OLLIE ATKINS

This new combination air horn's imitation of a steam whistle sounds even better than the whistle, says Safety Director Charles Kimball.

They Teach Trains to Whistle

By HUGH MORROW

WHEN the railroads scrapped 11,000 steam locomotives in favor of Diesels during the past seven years, they necessarily silenced a sound long identified with the growth and bustle of America—the low, plaintive music of the steam whistle piercing the night. The new streamlined Diesels, not having any means of generating whistle steam, came equipped with air horns. They made themselves heard, all right—and so did the people who had to listen to them.

Of the thousands who complained, none summed up the case against the Diesel air horn more vehemently than Miss Beatrice E. Streb, of Canton, Ohio. In an epic series of angry letters to the Association of American Railroads, Miss Streb described the newfangled horns as "unreasonable, intolerable, unbearable . . . nerve-shattering, sleep- and health-robbing . . . harsh, powerful, terrifying." In forty-four years of living within earshot of the tracks, she said, she never had been disturbed by a steam whistle, whereas in two years of Diesel horns she never had an uninterrupted night's sleep and on some nights got no sleep at all.

Fortunately, modern science, whose air-horn invention worked people up to a high pitch, has now found means of quieting both the locomotives and the listening public. Recent Canadian experiments and an American manufacturer's application of them have produced a new type of air horn, or "air chimes," consisting of a group of three or five horns. These, when blown, sound like the old steam whistle and—heresy of heresies to railroaders—even better. They have already been put into use on engines of the Lehigh Valley, Baltimore and Ohio, and Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac railroads, and a major Western line is now experimenting with them. The biggest change-over so far is being made on the 8000-mile Southern Railway System.

Charles M. Kimball, safety director of the Southern, discovered that aside from merely annoying people the Diesel horns were causing crossing accidents. Motorists mistook their toots for truck, bus and even watercraft horns. So Kimball and a crew of technicians went to the railroad yards at Alexandria, Virginia, just outside Washington, to experiment with air chimes in seven different tones. As an authority on musical whistles from tweets to oompahs, they took along Lieut. Charles Benter, former director of the United States Navy Band.

For three days Kimball and his crew blew various combinations of air horns and Benter listened to them at distances of 100 feet to a mile. Officially, 204 tests were made, "but we blew a few extra just for the hell of it," Kimball said. The noise alarmed residents of Alexandria, and the police chief investigated in person; but when Kimball explained his purpose, the chief told him to go right on whistling. Finally, Lieutenant Benter, Kimball and crew picked a combination of five horns for the Southern's passenger trains and fast freights, and a three-horn battery for switch engines and local freights. Both sound like the steam whistle, but are more musical and carry farther.

Now Kimball is worrying about the bells on Diesels. The steam locomotives which the Southern has scrapped had such beautiful bells that 160 of them have been given to churches in the South. Diesel bells, inside the engine, sound as unmusical as the old Diesel horns. To put bells back on top of the engine would break the streamlining, so Kimball is tinkering with a slow-striking hammer on metal bars, amplified to sound like old-fashioned locomotive bells. After that, perhaps, somebody will figure out a way to make a Diesel engine go choo-choo.