

New England's little gem

Maine Central was small enough to be a community, and it was profitable

PERHAPS IT WAS INEVITABLE that Maine Central, a plucky moneymaker in northern New England, would someday become a coveted gem in the merger frenzy of the 1970's and '80's.

Tucked away in a corner of the U.S., MEC quietly went about turning a tidy profit for its stockholders year after year while its larger neighbors became embroiled in merger and bankruptcy proceedings.

By the time I came to the railroad in 1974, Maine Central had become an anachronism. It was small enough to be a community of friends, much like its neighbor to the north, Bangor & Aroostook. While a few of us were from "away," most were born and bred Mainers. We knew the top officials, and they knew us by name. Battling the forces of nature in an often-harsh environment forged a work ethic and created bonds of mutual reliance. It was easy to feel a part of the organization. Twenty-five-year pins were common, and on the day the railroad closed its doors, 50-year pins were still in stock. When 20-year-old Edna Crimmins began with the company in 1918, she had no idea that 65 years later the railroad would have a jeweler fashion a special service pin just

MEC honored the U.S. Bicentennial not with a red-white-and-blue locomotive but with 10 new, and named, "Independence class" GE U18B's.

for her. Upon her retirement in 1985, she was given an engraved silver platter.

Therein lay part of MEC's strength of character, a bond that in today's corporate environment is hard to define, let alone locate. In the company's 121 years as Maine Central, its employees were proud to be a part of it, and in some respects felt it was theirs.

In its prime, with branch lines radiating from terminals large and small, MEC stretched out over 1358 miles between Portland in the south, Bangor and Mattawamkeag in the north, and Vanceboro, Calais, and Eastport in the east. To the west was its most scenic line, through the rolling hills of central Maine with exotically named places like Oquossoc and Passadumkeag and the rugged White Mountains of New Hampshire, to St. Johnsbury, Vt. We called it the "Mountain Division." It was our connection to the west, skirting the Boston & Maine. At one time, MEC's map included a 114-mile route north off the Mountain Sub through North Stratford, N.H., and Beecher Falls, Vt., to Lime Ridge, Quebec, the northern reaches of which dated from the late 1880's.

The system had humble origins, ultimately consolidating 50 small railroads in Maine, New Hampshire, and Ver-

mont, starting with the Calais Railroad in 1832. Maine Central Railroad was formed on October 28, 1862, by consolidating the Androscoggin & Kennebec and the Penobscot & Kennebec, whose lines extended from Danville Junction north to Bangor. These, plus the Kennebec & Portland, would be MEC's main routes. Other roads with

names long forgotten, such as Bangor & Piscataquis and Somerset & Kennebec, would join. Together with other lines leased or bought during 1870-1902, the foundation for the modern Maine Central was laid by the turn of the century. One line was the Belfast &

Moosehead Lake, leased from 1871 until 1925; it was turned over to the city of Belfast in 1926 and still runs. Another segment worthy of remark was Mattawamkeag to Vanceboro, which after 1890 formed part of Canadian Pacific's main line from Montreal to Saint John, New Brunswick; MEC sold it to CP in 1974.

Historically, Maine Central served its home state with businesses beyond the railroad. MEC was in the resort business (1911-1941, with the Mount Kineo House and the SamOset), operated coastal steamers and ferries (1882-1931), ran a bus line (1925-1956), and was in a partnership operating an airline (1933-1943).

