



All photos, Bob Mackreth, senior or junior



Dad, Uncle Bud, and 1508

Growing up on Long Island gave this young railfan a front-row seat for all the action, and provided a priceless memory for father and son to share

by Bob Mackreth

The note from my mother read, "I found these in the attic. Your father didn't want to give them up, but I thought you should have them. Do you remember this day?"

Along with the note came a handful of black-and-white photos, showing a boy with a 1950s haircut, a gaudy bandanna, and a child-sized engineer's cap, climbing on a locomotive.

How could I forget that day? I was the boy in the pictures: a kid in love with trains. The photos had been taken a couple of weeks after my ninth birthday; that cap and bandanna had been among my presents. One other present had been even better: My father had promised to take me to Oyster Bay, where there was a yard, a turntable, and almost certainly, some locomotives.

That's right, locomotives. This young railfan's experience in the New York City suburbs was quite different from the memories I've heard from friends who grew up elsewhere. I never had to sit patiently by the tracks, waiting and hoping for a train to come by. A quick bike ride to the station was guaranteed to bring a train sighting within



Left to right: Climbing up at Oyster Bay; fireman Ray and Bobby; sitting in front of the engineer from Oyster Bay to Roslyn; Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers; Dad on "the route of the dashing commuter."

a half-hour or less. The Long Island Rail Road was the nation's busiest commuter railroad, and I was lucky enough to live a mere mile from its most heavily traveled branch.

There was only one thing missing in this railfan's paradise. Traffic on the electrified South Shore line, which ran through our town, was dominated by multiple-unit lash-ups of self-powered cars. That approaching headlight usually belonged to what I called "a train with no engine." In contrast, Oyster Bay, at the terminus of one of the railroad's "diesel branches," promised excellent locomotive-spotting.

On Wednesday morning, July 22, 1959, I donned my engineer gear and two of us hopped into the family Mercury. Looking back, I can better appreciate Dad's generosity in committing a precious vacation day to my locomotive quest; he was not a railfan, but a hard-working, two-job-holding commuter, who already spent 10 hours on the LIRR each week.

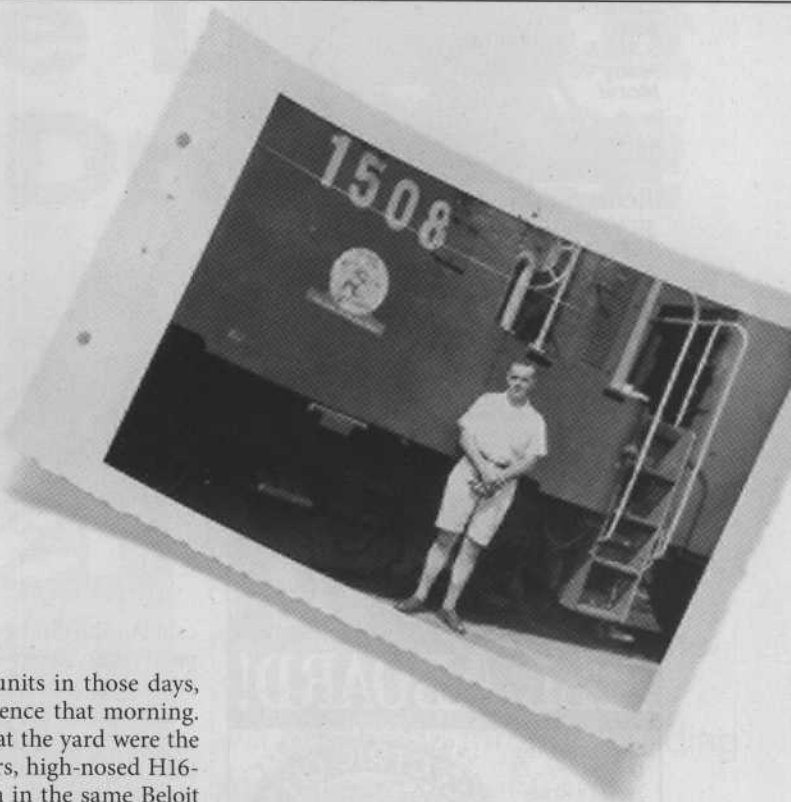
My excitement grew as we arrived at Oyster Bay. There was the turntable, all right, off to one side of the small yard. Best of all, there were several parked trains, each headed by a diesel locomotive. It had been only four years since the Long Island had retired the last of its 4-6-0 Ten-Wheelers, but there was no pang of steam nostalgia for me. I'd been too young to be aware of what I'd missed. Those boxy diesels seemed the most marvelous machines on earth.

And boxy they were, for sure. The Long Island owned a handful of sleek Fairbanks-

Morse "C-Liner" cab units in those days, but none were in evidence that morning. All the diesels parked at the yard were the C-Liners' homely sisters, high-nosed H16-44 road switchers born in the same Beloit factory. The company had engaged the renowned Raymond Loewy, auteur of the Pennsylvania's magnificent GG1 electric, to fine-tune the design, but even he could do little to beautify the brick-on-wheels configuration.

If aesthetes tended to sniff at these units, mechanical departments were more likely to swear at them. Under the long hood was FM's unique opposed-piston engine, a power plant that had served well in submarines during the war, but proved ill-suited to the very different demands of railroad service.

