



## ***Train Horn Sounding: “Q” isn’t for “Quiet”***

Okay, so I know this is going to be a real giveaway about my age, but a recent article in the Orange County Register entitled *Sound Practice, or Just Noise?* by Jim Radcliffe and Ellyn Pak brought to mind a childhood memory. The article addressed the issue of the Federal Railroad Administration (“FRA”) 2005 Train Horn Rule which mandates the sounding of train horns as trains approach street crossings.

The law, which already existed in California, mandates that train drivers **shall** sound their horn – two long blasts, one short and one long – whenever a train is one quarter-mile from any street crossing they traverse. This sequence of horn blasts: long, long, short, long, or “— — • —” is Morse code for the letter “Q.” Ironically, in this case, “Q” isn’t for “Quiet”, however. Wyle Laboratories Report WCR 73-5 indicates a sound level of 105 dB(A) at 100 feet for a train horn sounding – louder than a chainsaw or pneumatic drill!

The only exception to the compulsory horn sounding occurs if the area surrounding a street crossing has been designated a “Quiet Zone.” There the engineer sounds the horn only in an emergency. Quiet Zone status can be achieved only after the implementation of special safeguards to prevent pedestrians or vehicles from straying onto the tracks during a train pass, so that the risk of injury is at most only equal to that which exists with the horn sounding. The article went on to mention one such safeguard known as “quadrant crossing gates.” These gates completely seal off the traffic from the level crossing, foiling those who’d prefer to walk or drive around the commonly used open-ended barriers to play chicken with the trains.

It was the mention of these quadrant gates that led me down memory lane. As a child in England, riding my bicycle to school every morning, I had to negotiate a level crossing on one of the busy city streets. If a train was coming, a short bell alarm (certainly nowhere near 105 dB(A)) sounded from an elevated, manned “signal box” beside the tracks, red warning lights flashed, and two long gates (one at each side of the street) swung out automatically, blocking off traffic and sidewalks completely in both directions.

For me, the only alternative to waiting for the train to pass and the gates to reopen was to carry my bike up and over the old wooden footbridge that spanned the railway lines. But here’s the very telling part: sometimes as I was crossing the central span of the bridge, the train would pass underneath, and it was fun to run through the clouds of white steam billowing up through the wooden planks!

That was back in the early 1960’s. I lived in a working class area of England (read: not exactly wealthy or prosperous), a northern port with a population of only 300,000. Even when we still had comparatively slow-moving steam trains in jolly olde England, we still had the sense to completely block traffic and pedestrians at the railroad crossings. If waiting for 5 minutes for the gates to open made us late for work or school one day, we simply allowed extra time the next. No 105 dB(A) horn sound was ever needed, just a short bell and flashing lights indicated that the gates were about to close. Later that decade, the footbridge, gates, bell and flashing lights I fondly remember were replaced by a vehicular overpass.

So what's my point? I'm shocked that, all these years later and in one of the richest economies in the world, some Orange County city officials (according to the Register article) say they can't afford to install the safeguards that would qualify their cities as Quiet Zones. And since cities are unable or unwilling to implement these measures, the federal train horn sounding law has effectively mandated that their residents be subjected to noise levels that unquestionably have a deleterious impact upon the quality of life in those cities.

The newspaper article stated that 64 train passes occur every day on the rail line between Orange and Irvine. That means residents of older homes without sound rated windows, located within 100 feet of the railroad, are subjected to *interior* noise levels over 90 dB(A) 64 times a day! It's hardly surprising that they're gathering petitions and demanding that something be done.

The FRA's argument is, of course, that the horn is required for safety considerations that outweigh the residents' right to quiet enjoyment of their property. Pragmatically, however, we understand that it's not only about safety, it's about justification in the event of a wrongful death lawsuit or similar claim: "We gave them a 105 dB warning that we were coming!" is hard to argue with.

It's tough to justify using "Q", however. In Morse code, three dashes and one dot is the longest combination for any letter of the alphabet. If the FRA insists on sounding the horn, let's make it shorter and easier on the ears. Send one long blast, "—". In Morse code, that's the letter "T". "T" is for "Train."

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