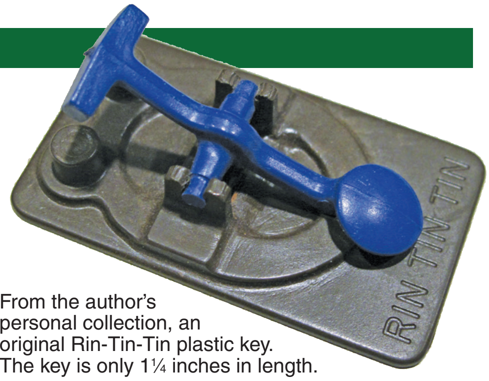
Toy Telegraph Keys

They were toys indeed, but they started many a child on the road to Amateur Radio.



From the author's personal collection, an original Rin-Tin-Tin plastic key. The key is only 1¼ inches in length.

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Click, click; flash, flash; buzz, buzz! Toy telegraph keys were educational, fun, and popular with kids for decades. Thanks to toy telegraph keys, kids mastered Morse code, learned about electricity, and assembled simple two-way communications systems. These skills prepared young people of that time for careers in electronics. Many obtained their Amateur Radio licenses.

Commercial telegraph key manufacturers, such as Signal Electric, and toy manufacturers, such as AC Gilbert of Erector Set fame, manufactured toy keys. Of course, these were not practice or training keys. True training keys are higher quality and more functional. However, the line between these devices is sometimes blurred.

Figure 2 — A Fleron Signaler Boy Scout key and its colorful box. This strap key has a buzzer and signal light. It also has a Morse code chart permanently molded into its base.

Marketing to Curious Kids

Toy keys were packaged in colorful boxes as complete "outfits" or "sets" that let young operators "learn the Morse code" and "send secret messages to their friends." These sets were marketed as two-way communications systems and included two telegraph keys with terminals for external connections; the wire to interconnect them; a mode switch; batteries, and transducers to change the electricity into light, clicks, or buzzes. Many sets included nicely illustrated instructional booklets and Morse code charts (see Figure 1).

Any telegraph key is a single pole, single throw (SPST) switch designed for multiple make-and-break operations. So what exactly is a toy key? A toy key performs the same function, but not quite as well as a commercial key. Most toy keys use a keying lever made from a thin strip of metal that flexes up and down. This type of key is called a *strap key*. To send CW, the operator pushes the lever up and down while holding a knob at the end of the strap. There are no pivot mounts or bearings to hold the lever in a fixed position, so the lever tends to wobble both vertically and horizontally while sending. It's a difficult way to send CW. An example of a popular strap key is the Fleron Signaler Boy Scout Practice Telegraph Key (Figure 2). The Codemaster sold individually for $1.95 in the 1950s and '60s. This key was used by many Scouts to pass the Morse code requirement to become a First Class Scout.

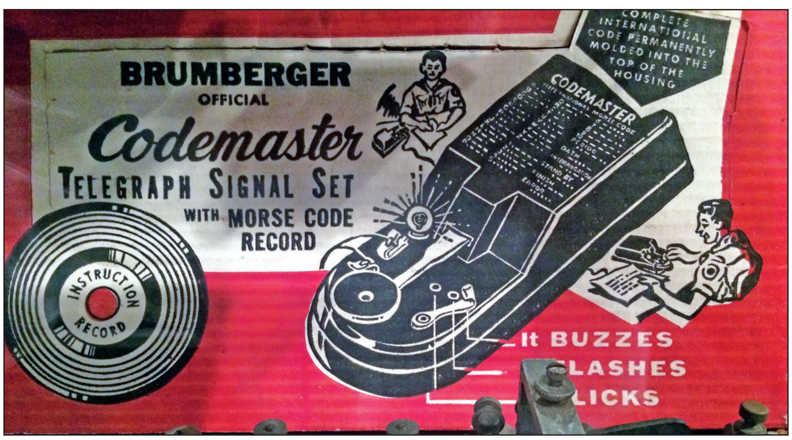

Figure 1 — A Brumberger Official Codemaster Telegraph Signal Set contained two keys and a Morse code record.

