

MP-54: MOTORIZED PASSENGER-54 FLEET

RAIL CLASSICS pays respects to the MU cars which served Long Island for over sixty years.

By Michael Boland

Last version of the MP-54, seen at Holban Yard, Jamaica, about 1931, is the MP-54a1 seen leading a string of cars. Gene Collara collection.



Their return to the Long Island Railroad was as low-key as their disappearance of eight years ago. The MP-54s were back on the property and their appearance was startling. No longer would they operate on their own power as their traction motors had been silenced a long time ago. But while they lacked their own power, their comeback was dramatic. The Long Island MP-54s returned in glossy tuscan red, black roof and gold Pennsy-style lettering, a sight not seen on the commuter road in twenty-five years.

Several of the railroad's vintage MUs that were saved from the scrapper's torch revisited the Long Island in July and August 1976 as part of a Bicentennial celebration conducted by the railroad, its local chapter of the NRHS, and historical societies of Nassau and Suffolk Counties. With exhibits donated by all, two pairs of MP-54s visited communities in each county and played to good crowds.

For fans of the 54s, though, it was a nostalgic sight and a much-welcomed one, very different from the last time the electric MUs were on the property. At that time, their headlights were smashed, their windows were shattered and their paint was faded. Their green seats were dis-

mantled, their canvas shades were disheveled and their motors quiet. No more would they hum with power; their pulse of life gone forever. Coupled in front of a string of double-deckers sharing the same fate, two sixty-foot steel coaches sat unobtrusively in Yard "A." The two cars were the last of the Long Island Railroad's fleet of MP-54s and after they left the property, the end of an era had finally come, an era that began in 1908 and lasted for some six decades. Late in that sixth decade the MP-54s fell victims of that timeless nemesis: progress. Time finally caught up to the 800 venerable MU veterans that made up the backbone of the nation's number one commuter line. Replaced by modern Metropolitans, the MP-54s that once carried close to 90,000 passengers a day followed the road's steam engines, DD-1 electrics, Fairbanks-Morse C-Liners, and wooden rolling stock into oblivion.

Measuring sixty feet in length and thirteen feet in height, the MP-54 was the successor to the road's fleet of 134 MP-41s. Built at a cost of \$35,000 per motor car, the MP-54 followed the standard design of the Pennsylvania Railroad's suburban passenger cars with some minor modifications to allow room for the 20,-

000 pounds of electrical equipment that would be installed in each car. The original order was given to the American Car and Foundry Company in 1908, calling for 200 steel passenger motor cars, fifteen steel passenger-baggage combines, and seven steel baggage motor cars. The first cars came in a lot of twenty and arrived in time for the opening of Pennsylvania Station in 1910. The MP-54s made the inaugural run into the giant station before the Pennsy began their operation and by the end of 1910, 150 cars were in service.

The MP-54s differed radically from the smaller MP-41s and their appearance was as contrasting with the new Metropolitans (M-1s) as it was with the MP-41s back in 1910. The MP-54s were much larger than the diminutive 41s that made the first trip over electrified trackage in 1905. Designed by George Gibbs, chief electric traction engineer and a kingpin in the New York City electric railway scene, the 41s sat fifty-two with longitudinal seating. The new MP-54s had a capacity for seating seventy-two passengers and were painted tuscan red with gold Pennsy-style lettering. Car length was fifty-four feet over the corner post—hence the numerical designation — while MP stood for motorized passenger.



MP-54 Club car 1677 nicknamed Far Rockaway boasted lime green interior, swivel seats, and—on the road—an attendant. Sameroff photo.

For motive power, each motor car was equipped with two box-frame interpole Westinghouse number 308 motors. Rated at 215 horsepower each, they could accelerate at a speed of .75 miles per hour per second, a rate which was curiously slower than the MP-41s which had a 1.1 miles per hour per second rate with two 200 horsepower motors. Top speed for the 54s was sixty-five miles per hour which was twenty miles per hour faster than their predecessors.

Each car end had motorman's controls along with subway-style headlights and marker lights similar to those found on the 41s. An end door opened inward to close against the controls and equipment. Side doors of the cars slid back along the car wall allowing the platform to be raised for access to the steps while double sliding doors separated the vestibule from the coach interior. Due to differences in couplers and platform height, the MP-54s could not be mated with the 41s and wooden trailers in operation at that time.

Each MP-54 weighed 107,000 pounds. The body was made of steel and weighed 54,000 pounds. Trucks were of PRR design weighing 33,000 pounds. Each car possessed spring buffer plates, Westinghouse AML-type brakes and automatic air coup-

lers, and M.C.B. couplers. There were interior heating, lighting, and a green interior. Most famous, though, were the portholes at each end, a unique feature which over the years would symbolize the road's one-time owner, the Pennsy.

By 1912, there were close to 400 units on the line and additional lots of forty and fifty cars continued to arrive until 1930 when close to a thousand 54s were in operation. Earlier cars had a monitor roof but later cars had an arch roof with five vents placed on top of each roof. Also added to the fleet were trailer cars. Costing \$17,000 each, these cars all had an arch roof and were given the designation T-54. Some of these cars had seen earlier service on the Pennsy.

