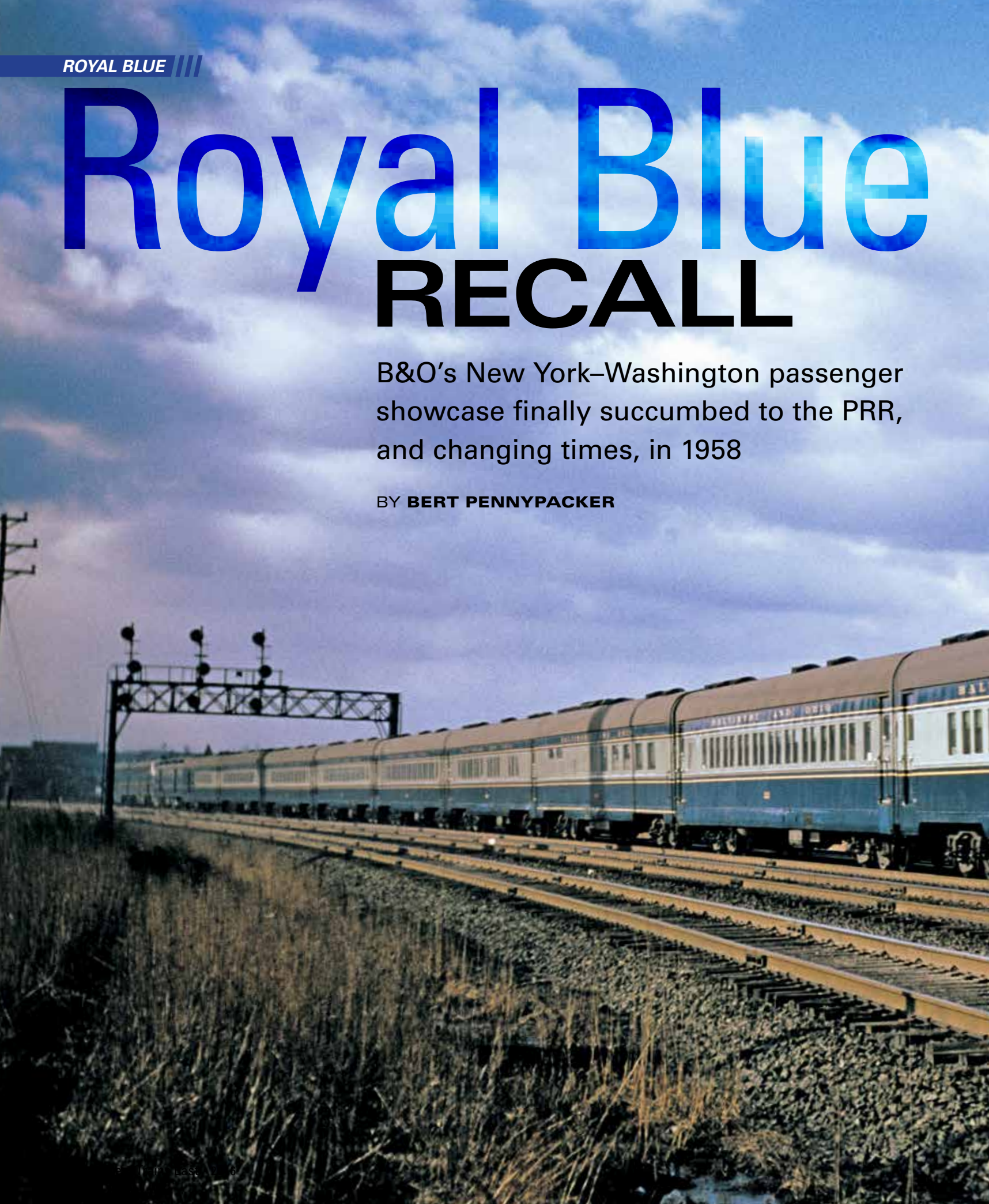
Royal Blue RECALL

B&O's New York–Washington passenger showcase finally succumbed to the PRR, and changing times, in 1958

BY **BERT PENNYPACKER**



Line

In 1910 (above), B&O 4-4-0 No. 853 nears Washington with a Royal Blue Line train. Four decades later (below), in 1952, two E units speed away from Jersey City with the *Royal Blue* herself.

