

Goodbye and Good Luck

The 30th Anniversary of Conrail's Exit from the Commuter Rail Business

This year, Metro-North Railroad, New Jersey Transit Rail Operations, and the SEPTA Regional Rail Division are celebrating the 30th anniversary of their formation. However, for Conrail, the celebration took place on January 1, 1983, when the railroad transferred responsibility for its commuter train operations to these regional passenger transportation organizations. With relief from this burden, the government-owned railroad was one step closer to long term profitability and eventual independence.

Created from six bankrupt railroads on April 1, 1976, Conrail was given the monumental task of stopping the financial hemorrhaging that had been taking place for over a decade on the major trunk lines in the northeast. A large part of the problem was the extensive network of unprofitable commuter trains operated by the Penn Central, Erie Lackawanna, Reading, and Central of New Jersey. Although financial assistance (and in most cases, equipment) was provided by the different states in which the trains operated, the various sources of revenue never offset the cost of providing the service.

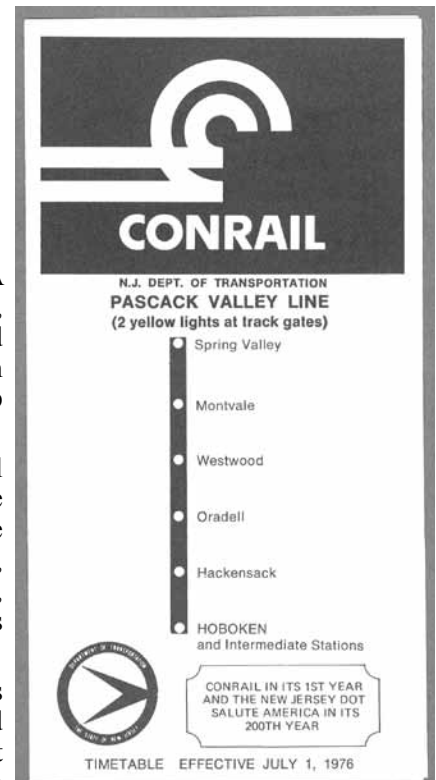
During the first few years of its existence, Conrail did whatever it could to eliminate its unprofitable passenger routes. The former Erie Lackawanna run between Cleveland and Youngstown, OH was discontinued on January 14, 1977. Later that year, an agreement was reached with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority for the Boston & Maine Railroad to operate commuter trains on the former Penn Central routes around Boston, and Conrail handed them over at the end of June. The Chicago to Valparaiso, Indiana "Valpo Dummy" was redesignated as an intercity train and was transferred to Amtrak on October 29, 1979, leaving Conrail responsible for the commuter trains that served Connecticut, New York City (except

Long Island), New Jersey, and Philadelphia. A pair of Baltimore-Washington runs on the Northeast Corridor were also handled by Conrail, in conjunction with its operation of Amtrak trains under contract on that route.

Unfortunately, the handful of trains that were trimmed barely put a dent in Conrail's passenger train deficits. A light at the end of the tunnel was finally visible in 1981, when the Northeast Rail Service Act was passed. This law established a plan for returning the company to the private sector, with a balance sheet that would no longer be in the red. One of its provisions was for Conrail to be relieved of the obligation to provide commuter service, and for the transit authorities that had been subsidizing them to assume complete responsibility for their operation.

The target date for Conrail's exit from the commuter rail business was set for December 31, 1982. In preparation for this change, lines within the commuter territory that were to remain with the freight carrier were reassigned to adjoining divisions. Labor agreements were renegotiated for affected employees to transfer to the new commuter railroads, with a provision for them to "flow back" to Conrail if they later wished to return to freight service. Most of the passenger rolling stock was either already owned by the state transportation authorities, or was permanently assigned to commuter runs, so making a plan to hand off equipment was comparatively simple.

As the new year dawned on January 1, 1983, the first trains departing from New York City on the New Haven, Hudson, and Harlem Lines were operated by the crews of Metro-North Commuter Railroad. The vast



Initially, Conrail prominently identified itself as the operator of its commuter services, as illustrated by the Pascack Valley timetable shown at upper right. The first Conrail timetables made use of the "ConRail" logo, which was replaced by the "wheel on rail" logo in later editions, as seen on these Manayunk-Philadelphia forms.

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network of commuter lines that spread out across northern New Jersey, over former Erie Lackawanna and Central Railroad of New Jersey trackage, fell under the control of New Jersey Transit's new rail operations arm. There was no change in the appearance of the silverliner fleet on the lines out of Philadelphia, so it was barely perceptible that transit operator SEPTA had taken over direct responsibility for the operation of its commuter trains. And on the Northeast Corridor, Amtrak inherited the Baltimore to Washington commuter runs when it began providing its own crews for intercity trains on this line.

However, the transition was not without its rough spots for the new operators. In March of 1983, SEPTA train crews went on strike, in protest of the agency's attempt to place them under the transit motormen's labor agreement. All of the new commuter railroads faced the challenge of adapting their operations to a



In its 1981 Annual Report, Conrail included this photo of a friendly trainman assisting suburban Philadelphia passengers, while noting that the company would soon be relieved of the obligation to provide this service.

new environment that no longer included the resources that were previously available as a division of a freight railroad. For Conrail, though, the financial headache was gone, and the railroad was free to focus its energy on further streamlining its freight operations.