The MP-54's appearance was not altered until the mid-fifties. In an effort to undo the road's Pennsy look, the 54s had their bodies painted grey and roofs painted white. White condensed gothic lettering and red numbers in a white rectangle replaced the gold lettering that had been used on the cars since their operation began. Following the road's 1954 bankruptcy, the majority of the 54s underwent a major metamorphosis. Half of the road's fleet were completely rebuilt with 3-2 seating,

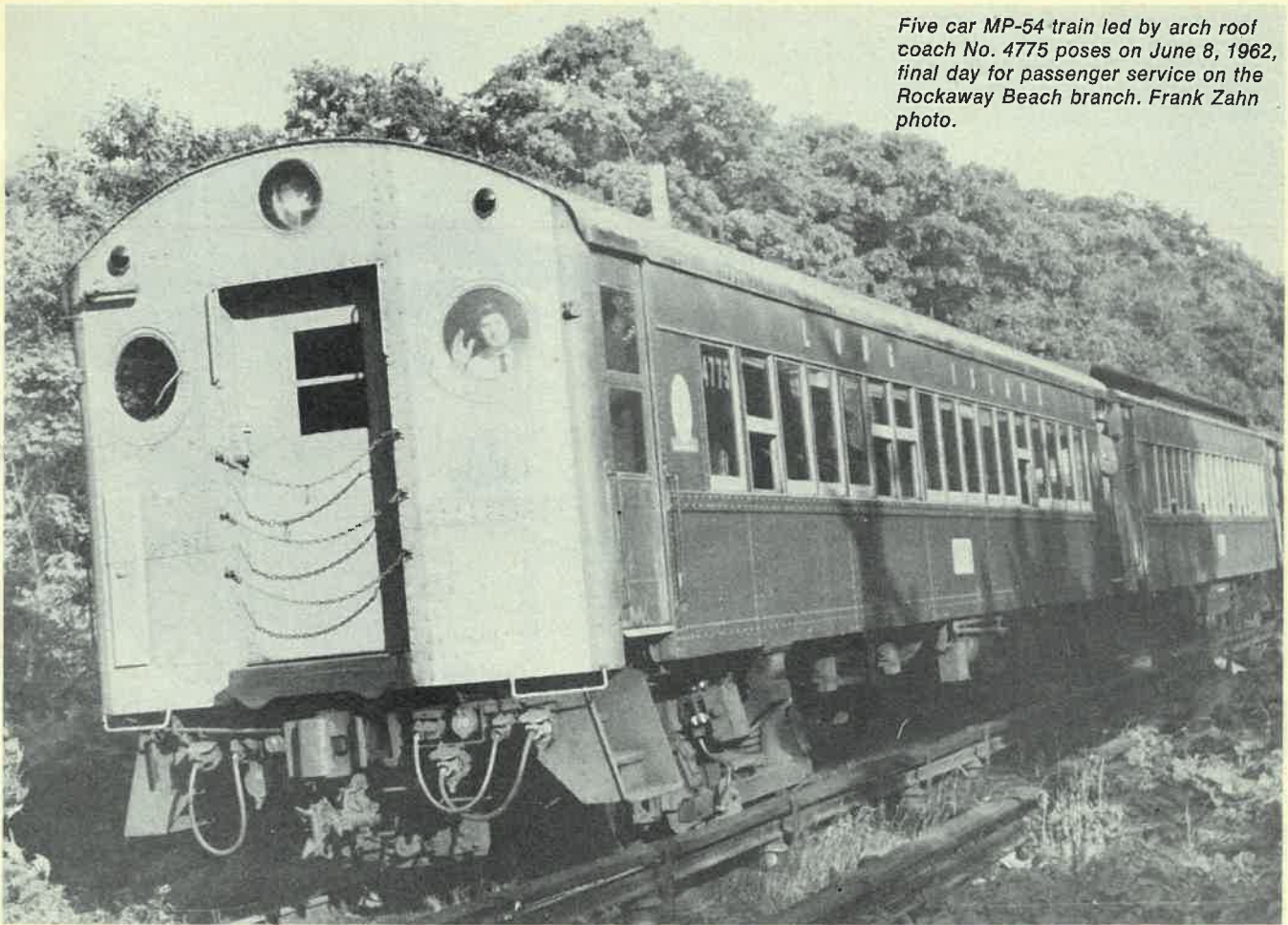
new lighting and heating were installed and another paint scheme was applied to each car. Ends were now painted bright orange for visibility purposes—the railroad still had a great many grade crossings—and the rest of the car was painted a dark, charcoal grey. Each rebuilt car was given a new number to signify its new lease on life. The rebuilding did not cure the MP-54s of their advancing age but it bought time for both the road and its aging fleet of cars.

