

FLAGGING CROSSINGS

INTRODUCTION

This document attempts to define the most effective and safe flagging procedures for use at meets or independent operation. None of the recommendations replace the host RR regulations. Some railroads with no experience in operating motorcars in groups, or any motorcars at all, may have practices that are less safe than ours. Ideally the Excursion Coordinator will have discussed the flagging procedures to the group prior to departure so that we can do the safest thing possible.

The safest thing is to have everyone knowledgeable about the details of flagging and to have everyone know what the other motorcars and flaggers are going to do in every situation. It is necessary to have only one set of hand signals that everyone understands. The few hand signals that we need are described at the end of this document.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this document is to have all motorcar operators observing the same uniform flagging procedures at grade crossings. It will ensure that the flagging is done in a professional manner and prevent incidents due to operators not understanding the flaggers instructions. The information is especially useful for the frequent passengers who usually provide the flagging service.

SELECTION OF FLAGGERS

Those persons designated to be flaggers should be agile adults who have some experience at it. Experienced teens are rare but should be OK. It will be necessary for flaggers to walk rapidly along the track in variable weather and ballast conditions. For that reason, an elderly or otherwise infirm person should not be selected as a first choice, regardless of experience. In addition, the designated flaggers get a lot more respect from the highway traffic if they are wearing a bright reflective vest similar to those used by professional flaggers.

TRAINED FLAGGERS

While a large group of trained and "certified" flaggers would be most ideal, we usually have a different set of motorcar operators and passengers at each meet. In some Areas there are as many as six clubs holding meets, and people from three other areas are likely to be in attendance. Our best effort therefore should be to have everyone trained to a common practice.

NUMBER OF FLAGGERS

Most country roads and other crossings need only one flagger if the traffic is very light. Other crossings that have a nearly constant stream of traffic, or that have poor visibility may need two. Four lane or very busy crossings will certainly need two or more. In that case the group will probably be crossing all together.

SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Four lane highways: This situation requires several flaggers if gates and lights are not available. It is unlikely that a RR will send us out by ourselves to negotiate this type of crossing without help.

The hostile driver: This one is common. For whatever reason some drivers think we are ruining their day. Several actions have been tried without success. Yelling loudly and pointing at them might work. In any case the flagger should attempt to stop the motorcars as a first priority.

The oblivious bicycle rider or jogger: Any road with a wide shoulder or sidewalk could provide a lane for a jogger or a cyclist with a headset, oblivious to everything else to bypass the cars stopped and possibly collide with a motorcar that they could not see due to cars blocking the view. Joggers especially are reluctant to break stride, and cyclists are reluctant to stop. In addition they are mostly out of sight to the motorcars because they are behind the row of stopped cars. Again the flagger should attempt to stop the motorcars.

Tracks paralleling a road: This situation is accompanied by having grade crossings on an intersecting road within 30 feet of the main road. The drivers on the parallel road are not looking directly at the flagger on the track and can fail to see anything until they have made their turn. The flagger must position himself such that the cars about to cross the tracks have as much warning as possible without causing the main road traffic to think they are being stopped.

The occasional busy two-lane crossing: Most crossings require only one flagger near the motorcars, but occasionally a busy crossing is encountered. It is up to the other people in the group to realize that the flagger needs help and to provide that help quickly and smoothly. An announcement over the radio would be helpful.

A UNIQUE FLAGGING PROCESS

One meet used a unique flagging process that accomplished four things at once. It defined which crossings were to be flagged, it protected the cars while crossing, it released the traffic at intervals, and it kept the entire tour group together.

The process started with identifying flagging groups of about 5 cars ahead of time, based on having a suitable flag person in the rear car of each group. Suitable means an agile and experienced person, preferably with a reflective vest. The lead car with the RR person aboard stopped at the first crossing needing protection. The flagger from the rear car of that group walked up and flagged the group across. Then the group proceeded onward with the exception of leaving the flagger car on the far side of the crossing. That car stayed put until the next group appeared. That means really appeared, not just as a headlight in the distance. That group, seeing the car sitting there knew that it was a crossing needing flagging. This is the thing that identifies which crossings are defined by the railroad as needing flagging.

The second group pulled up to the crossing and waited until their flagger walked up from the rear car of their group to protect the motorcars as they crossed.

GROUP SIZE

The ideal group size has been identified as three to five for most situations. Attempting to use a group of ten has been tried and found to be inefficient. It is just too far for the flaggers to walk along the ties or ballast. It is only workable at a meet with very few crossings needing protection.