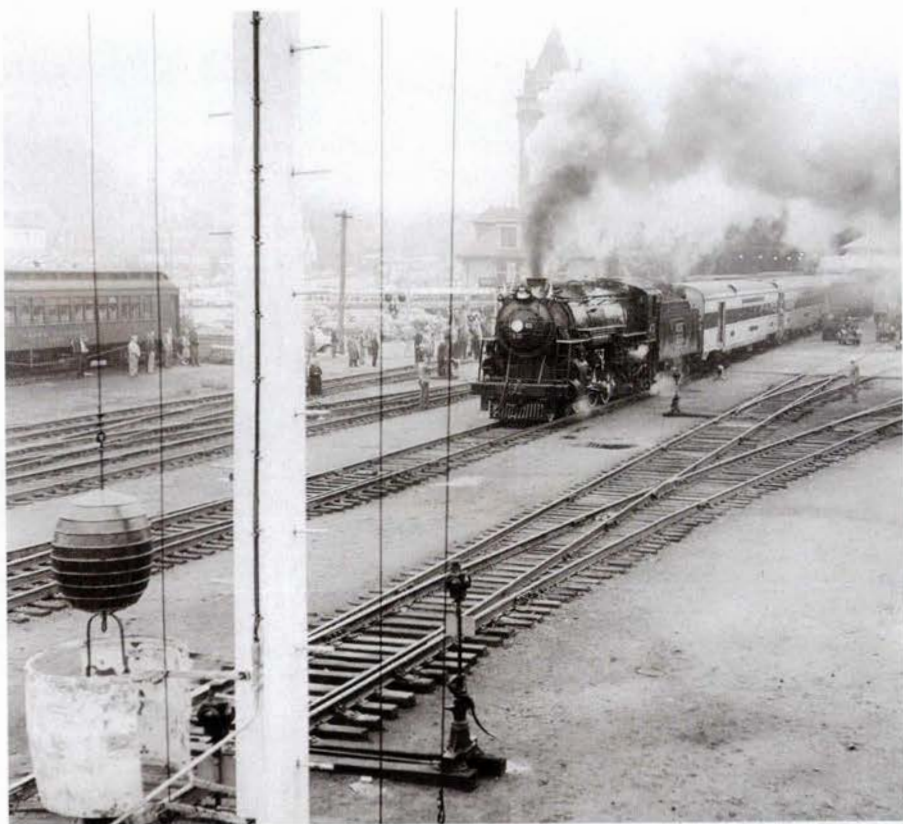
MEC's modern financial strength, though, was directly tied to the paper industry; wood products and by-products were its lifeblood. When the wood and paper industries did well, so did the railroad. In recessions, MEC coped.

Maine Central's history mirrored the railroad industry as a whole, a legacy characterized by expansion with touches of greed and arrogance, prosperity, success, hard times, retreat, and survival. MEC came under control of the Eastern Railroad in the mid-1870's and through it, control was passed to the Boston & Maine in 1884. B&M continued to influence MEC for 80 years. Requiring its own headquarters, MEC built a stolid edifice in Portland on St. John Street, beginning in 1898.

In 1907, the New Haven bought con-



GENERAL ELECTRIC



PHILIP R. HASTINGS

trol of B&M, and by extension, MEC. This arrangement ended in 1914, but not before MEC and B&M created the Portland Terminal Company in 1911 to facilitate operations in Maine's largest city. That same year the New Haven ordered Portland to take control of 2-foot-gauge lines Sandy River & Rangeley Lakes and (in 1912) Bridgeton & Saco River. When the lumber business in those regions evaporated in the 1920's, MEC, by then independent, sold them.

Hard times during the Depression forced MEC and B&M to agree to share corporate functions, with Boston at the throttle. The arrangement offered the benefits of merger without the legal entanglements, but after World War II, MEC's directors thought their railroad was getting the short end of the stick and the arrangement ended in 1952. Full separation wasn't achieved until 1955, with the election of corporate counsel E. Spencer Miller as president.

By then, MEC mirrored the operation of B&M, right down to the ringing of tinny electric bells in the accounting

Pacific 470 departs Portland Union Station June 13, 1954, with MEC's last steam run; 2000 people would greet her in Waterville, now her home.

departments on the third floor of the general offices that indicated when employees were to begin work, take a coffee break, break for lunch, resume work, etc. Tradition was hard to extinguish; the "bells" practice lasted into the Guilford era. Outwardly, MEC took small steps to distinguish itself from B&M, such as swapping deep green for the maroon on some road diesels while retaining the basic styling, much of it suggested by builders EMD and Alco. Although other units kept their maroon and gold for almost two decades more, MEC had established its own culture.

In steam days, Maine Central's roster was typical for a small road. Most numerous were Ten-Wheelers (67), and perhaps the most glamorous were its two 1930 Baldwin 4-6-4's. MEC owned 32 2-8-2's and some hand-me-down engines from B&M including eight 2-10-2's and even four 2-6-6-2's. MEC



JIM SHAUGHNESSY

Just out of Beecher Falls, Vt., MEC's daily mixed to Whitefield, N.H., approaches the Connecticut River bridge behind SW9 334 on May 28, 1955.