During this time, a number of the newer arch roof coaches and older monitor roof cars were de-activated as head-end units and modified for use as motorized trailers. A simple matter of economics made the Long Island remove headlights, marker lights, batteries, and motorman's controls. Many of these cables power cars were the oldest MUs on the line but they shared a kinder fate than 200 other cars that were scrapped when the road took delivery of its Pullman-Standard-built MP-72s. A few more cars were junked when the road received its order of Zip cars (MP-75s) in 1963.

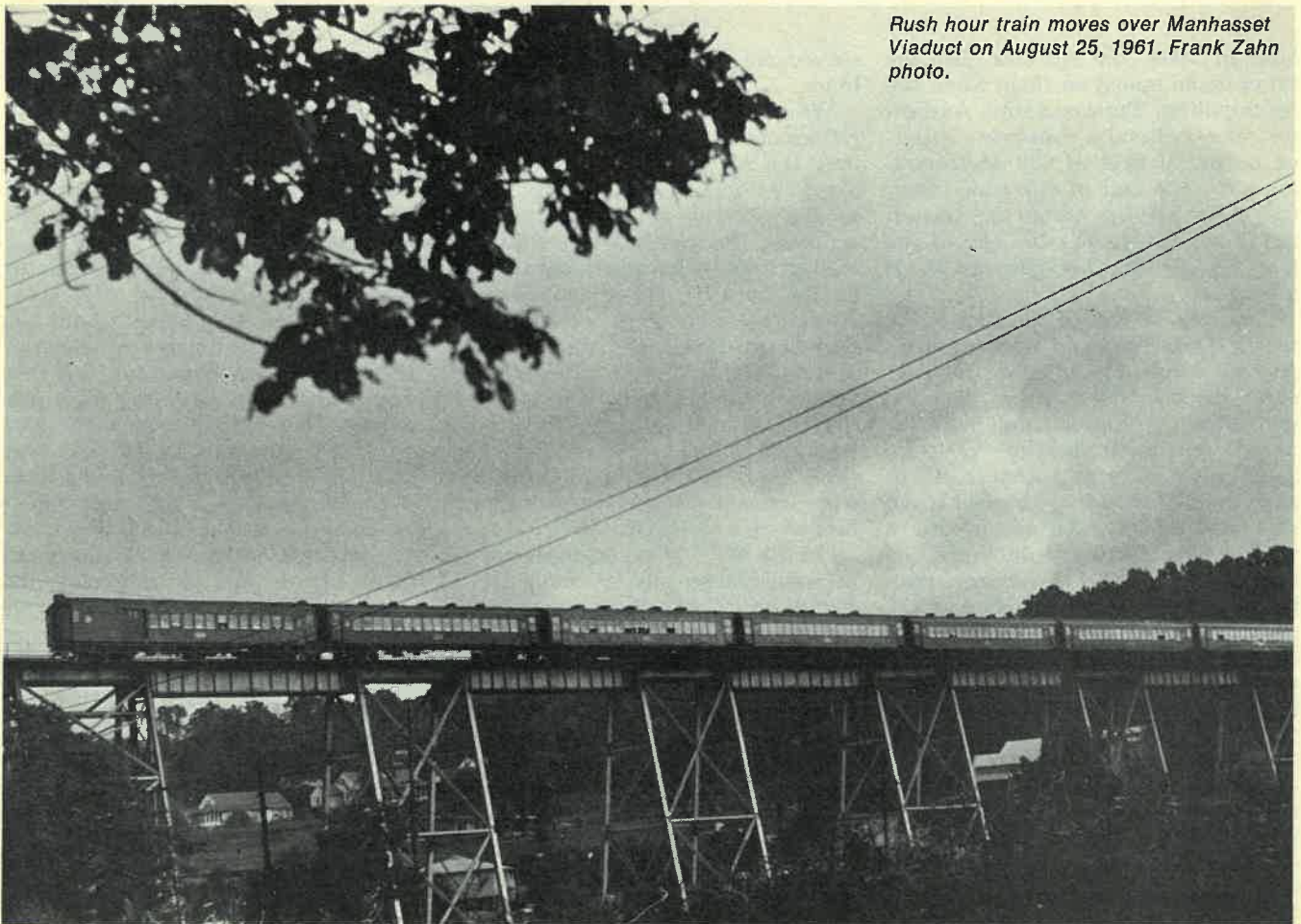
More time passed and with the fleet of 1000 MP-54s reduced to about 800 cars when the State of New York purchased the Long Is-

Thirteen new MP-54s leave the ACF Berwick plant in 1911. Frank Zahn collection.