A group size of two cars is so small that every other motorcar has to have a suitable flagger. That is very unlikely considering the typical age makeup of our attendees. All in all, the actual group size depends on the availability of suitable flaggers.

OVERLAPPING

With 3-5 car groups and a series of closely spaced crossings in a town, the second group flagger can sometimes walk onto the crossing before the first group flagger is finished. This is encouraged since it allows a smooth transfer of flaggers and a steady movement of the motorcars over the crossing. If a crossing requires only one flagger the first one there should immediately yield to the second flagger to appear. It is extremely important that a flagger not leave the crossing until the second flagger is in position with a flag displayed. If the first flagger leaves too soon the road traffic may think they can proceed.

UNPLANNED FLAGGING

Occasionally on a remote RR with few crossings no special flagging needs to be provided, and no groups or designated flaggers are pre-planned. However the need arises when a few of the front cars cross after slowing and looking, but then the crossing becomes busy and needs to be flagged. It is imperative that a person a few cars back recognize what is happening and to quickly come forward to provide the flag protection. The motorcar at the front of the stopped group can then pull across the intersection and proceed. The operator of the motorcar that supplied the flagger will pull across the crossing and stop leaving room for several more cars to cross at once since the traffic is safely stopped. All following cars must make sure that there is room for them on the other side before entering the crossing. This last statement is known as **The First Rule of Crossings**. As more cars arrive it will be necessary for additional flaggers to come from the back. How many cars are to be accommodated is decided by the distance the flaggers' car has pulled forward.

To avoid leaving someone stranded in the intersection, it is helpful for the flagger to judge how many can easily fit, and to signal the rest of the cars to stop.

In this case the flagger has not necessarily come from the last car. However if a flagger in a motorcar that is ten cars back notices a stoppage they should expect that their assistance is needed and immediately start walking forward.

Once several vehicles are stopped at a crossing they become a sort of safety barrier for us, if additional traffic can easily see them. For that reason it can be safer to hold the traffic for as long as the motorcars are crossing.

RELEASING THE CROSSING

In high traffic situations, a lot of traffic can pile up. It may be prudent to stop the last half of the motorcar group and let the hiway traffic go. This is where the concept of flagging in groups came from. Think about it! If there are 40 cars running 15 seconds apart, it takes 10 minutes for all of them to pass. The hiway traffic can become very agitated in that time and they may complain to the RR. We should not cause trouble for the RR. Typically in a high traffic situation the RR person may set flares, energize flashers, or have several flaggers of their own out. The RR practice should take precedence, of course.

When the flagger departs they should fold up the flag and carry it down and as concealed as possible, as they simply walk away. It has been said without proof that we should not motion to the traffic to proceed since they may misunderstand, have an accident, and blame us. That is probably good advice.

Sometimes the group is large and spread out requiring the fixed flagger to stop the motorcars, allowing the traffic to proceed. The flagger must leave the pavement and proceed to the rails, face the motorcars, and display the flag to them. A horizontal waving of the flag is acceptable, since that means STOP. However this should not be apparent or noticeable to the traffic, since one car might stop suddenly, causing a rear-ender.

FLAGGING IN GROUPS

This practice was developed because large groups of motorcars gathering at a crossing, then crossing together, and then stopping on the other side took a very long time. Flagging in small groups quickly became the usual practice. It was also found to be most efficient to bring the flagger from the rear car. When the flagger is from the front car they have to wait until all cars of their group have arrived. Then they flag the crossing while the group pulls across and stops again, hopefully leaving enough room for all cars to get across. If too long a distance is provided the flagger walks a greater distance. If too short a distance, the last car is left stranded in the crossing. Then the flagger walks up to the front car and the group departs. Note that the group has stopped twice, and the success depends on the ability of the front car of the group to pull up exactly far enough.

When the flagger comes from the rear, the ideal process goes like this: All cars pull up and stop closely together so that the flagger does not have far to walk up. The flagger stops the traffic and the motorcars cross, then accelerate back to speed. As the last motorcar crosses it stops at the far side while the flagger releases the crossing to either the traffic or the next flagger, and steps into the motorcar, which then departs. Note that the group of cars stops only once, not twice.

The Meet organizers are usually too busy with other tasks to organize the flagging groups. Therefore it is necessary for the attendees to do it among themselves. On the return trip the group size and flaggers may be different because the car order is reversed.