Above, Charles B. Chaney; below, Ed Theisinger

On a bright and clear Saturday, April 26, 1958, Baltimore & Ohio's celebrated Royal Blue Line was in full operation on its 223.6-mile route between Washington and Jersey City, just as it had been for 68 years. Using the through route that exercised trackage rights on the Reading Company and Central Railroad of New Jersey east of Philadelphia, B&O's handsome blue-and-gray E units forwarded 12 daily named expresses, most of them carrying parlor cars, full diners, and through Pullmans to and from western connections at Washington. A scheduled Budd RDC round trip operated as far east as Philadelphia, and a 15-car schoolchildren's New York City excursion ran to Jersey City.

Yes, April 26 seemed like any other day since 1890 — but it wasn't, for on the next day there would be no Royal Blue Line and B&O's eastern passenger terminus would be Baltimore. In what was perhaps America's largest fell-swoop passenger-train discontinuance, the Royal Blue Line finally had succumbed in its long fight with the parallel Pennsylvania Railroad for at least a modest-size wedge of the New York traffic pie. Competing against monumental disadvantages, B&O had predicated its competitive stance upon courtesy and extra services such as coach attendants and trainside bus connections from the Jersey City ferry terminal on five routes into Manhattan and Brooklyn.

In a thrilling 1905 publicity photo (top), Royal Blue Line trains pass at speed on famous Thomas Viaduct outside Baltimore. B&O vestibule coach 445 (above) of 1896 is resplendent in dark blue with gold lettering and striping and Maryland's coat of arms.
Top, Smithsonian Institution collection; above, B&O

CHANGING PARTNERS

It all began in the formative years when B&O was determined to extend its eastern terminus beyond Baltimore and tap the lucrative Philadelphia and New York trade. This led directly into a bitter grudge fight with predecessor lines of the Pennsylvania, which had handled B&O traffic east of Baltimore. After obtaining an interest in both the Reading and Jersey Central, B&O in 1880 suddenly switched its trains to that route at Philadelphia in violation of its contract with PRR. The keystone road retaliated by deliberately delaying B&O trains that used its Junction Railroad between Grays Ferry and Belmont in Philadelphia.

A court battle over this proved to no avail, and then in 1881 B&O again was rebuffed in an attempt to gain control of the Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore, which entered PRR's camp. Finally, by 1884 the squabbling

Reading Company catenary disappears in the smoke of P-7 Pacific 5318 *President Garfield*, scooping water from the pans at Roelofs, Pa., 29 miles east of Philadelphia. The train is the *Shenandoah* to Chicago.
W. R. Osborne; below, John D. Denney Jr. collection

over train handling and delays became so intolerable that Pennsy simply slammed the door on all B&O traffic. B&O, after once again losing a court decision over this, rushed completion of its own line from Baltimore to Philadelphia, hooking up with the Reading at Park Junction in Philadelphia in 1886.

The rivals now could compete on even terms. In 1890, B&O established the Royal Blue Line, featuring "through vestibuled limited express trains between New York and Washington, no extra fare for fast time." The cars, pooled from B&O/RDG/CNJ equipment, were painted blue with gold lettering and striping. Their letterboards read ROYAL BLUE LINE with state coats of arms at each end — Maryland's for B&O cars, Pennsylvania's for Reading's, and New Jersey's for CNJ's. The idea of not charging extra fare for speed apparently signaled the beginning of a practice of extra services, innovations, and a superbly run operation that was to exemplify the Royal Blue Line trains for their 68 years.

B&O and PRR trains — their routes often within sight of each other and even crisscrossing at several points — competed on an almost minute-by-minute basis in running times. This was the great age of "wooden cars and iron men" railroading. Passenger-car interiors displayed the ornate splendor of Victorian decor, and highly polished locomotives received treatment accorded the personal property of their engineers.

The dawn of the 20th century brought advanced concepts in motive power, and as 4-4-0s became less numerous on important limiteds, bigger engines took over. To match the fast-flying pace of Pennsy's new E2 heavy Atlantics, B&O in 1901 received from Baldwin nine Vauclain compound Ten-Wheelers especially designed for Royal Blue Line service. They had 78-inch driving wheels and were known as class B-17. The compound cylinders soon gave way to standard slide valves, but in any event, the B-17s' speed and power became legend along the line for many years. By 1906, however, the first P-class Pacifics, built by Schenectady, also began appearing with their long, slim boilers, slanted piston-valve cylinders, and Stephenson valve gear — hallmarks of their builder in that period.

The B&O engines came off at Philadelphia, where Philadelphia & Reading or Jersey Central power took over for the final 91 miles to Jersey City. Beginning in 1906, P&R's big class P-5 Camelback 4-4-2s became a familiar sight on these trains. Their 86-inch drivers reached above the cab floor level, and firemen had a vast 94.5 square feet of grate area to cover.

Then in 1910, