
Hugo's Railroad Torpedoes

A Railway Detonator (called a torpedo in North America) is a device used to make a loud sound as a warning signal train drivers. The detonator is the size of a large coin with two lead straps, one on each side.



Torpedo On Rail

The detonator is placed on the top of the rail and the straps are used to secure it. When the wheel of the train passes over, it explodes emitting a loud bang. It was invented in 1841

by English inventor Edward Alfred Cowper. Typical uses of detonators include:

- a warning, caution or stop signal in dense fog, when signals are difficult to see;
- a warning of a train stopped on the line ahead by an incident or accident — the train's personnel are usually responsible for placing the detonators;
- a warning of ongoing way works ahead; or,
- when a signaller or other railway employee needs to stop approaching trains in an emergency.

Wayne McKy, a member of the Hugo Section Gang in the early 1950s, stated that torpedoes were just another tool like a spike maul or shovel.

1. Hugo Neighborhood Association. January 21, 2004. *Orville Dingler's Hugo Memories: 1910 - 1920*. By Mike Walker. Hugo, OR.

2. <http://www.springerlink.com/content/nu87265716156781/BRS72> - Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen - Railroad Terminology, Slang, Definitions

Southern Pacific Railroad

Orville Dingler: 1910 “Seven-year old Orville Dingler, the son of Fred Dingler, the Hugo Section Foreman, got in trouble one time when he and three Potter children were traveling home from school on the tracks to Tunnel No. 9 when they met a flag man. He told them to get off the tracks and out of harm’s way of the men working there. His attitude made Orville mad, but he did what he was told. As the children continued walking home they found the flag man’s speeder that he had left with a box of torpedoes on it. To the other children’s dismay Orville grabbed about a dozen torpedoes and carried them away. A torpedo was a railroad warning device, a container with an explosive charge that could be attached to the tracks and would detonate when a train ran over it. Orville was still mad at the flag man and eventually he placed 10 torpedoes, one by one each about a foot apart from the others, on the tracks. All the kids were home at the tunnel when the train came through. His dad, Fred Dingler, came home that night and told Orville he wanted to talk to him. “*Where did you get the torpedoes?*” Orville responded, “*What torpedoes?*” But, he knew the game was up. His dad said, “*Cut it out; we both know what we are talking about.*” Orville “fessed -up” and said he did it because he was mad that the flag man got smart with him and the Potter kids, and told them they could not walk that way. Maybe he should not have done it, but he had.”¹

Contrary to popular belief, torpedoes are triggered by pressure, rather than impact. This makes them safe during transport, as they cannot detonate in a bag or storage container. Attempting to detonate them by striking with a hammer will not work.

Hugo Section Gang Tool

In the United States Upon hearing the noise of a torpedo exploding, the engineer would reduce speed to 20 mph or less; the train could not resume its original speed until it had traveled at least two miles beyond where it encountered the device. Traditionally, used in pairs to ensure that the sound registered with train crews. Torpedoes are essentially obsolete in the U.S. today, as soundproof construction of modern locomotive cabs renders the devices useless.



Railroad Torpedo

Quoting from the terminology book of the *Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen*.²

A torpedo is a device which is strapped to the top of a rail. When a train drives over the torpedo, it emits a very loud "bang" which can be heard over the noise of the engine, and signals the engineer to stop immediately. Torpedoes are generally placed by the flagman when protecting a train ahead. Torpedoes are about 2" x 2", red in color, about 3/4" high, and have two lead straps attached, which hold it to a rail. The torpedo has discs inside and are filled with detonating powder. The torpedo was invented about 1874.



Torpedo On Rail

More information Contact an officer of the *Hugo Neighborhood* on how you

can become involved in your community’s land use, and/or history projects.

Hugo Neighborhood Association & Historical Society's Mission

This information brochure is one of a series of documents published by the *Hugo Neighborhood*. We are a nonprofit charitable and educational association composed of a voluntary group of citizens interested in both the land use and history of the Hugo area, which is located in Josephine County, Oregon.

Land Use & History

Its land use mission is to promote the social welfare of the citizens of the area by working to educate, preserve, protect, and enhance the livability and economic viability of its farms, forests, and rural neighbors.

Its history mission is to educate, collect, preserve, interpret, and research its local history and to encourage public interest in the history of the Hugo area.

Send us your email address if you want to know what we are doing; email does not cost us money, just time and effort.

Hugo Neighborhood

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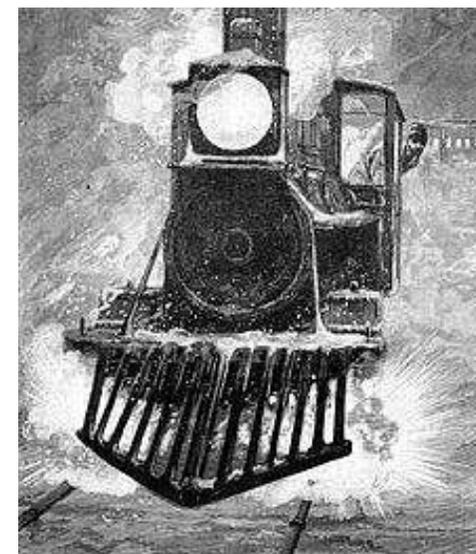
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**Wayne McKy
Demonstrating
Placement
Of A Torpedo**



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This illustration from an 1882 Leslie's Monthly portrays an engineer (fireman) finding a torpedo on the track.

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