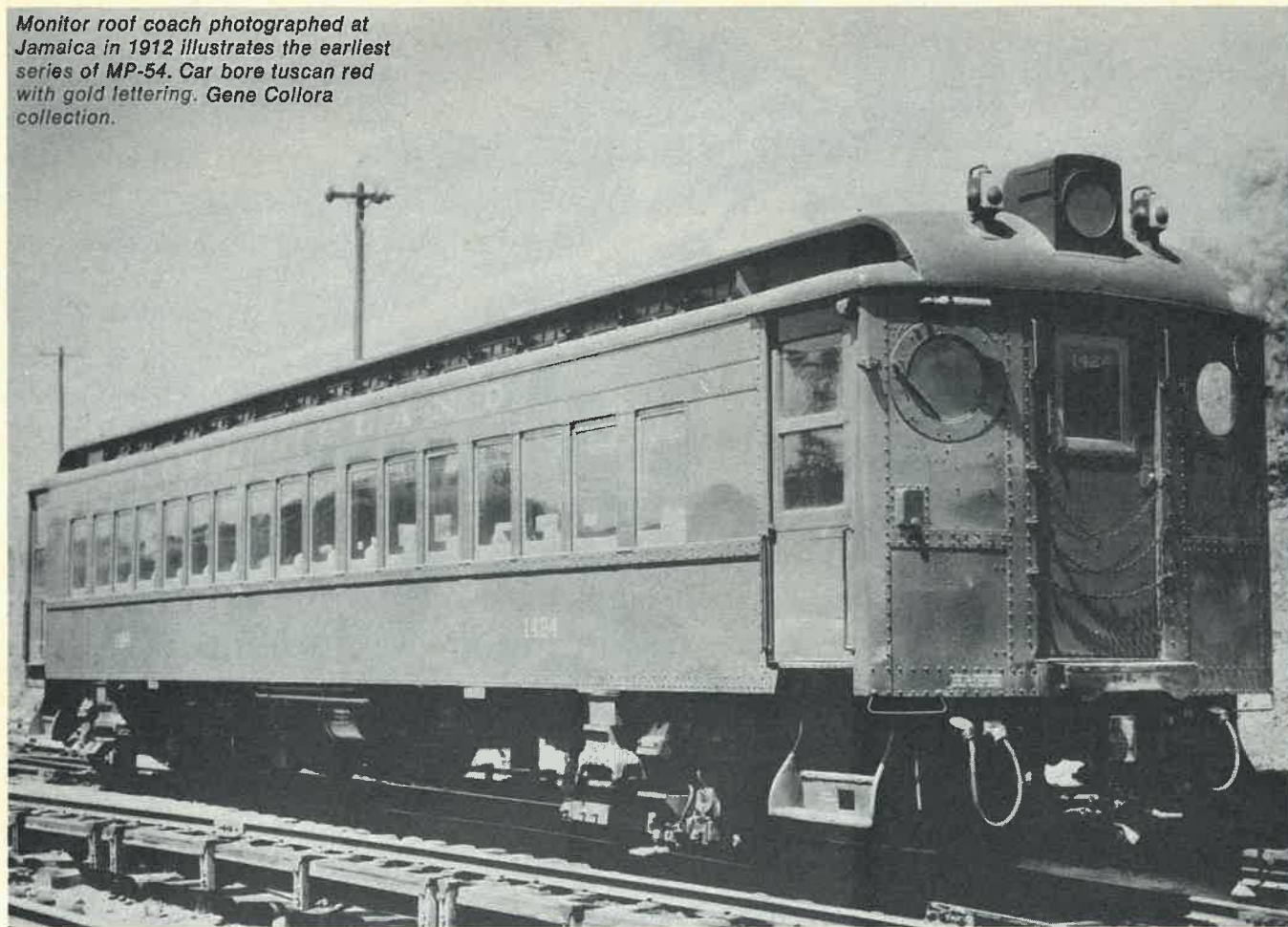


Five car MP-54 train led by arch roof coach No. 4775 poses on June 8, 1962, final day for passenger service on the Rockaway Beach branch. Frank Zahn photo.



Rush hour train moves over Manhasset Viaduct on August 25, 1961. Frank Zahn photo.

Monitor roof coach photographed at Jamaica in 1912 illustrates the earliest series of MP-54. Car bore tuscan red with gold lettering. Gene Collora collection.



land in 1968, the MP-54s had the lid of doom sealed on them when the Metropolitan Transportation Authority—the railroad's over-seeer—ordered its initial fleet of 620 Metropolitans. By the end of the same year, fifty-nine MP-54s would be phased out of service. It was the end of the line for all the MP-54s—or so it seemed.

After the arrival of the first M-1s, the first 54s scrapped were those in poorest shape. These were primarily older coaches that had survived the mid-fifties scrapping and had escaped the modernization program along with other cars that had not aged as well. Most of the 54s to go first were de-activated power cars as well as a few head-end units and the remaining 150 T-54s. Rather than be extensively repaired when it became economically unfeasible, the coaches were simply retired. For the 54s taken out of service, the final days were not pleasant ones. The Long Island had little room for them so the cars were placed on sidings where space permitted. A string of the older monitor roof 54s kept at the Belmont wye had their windows smashed by rock-throwing vandals who had no regard for their heritage while other cars were ransacked by

scavengers looking for salvageable brass.