POSITIONING FLAGGERS

Flaggers should be able to position themselves in the best location without specific instruction from the EC. Curves, crests of hills, buildings blocking the view, and a lot of other things affect the positioning. It does no good for the flagger to stand four feet from the track with a flag out if the approaching traffic cannot see the flagger in time. Expect the traffic to be substantially exceeding the speed limit at any time, and expect that any driver could be impaired. Also consider that many short lines run infrequently and seldom on a weekend. Local traffic knows this and does not expect rail traffic.

STOPPING TRAFFIC

Flaggers should take their position(s) by walking along the road shoulder with the flag furled and hidden as much as possible. The lead motorcar operator is watching for the flagger to stop traffic. When the flagger arrives at the proper position they should pick a big gap in traffic and then display the flag. The proper position on the pavement is one third of the way into the lane until the first vehicle is stopped. This allows an escape with only a couple of steps in case a vehicle does not or cannot stop. Once the vehicles are stopped the motorcars start crossing, and the flagger moves farther onto the pavement so as to be seen by the second and later vehicles.

SIGNALLING THE MOTORCARS TO CROSS

The flagger must insure that all approaching traffic is stopped, or is clearly stopping, before allowing the motorcars to cross. The flagger must make sure there is room for the group on the other side of the crossing before signaling the motorcars to cross. The hand signal to the motorcar must be discrete so that the traffic does not mis-read the flaggers' instructions. A subtle hand signal for "go" should be used.

DISPLAYING THE FLAG

Holding the flag with both hands overhead so as to spread it out is recommended until the traffic is stopped. With only one flagger they have to be positioned so that they can see both ways and be seen by both lanes of traffic. Standing in front of the near lane cars while holding the flag out at right angles to the vehicles stopped in the far lane seems to work when there is only one flagger. If the flagger sees a vehicle creeping up or otherwise looking like they are impatient, a firm step toward them and a stare at the driver can get them stopped.

HOLDING THE CROSSING

At all times the flagger faces the traffic, with occasional glances to monitor the motorcars as they cross. Typically though, there is a strong urge to watch the motorcars instead. This is the most frequent breakdown of good practice, and can result in a vehicle sneaking around the flagger unnoticed and crossing in between the motorcars.

Meanwhile, the previous group minus one car proceeded at a modest pace until their flagger caught up, or until they came to the next crossing needing protection. They had to stay there until their flagger car caught up. This is the thing that keeps the entire tour together.

Typically there was no waiting, because the second flagger could arrive as the first flagger was climbing into their car. The second flagger could decide to release the crossing to the traffic, or to continue to hold it.

As a result, the groups could never be very far apart. In fact there is no need whatsoever for the groups to travel separately with a large space between.

GROUND-BASED FLAGGERS

The first ever NARCOA Convention in 1985 included flaggers from the local organization driving from one crossing to another to flag the cars across. It continued in future years as well. The service has been continued by one Affiliate. It allows the attendees to roll across roads without stopping, and concentrates the flagging duties into a small group of experienced flaggers. There is much to be said for this service but it is rare. A variation is the Railroad employee who appears at the significant crossings and provides the flagging. This appears to be much more valuable than simply leading us along the rails.

The troublesome aspect of this program is for the flaggers to know when the last motorcar has passed. Remember that the flaggers are facing the traffic, not the motorcars. One solution is to designate the last car to do two quick toots of their horn as they cross. Unfortunately, other motorcars do the same as a "thank you" to the flaggers, but resulting in some confusion. A clear statement at the Safety Meeting specifying that horns are not to be blown at crossings can prevent this.

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MOTORCAR DRIVER

Even though the Excursion Coordinator has sometimes provided multiple automobile-based flaggers at every crossing who follow along with the group, the motorcar operators should not think that they are protected. They are NOT! Having flaggers on the pavement with some cars stopped is a convenience, not protection. Nothing prevents a hostile driver from driving around the flagger and crossing in between the motorcars.

The operator must be vigilant, looking both ways, with one hand on the brake, and at a reduced speed while crossing. Also suggested is coasting across with the belt disconnected, or your hand or foot poised on the clutch pedal or handle. There might even be an emergency vehicle approaching and expecting to pass unhindered.

In addition, possibly due to a gap or excessive traffic, the flagger(s) may have released the traffic in between motorcars. For this reason the motorcar operator has to be prepared to stop prior to the crossing if the flagger indicates. Look for the flagger to stop the motorcars.