Yet this undistinguished locomotive became a lifetime favorite when an engineer caught sight of my father and me standing near the tracks. Life was simpler in the 1950s. Rather than calling for the railroad police, he motioned us over.



"Nice outfit you've got there, sonny." I stood in awed silence. Dad led the way over and explained how much I liked trains. "Would you like to take a look in the cab?"

What a question! We climbed the steps — I was surprised at how high and steep they seemed — and entered the cab.

"What's your name, son?" He shook my hand and added, "You can call me Uncle Bud."

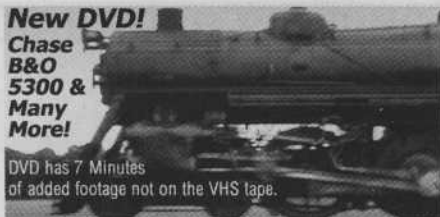
My new "uncle" was the picture of an old-time engineer: With a hat very much like mine, he appeared somewhere in his 60s. Ray, the fireman, was equally friendly. They showed me around the controls, and Ray opened the door to the engine compartment. I thought it had been noisy in the



No. 1508 strains to get its 10 cars up the grade near Roslyn station headed toward Oyster Bay in July 1952 — just seven years before its encounter with the author.

Robert B. Dunnet


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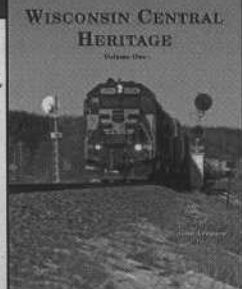
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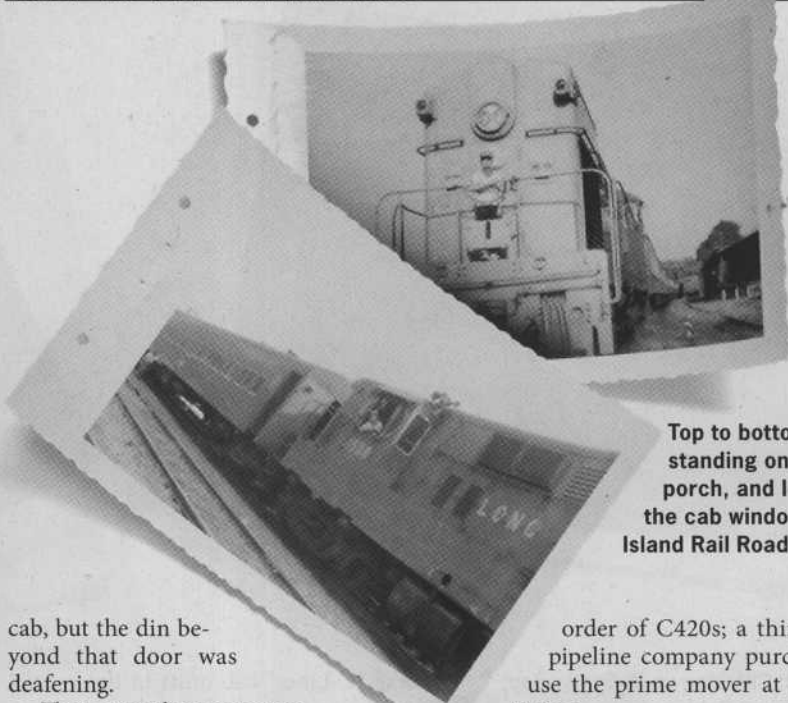


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RAILROAD READING



Top to bottom: Bobby standing on the front porch, and looking out the cab window of Long Island Rail Road No. 1508.

cab, but the din beyond that door was deafening.

Then came the greatest moment of all. I don't recall exactly how Dad introduced the question, or the words he used to phrase it, but now I can understand the courage it must have taken for him to ask for the ultimate favor.

Uncle Bud thought my father's request over for a moment, then smiled. "Sure, I think you can ride with us a few stops. There'll be an eastbound at Roslyn a few minutes after us; you can get off there and ride back."

As the news sunk in, he added, "Just let's keep your heads down and out of sight until we get past the station. Somebody might say something."

Oyster Bay to Roslyn: seven stops, one magical half-hour during which I called off the indications from the Pennsy-style position light signals, blew the whistle long-long-short-long at grade crossings, then watched with apprehension as one driver decided to race us across anyway.

When the ride was over, we hopped off quickly, then stared transfixed as the train receded westward toward Jamaica. What a dream come true! I'd left home expecting to have fun, all right, but never could have imagined what a thrilling turn events would take. Could any kid on all Long Island be happier than I was that day?

Over the years, I've thought back often to that wondrous morning, but I hadn't seen the photos in several decades. Now, the pictures helped me track down more information about the locomotive.

Number 1508, it was; among a group of nine purchased in 1951, all retired a mere 13 years later. The unit's ultimate fate remains mysterious. One source says the Long Island sold it to the New Haven; another says it was traded to Alco against an

order of C420s; a third claims a pipeline company purchased it to use the prime mover at a pumping station.

I put down the photos and called my mother to thank her for sending them. "Of course I remember that day, Mom. Sometimes I think it was the best day of my life."

She paused a moment, then replied quietly, "You know, Bob ... when I showed him the pictures, your father said the very same thing."

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