

THE NIGHT I ALMOST WENT INTO THE WATER *by Frank Zahn*

My first day as an L.I. Employee January 24, 1944, I was sent to the Bay Ridge Yard to break in as a switchtender. There was a period of about two weeks of daylight hours to get to know the track layout, practice getting on and off moving equipment, climbing ladders, walking catwalks while in motion, applying various kinds of handbrakes, a knowledge of hand and lantern signals and operating rules and a constant awareness that there was an 11,000 volt catenary about three feet above when you were on a boxcar and lower in some places where you had to duck down.

Bay Ridge at the time was a beehive of activity, a bridge route from the south and west to New England via the PRR Greenville, New Jersey, to Bay Ridge car floats. There were four drill crews around the clock plus extras, all powered by pairs of L.I. B-3 0-6-0 electrics 324-327. The New Haven moved the trains with its class EF-1 2-4-4-2 electrics **O73-0111 usually in three or four unit lashups or one of the huge EF-3 4-6-6-4 **O150-0159. However, when an EF-3 had a heavy train, a pair of B-3's pushed to about Sixth Avenue where they were cut off on the fly.

The practice at Bay Ridge was for the B-3's to pull the string of cars up Second Avenue where they could be switched to any of the 24 tracks in the yard. The conductor would tell the brakeman what track he would be headed for and how many cuts of cars he should wait for before riding them all the way in. This particular rainy night I rode the first car of three cuts headed towards "Benny" yard and stopped it just to clear the ladder tracks to hold the second cut of two loaded hoppers. Then when the third cut coupled, I released the brake so that I would ride all four cars down the track and couple to the two cars that were in the track all the way down at the float bridge end.

Well, the brake I had was an old ratchet type that had a great amount of slack in the chain and we had picked up momentum before I could get it all rewound. I realized we were going to couple up hard to the two cars that were in the track so I got up on the catwalk where I could do some fancy footwork when we hit. However, we still didn't stop; the brakes on those two cars didn't hold and I was rolling towards the water with six cars and no carfloat was in the bridge. I jumped down to the hopper car and it seemed like eternity as I wound that brake on another notch and yet another notch and we finally did stop less than a car length from the water. It was a harrowing experience to say the least.

**In steam days the New Haven electrics and diesels all had an "O" before their number. Near the end of steam this was omitted and the few remaining steam with conflicting numbers were given "S" before the number.