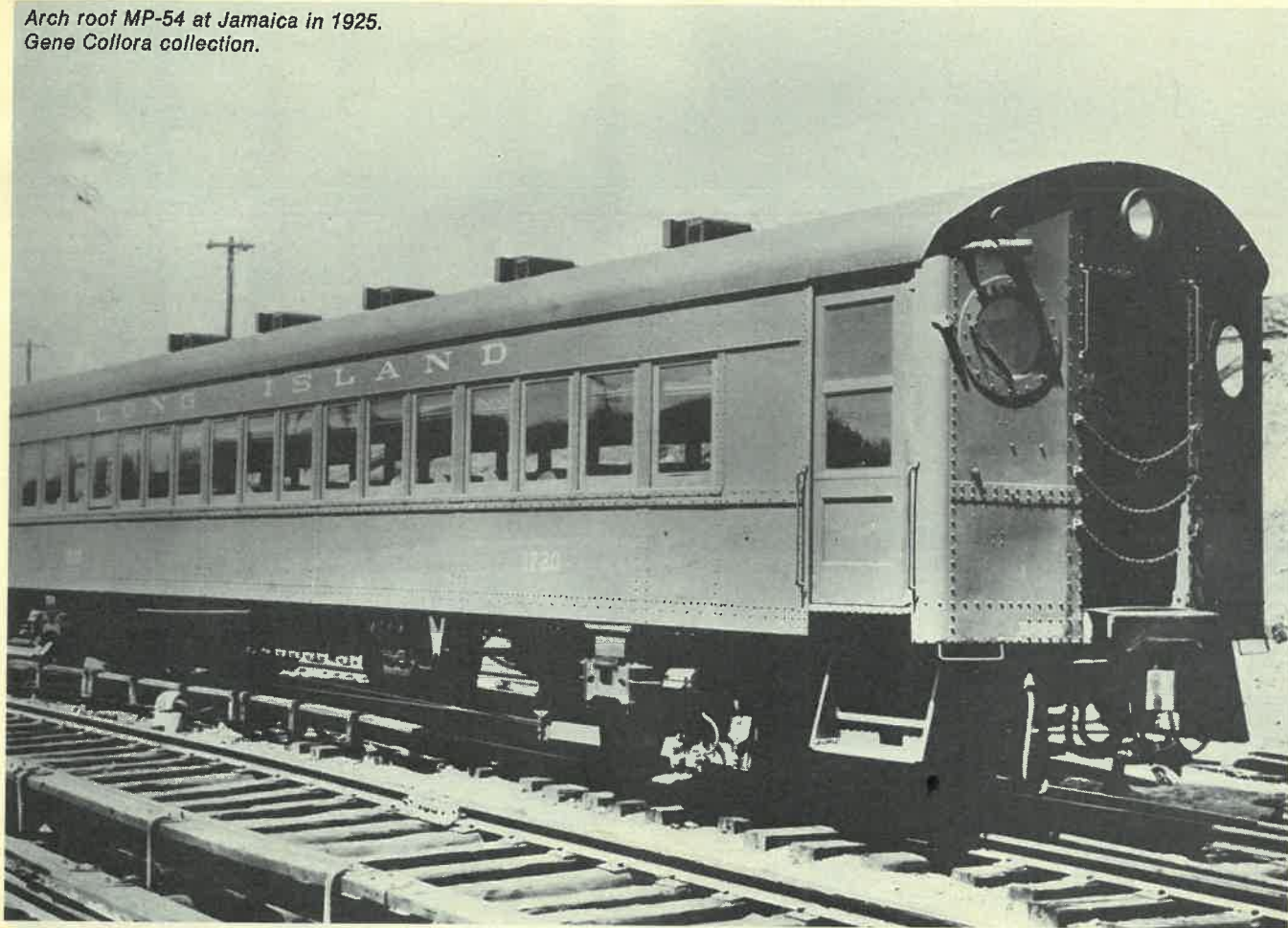
When it came time for removal, retirement was a simple movement over the road's Montauk Branch to Yard "A" in Long Island City. Here, in the shadow of Manhattan skyscrapers, the coaches stood silently among rows of freight cars and waited for the end. Their wait was for a one-way ride on a car-float that took them down the East River and around the Battery to Jersey City. Once on foreign rails, the 54s were moved by the Jersey Central to a junkyard in Newark where the scrapper's torch awaited them. Other cars were moved to the Corona Yard, broken up and carted away.

As the MP-54s began to disappear at a noticeable rate, the Long Island found its Metropolitans beset with mechanical problems. As the M-1s began to fail, the MP-54s were given an extended life, a gift ironically given them by the very cars that would still send them to the scrap heap once their bugs were removed. Their extended life was short-lived, though, and as the Metropolitans began to live up to their expectations, the 54s were a familiar sight in Yard "A."

