

The Western Union

" I worked for the Western Union before and after the Army. Junior Fiebelkorn went with me the first time I joined the Western Union. We saw an ad in Watertown where they advertised for help, and we both signed up. Hank Novey and Duane Hjelmung were working there; I thought we'd work with them, but we never did see them. I had to get a release to leave the farm; we were frozen to our current jobs because of the war. If you worked in the defense plant you had to stay there, you couldn't go anywhere else. That was the winter of 1943. "

"The Western Union sent a wire to Chicago and a day later we were on the train. We were only 17. Ma and Dad were not too happy. We went to Yorkville, Ohio. We stayed in hotels and ate in restaurants. At the end of the week the foreman picked up the bill- he would always look it over to see what we ate and drank. Junior would always have chocolate milk. The foreman started to call him the 'Chocolate Milk kid'. Junior had a bad stuttering problem. He could only say a few words without stuttering. He said, 'He can't call me that' and wanted to quit. The Western Union had a hard time keeping help, they wanted him to stick around. That foreman wasn't so bad. He never minded if we had a steak, but he didn't like it if we covered it with steak sauce or catsup!"

"When I was in the Western Union, I had a roommate named Pete King. We worked in Illinois, Ohio and Indiana. Pete liked to go to the backrooms of some of those beer joints; they always had a card game going. Sometimes he'd come home and say "Too many house men". House men were card sharks and they would play against unsuspecting newcomers. Sometimes they would let you win, just so you'd come back to lose more money. One night Pete came home, excited that he won some money. I said 'You know, this is the first time I can remember that you ever won'. That made him really mad. Later on, he bid for a job on the cable crew in Chicago and that was the last time I saw him."

"I remember working in Chester, Illinois. After the war they played the song *Good Night Irene* over and over and it nearly drove me nuts! I was friends with a guy named Geraldine Buck; we called him by his last name. His folks lived in Chester, Iowa. We roomed together for awhile when we worked for the Western Union. He relieved a guy in Anderson, Indiana, and that's when he met Rosie. They got married, and he brought her back. They got a little apartment for 3 dollars a day and they'd have me over for supper on Saturday nights."



I had to have this picture for the Western Union because I was bonded.

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"The Western Union covered a lot of territory- the Western Union Lake division covered 13 states and the Milwaukee covered 13 states, but they were not the same. I worked out east for awhile- the Nickel Plate railroad went from Chicago to Buffalo NY. At one time, the Western Union had all communications for the railroad, which was Morse code. The railroad started to get block telephones four-pair that went from coast to coast. They had too many wires on the Nickel Plate so Western Union took them down. I was the foreman that ran one of the crews that took down 26 lines from Chicago to Buffalo NY. They had about 6 crews, one started in Chicago; the next crew would start about 20 miles out, then they would go around them when they caught up. We ended up in Erie, Pennsylvania, then Silver Creek, New York."

"Around 1948 there was a huge ice storm down south and I was told to drive the truck to Jackson, Mississippi. I remember going through Murphysborough in the southern part of Illinois; they had oil wells right in their back yard. I drove with Archie Wogen, he was a ground man and his wife was head cook. After we cleaned up in Jackson, we had to go to Paris, Texas. I was with the foreman, driving the company truck, and the roads were very icy. He said 'Drop me off in front of the hotel and you go find a place to park.' A short ways away was a gas station; I had to jump a curb to park, and it was so icy I hit a power pole, and the sparks flew up. The authorities had to come. The next day the foreman walked by as I was repairing wires and he said the truck was dented a little. 'You will probably get 90 days furlough and I will probably get 60 days' he said. I said 'I don't care if I get 1 day - I won't be back'. Everyone else took a train home- but I was driving from Peoria, Illinois and I got a message to report to Chicago. I thought I was going to get canned- but that is when they promoted me to foreman!"

"The Western Union was pretty similar to the railroad, we worked setting up lines, too, but we also did some rebuilding.

I was in Chillicothe, Ohio and had just distributed a whole bunch of poles. I was foreman on a work train, then they had a forced reduction and sent me back to the crew I originally started with as assistant foreman. They were planning a big rebuild for the Baltimore/Ohio RR, I had the work train for a few days, we would drive real slow and whenever a pole needed to be replaced we would throw it off as close to the pole as possible. I guess after the forced reduction some other crew finished up. I ended going back to the old guy I started with, Curley Winkle. Then he retired and I got his job. I think that was probably planned ahead of time. But they went on strike shortly after that. I waited for 6 weeks, then put in my application for the railroad. During that time I helped my brother-in-law Joe with his farm. That was 1952. "