

REMEMBRANCES OF THE LONG ISLAND RAIL ROAD CLASS N52 CABIN CARS

by Bob Kaelin

LINGO

First off, please excuse my Long Island vernacular. On the LIRR, for instance, a cabin car was known as a "hack," and even when we made reference to the Pennsylvania Railroad, it was usually "Penn" instead of "Pennsy." So, if you notice a sprinkling of odd vocabulary in this story, it's because I'm telling it in my own dialect. My tale deals mostly with the N52 "hacks" and the men who worked them (and literally lived in them) back in the 1940s. At that time, the LIRR was still a part of the Pennsylvania system, although it retained a lot of its own individual characteristics.

When faced with the task of writing another celebration of the "glorious hardware of 'Pennsy' past," it was hard to keep from meandering into the memories of the men who made those old "hacks" what they were. They were all unforgettable characters from a vanished way of life. We'll get into some of that later on.

HOT COAL AND COLD BEER

Although these "hacks" were originally well insulated, it's sad to note that they were allowed to deteriorate toward the end of their years of service. It was a whole different ball game then. In desperation, freight crews nailed sheets of corrugated cardboard to the inside walls to keep the wind from whistling through. Prior to that, the main gripe always seemed to be with the N5 steel "hacks," two of which were bought by the LIRR in 1932. (I also seem to recall having been in one or two others that may have come over on loan off of the "Penn" during the War.) Some LIRR men disliked them and claimed they were hard to heat. One known remedy would be to steal the canvas weather curtain off of the engine and lash it up across the passageway between the lockers in hopes of keeping some heat in the end where the stove was. This usually resulted in the engine crew having to pull up alongside the "hack" in order to cast aspersions on the ancestry and moral fiber of the creatures within who perpetrated such a dastardly act of self preservation.

Nevertheless, you had to make the best of it with the wooden "hacks," too. The Eastern End of Long Island always had unpredictable weather; it could be unusually warm in January and we could get a blizzard on the first day of Spring. We've seen temperatures in the 70's in January and snow on Easter Sundays in mid-April. It's the Gulf Stream that warms us, stuck out in the Atlantic as we are. But it's the northwest wind that makes temperatures come down. On the LIRR, everything runs pretty much either east or west, and if a "hack" was newly assigned to a freight job and the stove happened to be on the east end, some conductors or flagmen would want to get it turned as soon as possible so that the stove was in the other corner in order to provide better protection against the cold nor'westers. After that, the "hack" was never turned again unless it got so by mistake through a wrong move on a wye or something like that. Greenport, for instance, had an air-operated turntable, and it was still possible to turn a car there by using a long "walk-around" hose that was there for that purpose, especially for turning snowplows.

You wanted to have good coal for the stove, too. Real good coal. Therefore, the lower bunk across the aisle from the stove served a dual purpose in some cases. The case in point here would be someone with a little larceny in his heart who would spot a nice load of "Blue" coal or good pea coal. Some of this would be "liberated" and would end up under that bunk which made a perfect coal box right near the stove and kept the booty discreetly hidden as well.

So much for winter. In the summertime, it was S.O.P. for the LI RR to outfit these "hacks" with window and door screens. An early version of screening included only small covers for the windows in the doors. Later on, provisions were made for full screen doors that could be put on the outsides in summer; they swung out onto the end platforms.

There was some beer drinking going on in the summer, too. There's no denying it; it was a fact of life and we knew that God put that icebox in the "hack" for a divine purpose. A lot of funny things happened, but the funniest thing of all is a story that has spread around the Long Island Rail Road for so many years that each successive person that tells it wants to claim that he himself is indeed the silent "hero." This is the story of...

THE BIG RAID

It seems that one day some bosses were "spotting" a job because they heard that there was some drinking going on. At one point, they decided it was time to move in, and they actually boarded the "hack" for a raid. One boss

came in one end door and a couple more swarmed in the other. One of the crew was still in the "hack" (we'll just call him "R" for short) and he was sitting on a box by the sink. He took slow drags on his cigarette and didn't say a damned word. In the meantime, the bosses ransacked that place from top to bottom, going through all the lockers, lifting up all the cushions and bunk lids and prying into anything else they could think of. But they never thought of asking "R" to stand up. They finally left, empty-handed. Throughout the entire raid, "R" calmly sat on that box and literally kept his "cool," because that box was chock full of ice cold beers.