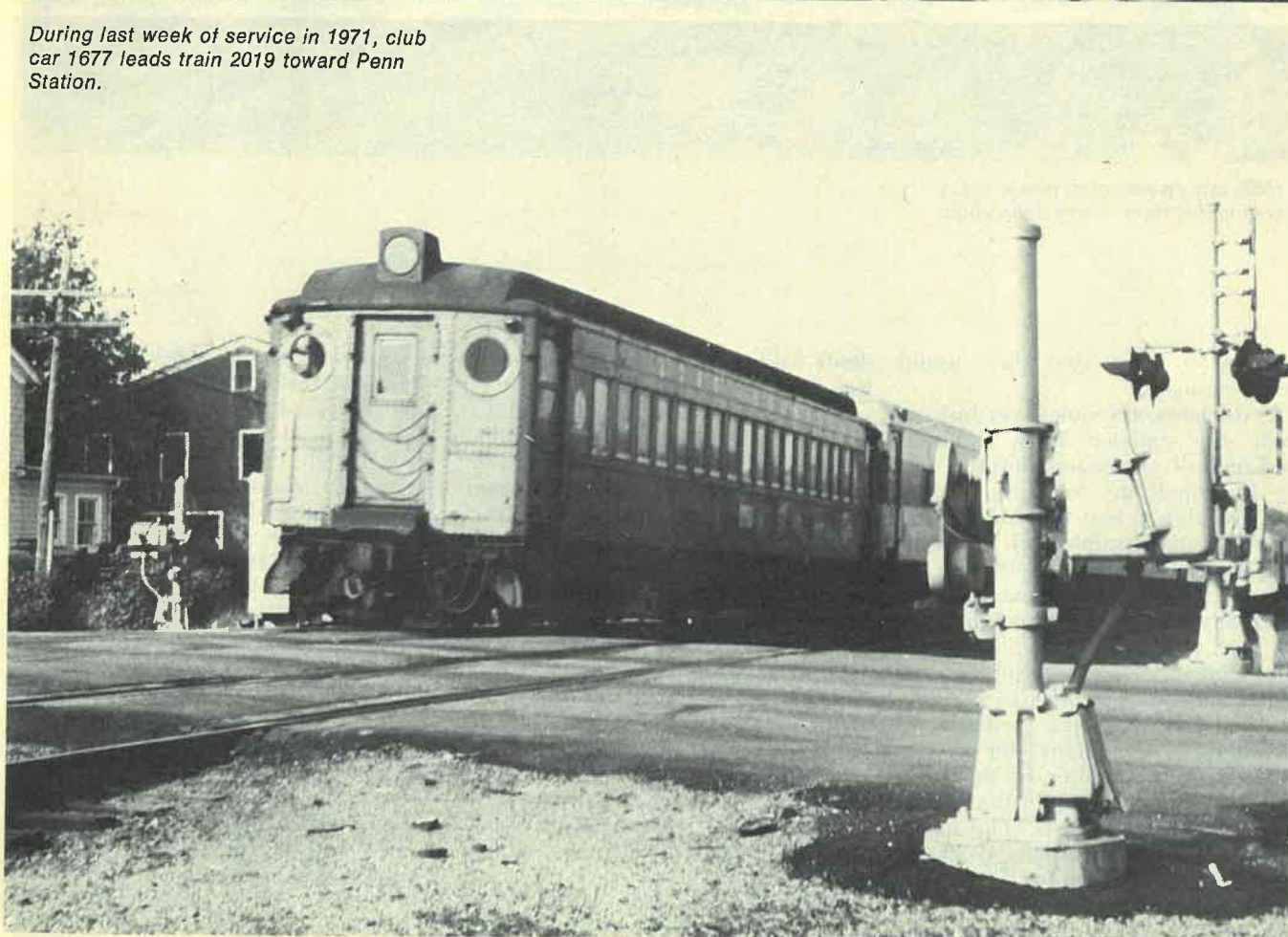
By the end of 1970, the M-1s had

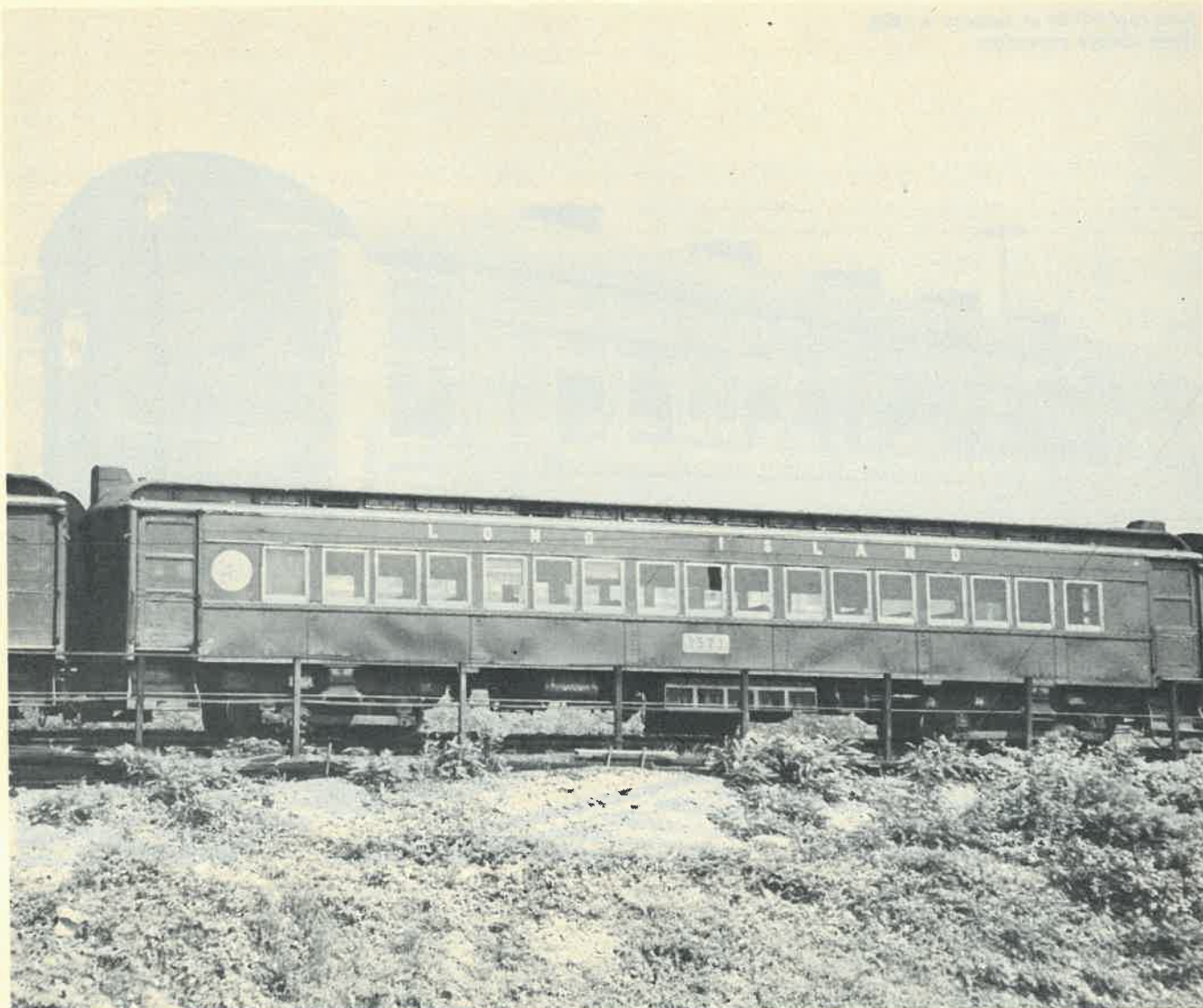
their bugs removed and it was simply a matter of time before the last MP-54 would run. A total of 194 coaches were junked that year and it became apparent that no 54s would still be in service by 1972. A train of the old veterans was increasingly infrequent to spot but when seen; they were still a pleasant sight. Lengthy trains of twelve MP-54s—the maximum the Long Island allowed—were no longer to be seen. The number of remaining MP-54s shrunk and dwindled away until one summer day in 1971 when the last train made up only of MP-54s had its final run. Unlike the road's fleet of double-deckers, which survived a few months longer and received a farewell spot on local television news shows, there was no ceremony or fanfare as the train left Far Rockaway bound for the Flatbush Avenue terminal in Brooklyn. In a fitting finale, the westbound train rode the rails of a branch that had seen many 54s over the years and a branch that had hardly changed over the years. Only high-level platforms and automatic crossing gates brought the scene up to date as the five-car train headed for Jamaica. Practically no one watching it at the many grade crossings on the line realized that

*Arch roof MP-54 at Jamaica in 1925.
Gene Collora collection.*



*During last week of service in 1971, club
car 1677 leads train 2019 toward Penn
Station.*





In 1968, this de-activated power car is operating mid-train. Frank Zahn photo.

this was a sight that they would never see again.

At Jamaica, the quiet, yet historic event was signaled when the railroad had all passengers detrain, taking Metropolitans to Penn Station and Brooklyn, a feat that had recently been made possible with the modernization of the Atlantic Branch between Flatbush Avenue and Jamaica. Originally, only the 54s could make the run to Brooklyn while longer cars were used out of Penn Station due to clearance problems. The detraining at Jamaica marked a "changing of the guard" for it symbolized a new chapter in the Long Island's history, a chapter that would not include the MP-54s. The future seemed exciting while the past was mere history, colorful but filled with many incidents not worth remembering, two of which were fatal acci-

