the rail bolts. All the tools were painted red and mounted on a red board. The spike maul especially caught my eye. It was something like a sledge hammer, but the metal steel head was about a foot across and the ends were only about 1½

inches in diameter. These tools did not overly concern me because all of the towers had them, and they looked unused; the red paint still intact on the striking surface. I did inquire about them during my "posting" process. Workers assured me that they were there only for an emergency and further, no operator (to their knowledge) had ever needed to use them.

The skies were overcast but it was otherwise a mild November day when I reported for duty as the second-trick operator (3 p.m. to 11 p.m.) at VR Tower at



# Spiking over the switch

Hoover, Ind. (population 39 if the kids were all home). It was not long before the tower started to cool off, and I went down to put coal in the little pot belly stove on the first floor.

By 6 p.m., the temperature had fallen rapidly, which was not unusual for the time of year. But, the entire fall that year had been mild. By 7:30 p.m., the temperature had dropped from about 55 degrees in the afternoon to below freezing, around 26 degrees.

VR Tower was 8 miles northwest of Peru, Ind., and was an at-grade crossing

and interchange between the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Chesapeake & Ohio. The Pennsy was just a branch line at that point, but the C&O was a first-class operation running lots of trains on a single main, all train-order controlled (Form 19). West-bound trains leaving CW Tower (West Peru) were forced to climb a rather severe gradient from the Wabash River basin. As a result, the C&O routinely doubleheaded K-3 Mikes from CW Tower past VR Tower to Twelve Mile, Ind. The running was relatively flat from Twelve Mile to GF Siding

near Chicago so the extra K-3 would be cut off at Twelve Mile and issued orders to return to CW Tower. This activity often resulted in meets at VR Tower.

The first section of train No. 97 was scheduled out of Peru around 7 p.m.; it was the "Fruit Special," handling perishables for the Chicago Produce Terminal, Fruit Auction, and the Wood Street Potato Terminal, and was usually lightly loaded. That train could easily handle the grade out of Peru and still go by VR Tower at 40 mph. The second section of No. 97, how-

**An eastbound C&O train crosses the Pennsy diamond at Hoover, Ind., July 4, 1952.** W.A. Swartz, M.D. McCarter Photograph Collections



## IN MY OWN WORDS

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ever, was often a coal drag with double-headed power. Such was the case this night. After second No. 97 passed, the light engine returned to VR Tower, entering the west end of the siding at Hoover at a manual switch. VR Tower controlled the east end of the siding via a pipeline and a strong arm lever in the tower.

The light engine entered the siding at the west end and slowly drifted down to the tower, waiting for clearance after the third section of No. 97 passed. When the dispatcher finished issuing the meet orders and third No. 97 had passed, I started to align the interlocking machinery to bring out the light engine. Then the trouble started. To change the track alignment using the strong-arm system required two levers. One lever moved a locking mechanism near the switch points, controlled by the pipeline. A second lever actually moved the switch points. Once the points have been moved, the locking lever would again be returned to a normal position. This action would then lock the points into the new position. I could release the lock lever and (with some strong arm power) move the points over but the locking lever could not be returned to the locking position. What do I do?

I alerted the C&O dispatcher to my predicament. After musing awhile, he said, "Do you have a spike maul, spikes, and a lining bar?"

I said, "Well ... yes," fearing what he would say next.

After he alluded to how the switch points could be spiked in the reverse position, in order to allow the engine to pass, I was silent. I finally said, "You got to be kidding."

He knew he had me and finally started chuckling and said, "I know what you mean, I couldn't hit a spike with one of those mauls either."

VR Tower had telephones to the other railroad installations but did not have an outside line. Therefore, the dispatcher agreed to call the signal maintainer (a Pennsy employee). He wasn't too thrilled to be called out on such a miserable night, but a couple of hours later, he arrived, and we managed to get the switch points locked into place with me pulling on the lock lever in the tower and with him prying on the locking mechanism near the points. It was a long night, to be sure. I am happy to say that I didn't need to take down those red-colored tools!

What really happened that night was due to the mild fall. The pipelines had never been adjusted to allow for contraction in lower temperatures during the winter weather. The sudden temperature change was too much for the pipeline, and it became hopelessly out of adjustment. Tower life could be interesting.