NEWT

For the most part, the old-timers on the LIRR were indeed very clever and resourceful men, who worked under a wide variety of conditions ranging from the Railroad dock at Greenport through the boondocks of Manorville and from the boat docks at Montauk to the car docks in Bay Ridge. No question about it - we were on an island.

Trainman N. B. "Newt" Gotcher was a colorful example. As I recall, he was said to have been part Indian and came from out west someplace, having worked on many railroads before winding up on the Long Island. That may or may not be so, but Newt was nevertheless a qualified conductor and he knew his trade well. However, for many years during the '40's, he held down the job of flagman on train No. L-87, which was one of the Greenport freights. And for several years on end, Newt kept one "hack" the No. 39 - on his job. This was unusual, because regular freight jobs would ordinarily get a newly shopped and repainted "hack" once a year. Not so with this one. That was HIS "hack" and Newt hung onto it for so long that the paint faded and you could just barely read the lettering. If the roof started to leak, he would tar it himself. Newt was a clever mechanic and could do just about anything once he put his mind to it. That "hack" was his home; he had a lot of his belongings in it and he even had it wired for lights. His lighting scheme was ingenious. First, he wired it for 110 volts. When they had layovers in Greenport, his "hack" would be spotted by the old Greenport bunkhouse and he could hook up his lights. Back in those days, the Main Line of the LIRR actually terminated on the aforementioned dock at Greenport. It was originally built so that the trains could make connections with steamboats in the old days, and later the tracks on the dock were still in use. During the War, there was a Coast Guard cutter tied to that dock and in the Summer when it was hot, it was always seen to it that Newt's "hack" would be kicked onto the dock when they finished up. There he could have a nice breeze off of the Bay, and the men on the Coast Guard cutter would throw a wire over to Newt so he could run his lights on whatever voltage they had. While out on the road, he had a different setup. It seems that the electric hand lanterns had just started to appear on the LIRR about that time and Newt would go to the supply stores at Holban and draw several of the six-volt lantern batteries, which he would hook up in parallel and feed them through a maze of bell wire to clusters of lantern bulbs that came from the same place.

Newt loved to hunt. He had a collection of pistols, shotguns, and Lord only knows what else stuffed inside that "hack." Number 39 was also one of the few that still had the original PRR-style flag box up on the cupola end wall. This too was stuffed full of shells and ammo, and was duly padlocked. If that "hack" had ever caught fire, it would have made such an explosion that there probably wouldn't have been a window pane left in town.

Newt would often get up at the crack of dawn and go out to bag something or other that would wind up as a tasty treat for the crew later on. He also liked to fish. He would often catch the last passenger job out of Greenport in the morning and they would drop him and his fishing gear off near the trestle at Mill Creek, about 2 1/2 miles up the line. The freight crew would come along a few hours later and pick up their flagman and their dinner.

Years ago, conductor Pete Cafarelli told me a story about the time he was in the "hack" with Newt as they bounced along through the woods down in "Manor" (Manorville). Pete started to hear this loud banging, which made him wonder if they'd dropped a brake rigging or if a car up ahead was on the ground. He looked, but there was no sign of any such trouble. He looked some more and there was no sign of old Newt, either. Just about then, he saw a shadow of something moving outside one of the cupola windows. He walked outside and crawled up the ladder just far enough to peek over the runners and there was old Newt, sitting on the cupola roof with his feet planted on the catwalk ... he had a big old repeater shotgun, blasting away at crows, rabbits, squirrels, and anything else that flew, crawled, or skittered as the freight bored its way through the woods. "Jist gittin' in a leetle targit practice" was the answer.

Some of those freights would really move out in those days. Sometimes it was a case of dire necessity, especially if old Tom Hemblo was in charge. Tom was a real old-time conductor who always went by the book. The engine crew would have to go like hell and run for the quit so that they could get on home before old Tom could get the chance to outlaw them. Tom's son, Eddie, was in the "hack" with Newt one day when

they were moving along at a pretty good clip and he was dumbfounded to see old Newt shaving with a straight razor while peering into a little mirror that hung on the wall and danced back and forth, while the "hack" was bouncing and swaying as they barreled along like a shot out of hell. The odd thing about it was that Newt never missed a lick and never got a nick.

DUCKS AND TURKEYS

Another one of Tom Hemblo's regular crew at one point was a character by the name of Anderson, who - one way or another - got hold of some duck eggs one day at Yaphank. These were put into a little wire milk crate and stashed behind the stove with the half-baked idea they might someday hatch. The eggs weren't half-baked, by any means. After a few days, it was obvious that they were beyond hatching. A couple of them exploded and the rest of the mess unceremoniously heaved out the door.