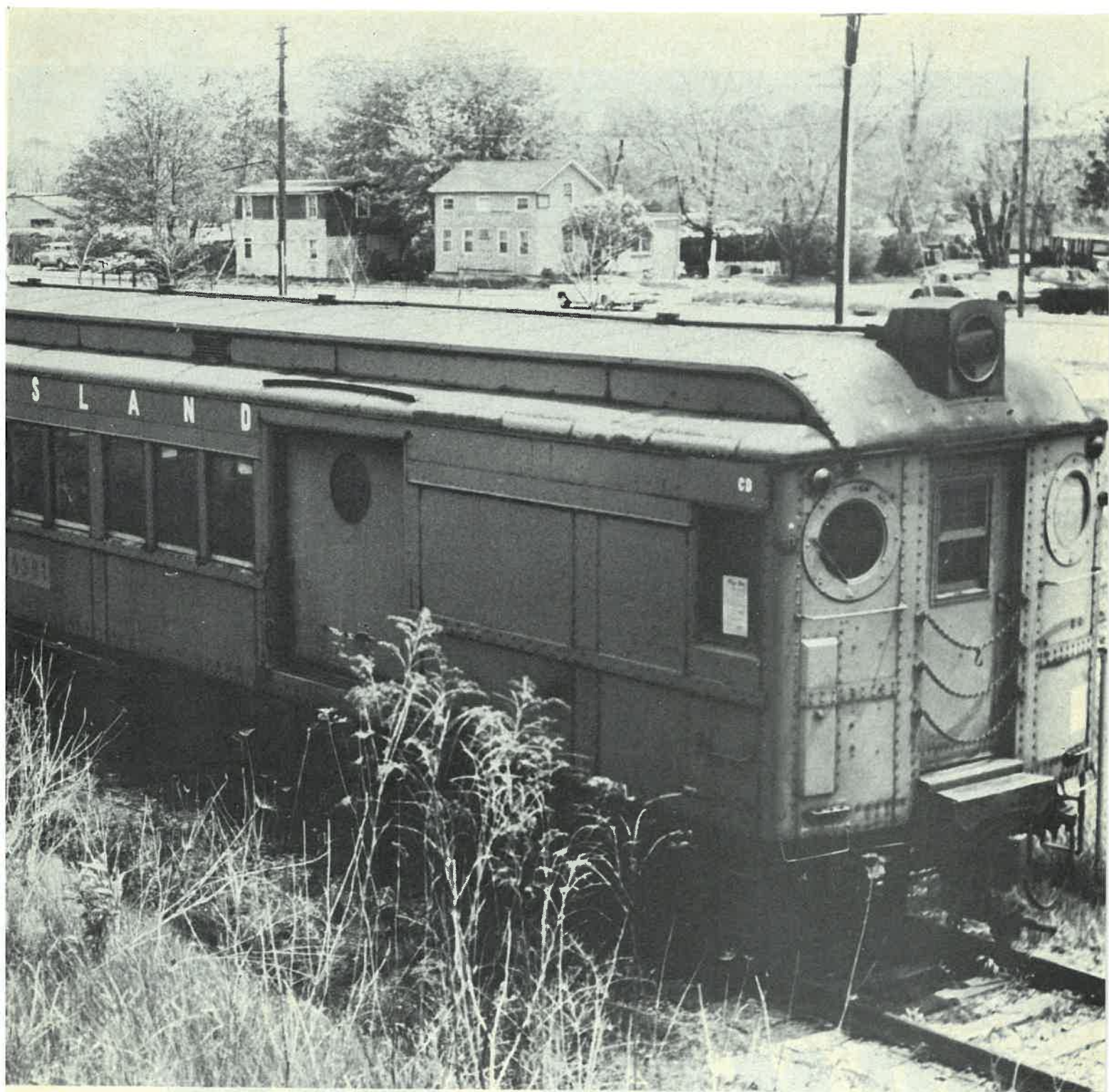
dents killing over 100 commuters in less than a year.

Unfortunately, the de-training was not as dramatic as an event which took place back in 1955 when the railroad celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its first electric MU run. With an old MP-54 coupled between four modernized ones, the train moved over its original route and came back to Jamaica where a car inspector took red paint and crossed out the old car's number, retiring it. This time, there was no red paint and there was no ceremony possibly due to the fact that much of the trackage that the LIRR's first electric train rode over for its first run—the Rockaway Beach branch—had been transferred to the city's Transit Authority.

Now a dozen MP-54s, all head-end units, remained in service for

two more months working at the points of trains with newer MP-72s and MP-75s but by the fall of 1971, they were all gone, all 800 out of a fleet which once had numbered a thousand. Months later, the last of seventy-three 54s were scrapped. In an ironic note, the last coaches to go were two MP-54al units, the last version of the 54s to be built prior to the road's double-deckers.

A few remnants of a by-gone era still remain. In Brooklyn, an MPB-54 (motorized passenger baggage) car numbered 4215 resembles a deserted Pony Express station on an overgrown siding while providing a new use: stocking space parts for its successor. In Jamaica, coach 5751 stands still in the blue and platinum garb of the MTA as an instruction car while combine 4396 is used for radio repairs. Several other MP-54s



Combine 4391 stands peacefully at Babylon in 1971 after removal from service. Along with about a dozen LIRR veterans, this one was expected to be preserved.

remain as possible museum pieces preserved by the Sunrise Trail Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society but the organization is having a difficult time procuring funds and the future of these cars is somewhat clouded. At the present time, the cars remain on a siding in Suffolk County while four of their lot participate in the Bicentennial event.

Although the MP-54s did receive little fanfare or farewells during their final days, many of the venerable electric MU veterans went out in style. Unlike purists, who no doubt would have rather had the cars moved through Penn Station for a fitting farewell on their way to the scrap heap, the builders of the MP-54s probably would have been delighted by the manner of their removal from

the rails of the Long Island. On car-floats towed down the East River and around the Battery to Jersey City, the MP-54s could take one last look at the city whose commuting workers they served so well for so long.