

Take a ride on the Reading

EVEN THOUGH the Reading Company's railroad disappeared into Conrail 24 years ago, it is still possible to "take a ride on the Reading." This can be done when playing the board game Monopoly, or (more literally) by boarding a SEPTA commuter train in the Philadelphia area. Today, the Reading (pronounced "Redding," not "Reeding") would be termed a regional carrier, but in the classic era, it had a much larger presence on the railroad scene than its approximately 1300 route-miles would suggest.

The Philadelphia & Reading Railroad was chartered in 1833 and opened in 1842 from Philadelphia along the Schuylkill River through Reading to Pottsville, Pa., 93 miles. Its purpose was to haul anthracite coal to Philadelphia. Beginning in 1850, the railroad grew by leasing, purchasing, or merging with nearly 100 smaller railroads over the next century. Some of the more important were the Lebanon Valley, which gave the Reading access to Harrisburg, and the Philadelphia, Harrisburg & Pittsburgh, which extended its reach west to Shippensburg, Pa., and a connection with the Western Maryland. To the east it acquired the East Pennsylvania Railroad between Reading and Allentown. These later routes would form a part

of the famous "Alphabet Route" from Chicago to New York and New England. Other carriers associated with this route were Nickel Plate, Wheeling & Lake Erie, Pittsburgh & West Virginia, Central of New Jersey, Lehigh & Hudson River, and New Haven.

In the late 1880's, the Reading acquired the North Pennsylvania and the Delaware & Bound Brook railroads, which provided access to Bethlehem, Pa., and to a Jersey Central connection at Bound Brook, N.J. The inclusion

of several small lines in the coal regions gave the Reading access to Williamsport, Pa.,

and an important connection with the

New York Central. Eventually the Reading reached

New York Harbor at Port Reading,

N.J. As a result of these acquisitions, the Reading would become a strategic "bridge line," forwarding overhead traffic. (In a high-profile example of this role, RDG was middleman on the Jersey City-Washington Royal Blue Route.) At Philadelphia, ferries crossed the Delaware River, allowing the road to reach southern New Jersey seashore resorts via the Atlantic City Railroad. One other important link was the Wil-

At Jenkintown, Pa., passengers wait to board an Iron Horse Ramble. This November 14, 1959, trip was the third in the popular 5-year steam series.



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By Dale W. Woodland

ilmington & Northern, which gave the road access to Wilmington, Del. In 1923, the P&R merged the companies it acquired into the Reading Company and divested itself of the Philadelphia & Reading Coal & Iron Company following a government antitrust suit. In 1933, the Reading and the Pennsylvania Railroad consolidated their South Jersey operations into the Pennsylvania-Reading Seashore Lines (PRSL).



S. BOTSKO

A 2-8-0 of "America's Largest Anthracite Carrier" switches hopper cars at a St. Claire (Pa.) mine.

After World War II, the Reading was affected by several factors which would lead to its demise. The biggest was the decline of anthracite traffic, which went from 16 million tons in 1945 to just under 2 million in 1975. The completion of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1957 diverted grain traffic bound for Atlantic Coast ports. The expansion of the Interstate highway system, the Penn Central merger of 1968, the demise of interchange partner CNJ in 1971, and the sale of Reading's stock by parent Chessie System led to bankruptcy in 1971. The biggest blow was the PC merger, because it removed much of the bridge traffic with NYC and New Haven, traffic the Reading desperately needed to make up for the loss of coal business.

On April 1, 1976, most of the Reading's railroad assets were transferred to Conrail. With Amtrak charging high freight user fees on its former PC lines, Conrail shifted much of its New Jersey and southeastern Pennsylvania freight traffic to former Reading lines. SEPTA continued to operate the former Reading commuter routes, which Reading electrified in 1931. During the Conrail era, some 22 short lines operated portions of former RDG branches, but



JOHN BRIGGS

Shiny new FP7's stand at Reading Terminal with the *Crusader*; at right, an electric M.U. looks on.

major yard and terminal facilities such as Port Richmond, Rutherford Yard near Harrisburg, and the Reading (Pa.) shops were downgraded. The famous Reading Terminal in Philadelphia survived inside the Pennsylvania Convention Center along with the venerable farmers market at street level.