After another stop at Yaphank one day, there appeared two turkeys in the "hack". It looked as if they had formerly made there home at the farm on the county poorhouse grounds nearby. Now it probably would have been a little hard to do very much with two turkeys on that little stove, anyway, they never got that far. After turning the inside of "hack" into a madhouse with feathers flying all over the place and droppings spattered all over hell, the turkeys met the same fate as the duck eggs, except they never did get cooked as well as the eggs did.

CHOW TIME

Getting back to that little stove, all sort of things could be gotten together, depending upon the cleverness of the cook. When freight jobs were up for bids, the most important thing was to get a flagman who was a good cook. The men would then chip in to get what was needed and they'd be set for the day. Sometimes it didn't even cost anything except a little extra effort. They would do a favor for the operator of a potato packing shed, such as shoving an extra cut or spotting empties, for instance, and they had all the potatoes they wanted. Soups and stews were always a favorite, especially one of Long Island's staple foods, clam chowder. Sam Dawson, one of the old time engineers, was an ace at making this concoction. The trick was to make it a day ahead. This was easy, because it could be done at home. It could then be simmered up the next day. Sam was one of my very best friends; he was like a father to me. In later years, I came across a recipe for a heavy soup made with Polish kielbasa (another local staple on Long Island), red beans, cabbage, and an assortment of vegetables and condiments; this also became a favorite of caboose cookery. Like clam chowder, it too, was always better the second day. Squirrel stew was another LIRR "delicacy" and it wasn't too bad - quite tasty in fact - as long as you could keep your mind off of what you were eating. The best thing of all was the coffee. There is nothing else in the world like the smell and taste of coffee inside a "hack" on a snowy winter day.

When the N52's were still around, another trick of "cookery" was not on the stove itself, but rather in the large overhead heat shield where the stovepipe went through the ceiling. That shield could get pretty hot, and when frozen TV dinners started to appear on the market, some "wag" discovered that several of these could be slipped inside the shield and done almost to perfection. It took a while, but that didn't make any difference. If you were out switching for a couple of hours, they'd be ready when you were. No fuss, no muss, no bother.

THE BRAT

My own personal experience with the "hacks" dates back to when I was a brat in the 1940's. By the time I had gotten out of the Service in 1960, most of them were all gone. But I'd spent many happy hours on them over the years, riding through some of the most beautiful country in the Northeast, along the marshlands, over the creeks, down through the woods and across the farm fields. Back in those days, the train crews were generally very good to kids who took an interest, and when I wasn't working or in school, I'd spend hours on end, day in and day out, riding the engines and "hacks." Even in my small home town on the Eastern End of Long Island, there were freights coming and going at all hours of the day and night, especially during the War and in the years following, up until about 1949. We were wheeling potatoes all summer and cauliflower throughout the fall, as late as into December in some years.

On the freights, we had H10s engines for the most part. But the LIRR had only 19 of them, so every once in a while the freight would show up with a H9s or a H6sb. Sometimes they'd be stuck with a G5s. So, I got my turns at firing a variety of engines, as well as an occasional crack at the throttle, too. The men were very good to me; some of them were actually family friends.

As much as I enjoyed being on the engines, I loved those old "hacks" just as much. One good friend was Dick Carey, a Greenport man, who flagged the other freight (L-86) for many, many years. One of my jobs was to clean Mr. Carey's "hack" for him, which I did with pleasure. Hell, I even did windows. The courtesy was extended to other flagmen as well. It's too bad that a lot of kids today don't have the opportunities that that we had back then.

OTHER "HACKS"

In the summer of 1947, an N6b "Mae West" showed up on one job. I had never seen one before and immediately fell in love with it. We called them "Middle Division 'hacks,'" which was probably a misnomer, because these cabins actually originated on Lines West and didn't show up east of Pittsburgh until later on. All I knew is that this cabin was from Pennsylvania; it had come over on "lend lease" from the "Penn" and was just out of the shops with a fresh paint job, I thought to myself, "Jeez, only the Quakers down in Pennsylvania could make something that looked like that!" I recall the inside of it as having been quite "bare" in comparison to the LIRR N52's, especially with its seats in the cupola boarded over straight across with no cushions on them. In a way, it did remind you of the inside of a kitchen that you might find in a farmhouse down in Amish country. But for all its spartan and pristine simplicity, I loved it nonetheless. I still wonder why the N6b cabins (at least the several that I have ever been in) had their cupola seats boarded over straight across, whereas it looks as if they were originally intended to be facing seats in which you sat upright, like the New York Central had. In later years, I came by a set of PRR prints for both the center cupola and offset cupola versions of the N6b, and they did indeed show both versions with and without upright seats, with notations about boarding over but no reasons why. Well, that's another story. All in all, they must have been excellent cabins and I'm sure that *one* on a regular job could be fixed up quite snazzy. They sure as hell had plenty of locker space in them.