Although Conrail's role as a passenger carrier was relatively short-lived, a fair amount of memorabilia from its commuter days still exists. From the moment that it was created, Conrail prominently identified itself as the operator of its passenger trains, despite the fact that service under its predecessors had in



Conrail uniform cap badges have a gold finish, with blue enamel for the railroad name & logo, and black enamel for the occupation name. Collection of David M. Hamilton.

many cases been notoriously poor. Putting its best foot forward, Conrail ordered new uniforms for its crews, that included cap badges, buttons, and gold lapel pins. While the transit agencies that provided financial support for the trains still took credit for new equipment and service plans, Conrail made certain that passengers knew who was actually running the trains.

Public timetables were immediately distributed under the new company's name, with the early "ConRail" logo appearing on the first editions of several forms in 1976. The "wheel on rail" logo replaced it on subsequent printings, but the various timetable styles of the predecessor railroads generally remained in place. For several months, the ghost of the Penn Central



You won't see this message in a coach today! Blue letters contrasted with a red "No Smoking" on the sign's reverse, changing the car's status when turned. Bill Moll photo.

haunted the covers of several Conrail Philadelphia suburban timetables, with their illustrations of a silverliner adorned with the "PC" logo. Simple, single sheet timetables and pocket schedule cards were supplied to commuters on runs with only one or two trips, such as the "Valpo Dummy," perhaps hinting that Conrail was already contemplating their elimination.

For the higher profile trains in the New York and Philadelphia metropolitan markets, though, Conrail did make a commitment to provide the highest quality service that its limited resources would allow. The Conrail logo appeared on tickets, signage, commuter employee instructional manuals, and advertising

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materials, sometimes sharing the spotlight with state department of transportation or regional transit authority emblems. Over time, the involvement of these agencies became more evident, particularly with the use of uniform public timetable formats.

New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority was the first to exercise greater control over its timetables, introducing a standard format for the Penn Central's lines out of Grand Central Terminal in 1974. The same style was adopted by Conrail for its folders, which barely even mentioned the freight railroad's name. The familiar appearance of these timetables has now endured for almost 40 years, and they are still in use on the MTA Metro-North Railroad.

SEPTA followed in late 1979, with the Philadelphia agency phasing in uniform cover art that depicted a stylized locomotive. The Conrail logo disappeared, replaced with a small notation that service was provided under contract for the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority. Timetables for service in New Jersey received the new NJ Transit logo, and once again, Conrail was only mentioned as contract operator. By the end of 1982, the smiling faces of the train crews were the public's only indication that Conrail was in the passenger business.

Today, private companies compete for the contracts to operate commuter trains in locations such as Boston, Washington, and Baltimore. With the realization by government policy makers that public transit must receive adequate funding and equipment investments, commuter rail service has become a profit center instead of a drain on the balance sheet. It is interesting to speculate what might have happened if this "commuter rail



On January 1, 1983, Conrail handed over the keys to its commuter operations to the regional transportation agencies that had previously been subsidizing them.

renaissance" had taken place in 1976, instead of 25 years later. Perhaps Conrail crews would still be making the announcement of "tickets please" as the 5:30 local departs from Paoli. Things played out differently, though, and Conrail was able to emerge from its tenuous financial state partly due to its ability to shed itself of the suburban passenger trains. All that remains as reminders of this chapter in the railroad's history are a few timetables, lapel pins, and ticket stubs, from 30 years ago when Conrail wished "goodbye and good luck" to commuter trains.

Hudson Line
Effective April 25, 1982
Grand Central Terminal METROPOLITAN REGION
Poughkeepsie, New Hamburg, Beacon, Cold Spring, Garrison, Peekskill, Montross, Crugers, Croton, Croton-Harmon, Ossining, Scarborough, Philipse, Tarrytown, Irvington, Ardsley, Dobbs Ferry, Hastings, Greyston, Glenwood, Yonkers, Ludlow, Riverdale, Spuyten, Marble Hill, University City, Morris Park, New York City, Grand Central Terminal

BALTIMORE - WASHINGTON LOCAL SERVICE
ConRail

SUBURBAN TRAINS
CONRAIL
EFFECTIVE MARCH 1, 1982
BOSTON and PROVIDENCE, NEEDHAM, FRANKLIN, STOUGHTON, FRAMINGHAM
ALSO WESTERLY-PROVIDENCE-BOSTON

POTTSVILLE-READING PHILADELPHIA
and intermediate stations with BICENTENNIAL TRAINS to VALLEY FORGE

Warminster-Hatboro Philadelphia
Effective October 31, 1982
SEPTA Regional Rail Service
Operated under contract for Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

CHICAGO—GARY—VALPARAISO
and Intermediate Stations
CONRAIL
EFFECTIVE October 31, 1976

Read Down		Ex. Sat, Sun & Hal.	Read Up	
454	456		455	456
PM	PM	MILES	AM	AM
5:05	5:35	10 Lv. CHICAGO	7:10	7:50
D 5:33	D 6:04	16.9 Ar. Whiting	C 6:41	C 7:15
D 5:42	D 6:10	19.7 Ar. Indiana Harbor	C 6:53	C 7:06
D 5:50	D 6:19	24.9 Ar. Gary (Sh. & Cassel)	C 6:57	C 6:58
D 5:56	D 6:23	27.4 Ar. Gary (Broadway)	C 6:52	C 6:53
D 6:04	D 6:30	33.3 Ar. Hobart	C 6:15	C 6:47
D 6:35	37.1 Ar. Wheeler	C 6:10		
PM 6:20	PM 6:45	43.7 Ar. VALPARAISO	6:00	6:35
			AM	AM

Conrail cannot assume responsibility for inconvenience, expense or damage resulting from errors in time tables, delayed trains, failure to make connections or for shortage of equipment. The schedules shown in this time table are subject to change without notice.

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