Buzz Code

Toy keys usually buzzed when the lever was pushed. There were no electronic code

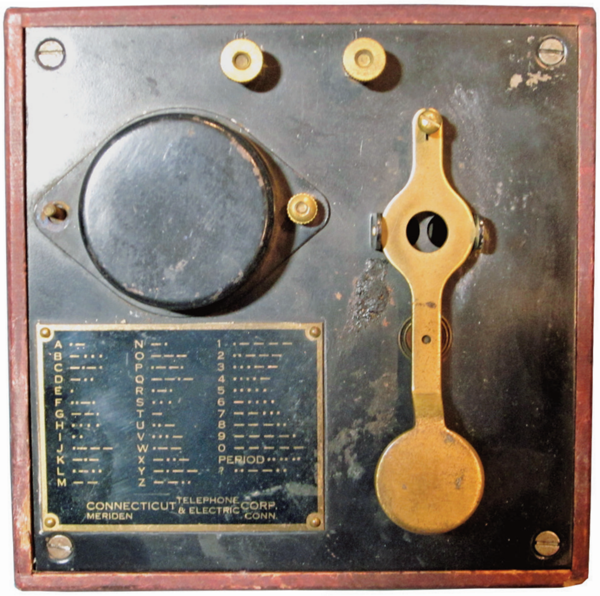

Figure 3 — From the author's personal collection: (above) one of a set of two Connecticut Telephone and Electric Company Practice keys and buzzers, and (at right) packaging for another Connecticut Telephone and Electric product.

Figure 4 — An Elkay Manufacturing Company Tri-Signal Telegraph Set. This Tri-Signal was part of a set of two keys. Note the battery case with the Morse code chart. It has steel strap key and a switch to determine the operating "mode."

practice oscillators in these inexpensive products, so a raspy electromagnetic buzzer produced the audible tone. The buzzers were hard on the ears and a fatiguing way to copy CW. Figure 3 shows a Connecticut Telephone and Electric Company Practice Key and Buzzer that was made between the 1930s and the 1950s. The buzzer is in the upper left. This toy key practice set had a metal Morse code chart riveted to the upper copper plate, a wide brass strap key, and was mounted on a wooden box that held the batteries. It was sold as a set of two.

Along with buzzers, many toy keys had small incandescent lamps that blinked when the key was tapped. These keys had switches to determine whether they buzzed, lit up, or did both. The signal lights were more acceptable options for parents who did not care to hear buzzers at all hours. The Elkay Manufacturing Company Tri-Signal Set, shown in Figure 4, has such a signal light. It was sold as a set of two keys and accessories. This device is unusual because the batteries were stored on top of the key. According to its instruction manual, it "is the latest and most improved signaling device. It is simple enough for a child and complete enough for a telegrapher."

Morse code booklets and instructions were generally included with these sets and many toy keys had Morse code charts permanently affixed on top of the key. The rationale was that a paper booklet could be lost, but if the code chart was attached to the key, it would always be available. Some of these telegraphy sets also came with vinyl records that would teach prospective telegraphers the code.

"Cereal" Code

One of my favorite toy keys is the Rin-Tin-Tin key that was based on the popular TV show of the 1950s. This tiny plastic toy key was found inside of specially marked boxes of Nabisco Shredded Wheat Cereal. Along with the blue one pictured near the beginning of this article, they also came in green, yellow, and white. This key is not operational since it has no electrical conductors. To make it work, you were supposed to place aluminum foil on the end contacts. It also came with its own unique code system!

In an era of text messaging, smartphones, and Facebook, toy telegraphs seem rather old-fashioned. But during the 60 or so years when they were popular, they fostered a lifelong interest in communications for many of us.