June 13, 1954, behind No. 470, the last of MEC's 26 Pacifics, from which MEC's unofficial historical group, a Portland railfan organization, took its name. The 1924 Schenectady 4-6-2 is displayed in the MEC shop town of Waterville.

bought its first yard diesels in 1941, from Alco, and moved quickly after the war by purchasing new RS2's and RS3's, EMD F3's and GP7's, seven E7's for its passenger trains, and two Alco RS11's in 1956. Steam operation ended with a "last run" special in a pouring rain on

Maine Central's modern passenger operation began in 1935 with the purchase by B&M and MEC of the Budd-built, *Zephyr*-like *Flying Yankee*, today undergoing restoration. In 1947, MEC



bought eight new coaches, two diner-bar counter cars, and two baggage-coach cars, all from Pullman-Standard, in a joint order with B&M.

Deficits from passenger service cut deeply into profits through the 1950's, and passenger service ended in September 1960. The authoritarian Miller made sure there was no going back, selling all the passenger cars, even those just 10 years old, and properties. Depots were razed, even Portland's magnificent Union Station, which rocked the community. One car was sacred, though: MEC 333, the "Three Threes," a 1924 Pullman business car which had Peruvian wood paneling and brass fixtures.

Throughout the 1970's, Miller and Buck Dumaine (of New Haven Railroad and Amoskeag fame) debated merger. Dumaine's Amoskeag Corp. controlled the Bangor & Aroostook, and he wanted to vote Amoskeag's stock interest in MEC to form an alliance or merger. Although MEC was stronger, Dumaine saw himself at the head of such a combination. But he wasn't a match for the Harvard Law-schooled Miller, who repelled Dumaine's advances, postulating that ownership by a conglomerate was not in the interests of any railroad.

Miller seemed to prove his point. Modernizing with new motive power (GP38's in 1966-67) and rolling stock in a bright yellow and green livery, his purchases spoke for themselves—MEC was healthy and didn't need a partner to stay in business. When General Electric delivered 10 U18B "baby U-boats" in 1975, they were christened the "Independence Class," a double entendre,

Nine of MEC's 19 GP7's had dynamic brakes for the "Mountain Division," and 568 (plus F3 681) indeed are at St. Johnsbury, Vt., in August 1964.



R. R. WALLIN; J. DAVID INGLES COLLECTION

with each unit given a name in a revolutionary theme in anticipation of the U.S. bicentennial. Seven were named for patriots (Gen. Henry Knox, Hannah Weston, Gen. John Stark, Gen. Peleg Wadsworth, Kenneth Roberts, John Allan, and Ethan Allen); the others were *Arundel* (for a Roberts novel); *Unity* (a warship); and *Battle of Bagaduce*.

We admired our resourceful mechanical forces in Waterville and Bangor as they rebuilt aging GP7's, including four bought from Louisville & Nashville and one from Algoma Central. Their great challenge was MEC's 1980 purchase of 14 Rock Island U25B's, 4 of which were fit only to supply parts.

As the lumbering and paper businesses diminished, though, so did MEC's traffic. Branchline service was reduced, and some lines were abandoned. Friends retired. Employment shrank.

The septuagenarian Miller, easing into retirement but still wanting to keep control, sought to protect MEC from Dumaine. Thinking he might find a buyer who would need to retain him as a guiding figure, Miller selected a small firm that seemed just right: U.S. Filter. It had no rail background, and would need Miller to run it. Maine Central's stockholders approved the sale in 1980.

Within a year, Miller's plan went awry. U.S. Filter was purchased by Ashland Oil, which had no need or desire for a railroad. Ashland went shopping for a buyer, and found one. After its purchase by Timothy Mellon's Guilford Transportation Industries in 1981, the Maine Central slowly and painfully lost its identity . . . and in the process, lost its soul. ■

Maine Central fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1981)

Route-miles: 1121; 818

Locomotives: 201; 73

Freight cars: 6698; 4523

Passenger cars: 264; 66 (1959)

Headquarters city: Portland, Maine

Notable postwar passenger trains: *Flying Yankee, Pine Tree Limited*

Special interest group: The 470 Club Inc., P.O. Box 641, Portland, ME 04104

Source: *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999).