REAL RAILROAD MEN

Some other good things that came over "off of the 'Penn'" in those days were the bosses. They were real men, those "Penn" men. They knew their business and you could do business with them. In general, the LIRR men had a great deal of respect and admiration for them. E. L. "Gene" Hoffmann was the General Superintendent at the time. One of these bosses was a freight representative by the name of Ed Sachse. He was a terrific guy. Every year, when I was a kid, Mr. Sachse would personally send me one of the big PRR calendars with the Grif Teller paintings on them. I never forgot it. Another boss was a man named Jim Corcoran who was a sort of a "roving yardmaster," as I recall, and it was his job to keep things moving at several small but jam-packed yards when the heavy potato freights were running. Team tracks and packing house sidings were jammed to the hilt. Some private sidings had to actually be extended, and the loads had to be switched out and empties re-spotted on an hourly basis. If no freight crew was around to make the moves for the packinghouses, the cars were usually towed with a farm tractor, which often ended up burying itself down to the axle housings.

The fact remains that there was a lot of work to be done; and - by God - it GOT done, too. On the "East End," it was all single iron and it is amazing when you realize how many trains and how many different kinds of trains were running out here day and night without a single major accident or tie-up all during the War and the few years after, when our freight traffic was still heavy. A potato "extra" would come east in the wee hours with a hundred empty "reefers," for instance, and by the end of the day those "reefers" were loaded and headed back west.

One night, Sam Dawson had 110 such loaded "reefers" strung out in Riverhead and was pumping them up with one H10s. Jim Corcoran came up and asked Sam if they wanted another engine. They'd already been out more than twelve hours. They were tired and Sam was thirsty. Now, Sam would do anything for anybody. He had a heart of gold. And everybody liked him, too, and would do most anything for him. Sam said they would do it with what they had as long as Jim would buy him a nightcap and promise that once they broke their necks and got over the hill at Yaphank that the conductor would not pull the air on them once he got it rolling, outlaw or not. The deal was struck and off they went. They had No. 115, which was an old Vandalia engine and was still hand-fired at the time. There was a big brakeman on the job named John Knajdl; "big John" could fire an engine better than most men in engine service. He could keep an engine hot when many others could not. So, with John helping the fireman, they hauled the 110 cars out of there with the one H10s and went all the way to Holban yard.

That's the kind of teamwork you had back then. Another of the Cafarelli boys was named Salvatore, but we always called him "Soddor." Sometimes he would even go so far as to ride between the cars of a freight, just so he'd be right there on the spot to make the cut as soon as they stopped at the next town.

When "Soddor" ran a heavy freight as conductor, some men couldn't figure out why he would order them to "Hold onto eighteen and pick up two," for instance, insisting that certain loads be situated in thus and such a place in the train. But they understood when they finally wheezed into Holban Yard and the yard crews had only to make a very

few cuts with the least amount of switching out. You see, "Soddor" had it already sorted out for them. That's the way it was back then. When the Long Island Rail Road was still a part of the Pennsylvania, it was a time of pride and achievement. But the Long Island still retained its individuality, both in the geographical size of the operation and in the character of the employees who operated it. That's why I couldn't help but drift off into reminiscences of some of the men who were there. They're the ones who made the whole scene. Every time I see a picture of one of the old "hacks," I still see shades of all those old guys because - as was said - they were indeed unforgettable characters from a vanished way of life.

Sometimes we tend to have more vivid memories of the funny people and the funny things that happened and the laughs that WE had. In reality, a lot of that work was sheer drudgery, and while there were those who needed to bend the rules a little bit in order to survive, the men I really remember the most were the quiet, easy-going men like the Cafarellis, the Frank Motts and the Herbie Williamses who knew their business well and went about it day after day, year in and year out.

All in all, they were some of the greatest guys in the world. Most of them are all gone now, as is the "Penn." But the good memories remain.

Those were the days, my friend.

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