The Reading was notable for many things. It was the first to use the "Stop, Look & Listen" crossbucks at road crossings. Since it served a large Pennsylvania Dutch (German) population, its passenger-train conductors were famous for being bi-lingual. In the middle of the 20th century, RDG boasted that its Port Richmond on the Delaware River in Philadelphia was the largest privately owned tidewater port on the East Coast. The stainless-steel *Crusader* of 1937, the first streamlined passenger train in the East, featured an observation car at each end to preclude turning at its terminals of Philadelphia and Jersey City. After the steam era, the "Iron Horse Ramble" excursions, pulled by T-1 4-8-4's built in the road's own shops in 1945-48, made the Reading well known all over the U.S. In the mid-1960's, RDG introduced its innovative "Bee Line Service." A shipper could order a train of up to 20 cars to operate from point to point with one crew. This fast service, blurbled on some of the Reading's yellow-and-green high-horsepower diesels, was designed to compete with trucks for short-haul traffic.

Reading's locomotives were unique in both the steam and diesel eras. The Camelback and conventional end-cab steam locomotives had wide Wootten fireboxes, above-center headlights, and

arched cab windows, giving them a distinctive look. In 1948, the Reading built the last Pacifics in the U.S. In the diesel era, Reading's roster boasted a great variety with box-cabs, road-switchers, and cab units, represented by all five major builders. Reading had the first GP30's and the only SD45's with built-out windshields for dual controls. What really set most of Reading diesels apart was the inverted V-shaped drip strip above the cab windows, a feature not found on any other U.S. railroad except stepchild PRSL.

My association with the Reading began in 1945, when I was age 3 and my grandfather would take me on rides behind Pacifics from Norristown into Philadelphia. I still recall the seemingly gigantic size of the locomotive as it rolled into the DeKalb Street Station. The ride ended at the huge Reading Terminal trainshed, with its unique sights, sounds, and smells. Later, my parents would drive me to the roundhouse at Bridgeport and the classification yard at nearby Abrams. Friendly crews at Abrams provided rides in dark-green Alco RS3's switching the flat yard. A ride from Gordon to Locust Summit, Pa., in the cab of newly delivered FM Train Master 803, as it



ROBERT S. MCGONIGAL

C630 5308 and GP30 5513, preserved by the RCT&HS, pose at Reading Shops in June 1987.

pushed a coal train upgrade, cemented my fascination with Reading diesels.

A mid-1960's move to Lansdale, Pa., exposed me to the Reading's Bethlehem Branch. Our apartment was just 50 feet from the tracks, providing an up-close view. I saw brand-new six-axle power from Alco, GE, and EMD on the heavy iron-ore trains between Port Richmond and the steel mills at Beth-

lehem. For a brief time, as each type of locomotive was delivered, Reading tested them in solid sets of three. The Alco C630's and GE U30C's certainly made an audible, if not esthetic impression. With the onset of Conrail, I began to track down former Reading equipment with my camera, which eventually led to my association with the Reading Company Technical & Historical Society and the Anthracite Railroads Historical Society.

Today, Norfolk Southern operates former Reading lines linking Philadelphia, Harrisburg, and Allentown, while CSX runs the former Reading between Philadelphia and Bound Brook. Most of the remaining Philadelphia-area lines are part of the Conrail Shared Assets Operation, and many former Reading branches are run by short lines. The largest cluster of these is the coal region lines of the Reading & Northern Railroad, which has adopted a Reading look for its locomotives. Much Reading equipment has been preserved at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania at Strasburg, and by the RCT&HS at Leesport, Pa. ■

DALE W. WOODLAND, of Souderton, Pa., has had numerous photos and articles in TRAINS Magazine, and has written four books on the Reading Company. He is the editor of the "Keystoner" column in Railpace Newsmagazine.

Reading Co. fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1975)

Route-miles: 1460; 1149

Locomotives: 988; 225

Passenger cars: 910; 176

Freight cars: 43,298; 12,213

Headquarters city: Philadelphia, Pa.

Special interest groups: Anthracite Railroads Historical Society, P.O. Box 519, Lansdale, PA 19446-0519; arhs@railfan.net; Reading Company Technical & Historical Society, P.O. Box 5143, Reading, PA 19612-5143; www.readingrailroad.org

Notable postwar passenger trains: *Crusader*, *Wall Street* (Philadelphia-Jersey City)

Source: *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999). For more on the Reading, visit CLASSIC TRAINS online at www.classictrainsmag.com.