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The Origin of 73

The question often comes up in amateur circles as to the origin of the oft used abbreviation 73. The following information was contained in a U. S. Navy Bulletin some years ago.

One version has its origin arising from a dinner arranged by the Order of Military Telegraphers on November 27, 1908, in honour of Andrew Carnegie on his 73rd birthday. However, investigation indicates that the term was used many years prior to this event.

In the "Telephone and Telegraph Age" for June 1, 1934 another explanation was given.

In 1859 there was a telegrapher's convention held, which among other things, resulted in a committee being formed to devise a code of numbers, to be used to represent common expressions. The object being to reduce working time on the line.

Originally the code was formed of figures one to ninety-two. Many of these have now become obsolescent. One which is still in use is 30 which indicates "the end". Number 73 of this group originally stood for "my compliments" and is now considered to be "best regards", which is another way of putting it.

Again, From The Windsor ARC via June 1980 High-Q

To add to the many reports on the origin of the telegraphic term "73", Louise Moreau, telegraph authority and historian has a few more.

Through her research, she uncovered the fact that it was devised as a telegraphers toast to Andrew Carnegie on his 73rd birthday (1908). But this proved to be erroneous as the term "73" was already in use by that date. The story that it was used as a secret sign by members of the Railroad Telegraph Union was similarly disproved because the term "73" was used before 1909, the beginning of the Railroad Telegraph Union. The theory that it was used in the early west, referring to the Winchester 73 rifle (man's best friend in those lawless days) was discounted when it was proven that Winchester did not even make a 73 type of gun when "73" was in regular use in telephonic circuits.

Mrs. Moreau found through authentic sources that even in 1853, the signal was in use, but at that time, it meant "My love to you". In the 1859 Western Union "92" code of phrases for operator use, "73" meant, "Accept my compliments" but by 1908, after various changes, it assumed the present day meaning of "Best Regards".

The enigma remains, the definitive origin of "73" is still in doubt!

Can you solve the mystery?