

Don't have a nice trip!

Jon E. Schmidt, Nicasio Northern Railway

Operating on a model railroad can be an intense experience. I know that when I'm working a train, I tend to focus on that train and the railroad and not be aware of my surroundings. It's especially true when I'm switching or otherwise working a problem related to train movement.

Unfortunately, my feet sometimes need more attention than what I'm giving them at the moment. Several times, on several different layouts, I've tripped (thankfully never fallen) over some irregularity in the floor. This issue is critical on my Nicasio Northern, as the layout is approached by a half staircase up onto the layout level. That staircase leads to an aisle which has the peninsula town of Bayside on one side, and the town of Wittils on the other. Each of these towns offers an intense switching experience.

I could just see a crewman working the town and not realize that they are on the brink of the staircase. How to fix this? A gate? Something else?

Then I realized that the railroads had already solved this problem: a tell-tale!

Per [Wikipedia](#): "A **tell-tale**, also known as a **bridge warning**, is a series of ropes suspended over railway tracks to give warning to the driver that the train is approaching a low-clearance obstacle, such as a tunnel or a bridge. In the US, a standard tell-tale design had ropes on 7.5 cm (3.0 in) centers for a width of 2.5 m (8 ft 2 in) over the track, the bottom of the ropes 15 cm (5.9 in) lower than the height of the obstruction, and placed at least 30 m (98 ft) before the obstruction."

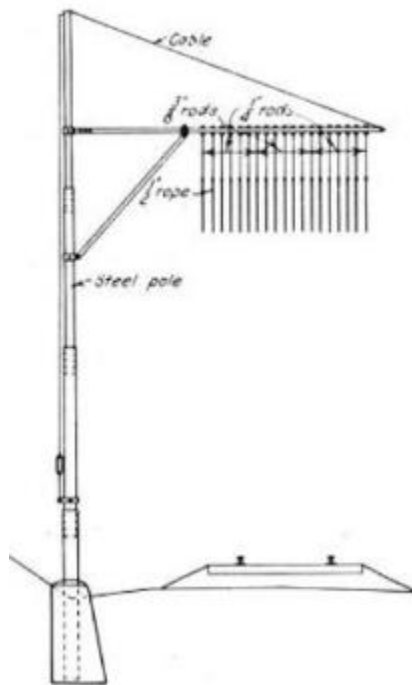


Figure 1: From Maintenance of Way Cyclopedia, 1921.

Wikipedia refers to “the driver” but I believe that the original intent was to warn crew who may be riding on the tops of cars that there was a low clearance approaching. A crewman would then take quick action to avoid the obstruction when he was brushed by the ropes.

Now obviously I didn’t need to construct something as elaborate as the prototype drawing in Figure 1. All I needed was something to “get in your face” that couldn’t be ignored as a warning. A simple tell-tale would be perfect.



Figure 2: My tell-tale.



Figure 3: Tell-tale and surroundings.

I constructed the tell-tale shown in Figure 2. Very simple, just a board with several dangling strings. The board is set rather high up, such that it doesn’t itself become a hazard. The strings trailing from the board are moderately heavy, such that they will be felt and cannot be ignored. I set the length of the strings so that they come down to my shoulders. You of course can design it for your situation, just make sure that your crews will always be aware of it when they’re working.

Figure 3 shows the tell-tale in context. I placed it a couple of inches before the stair, and made it cover the full width of the aisle. Crews cannot avoid it. They have come to understand what it means and why it’s there.

Safety is of the first importance in the discharge of duty.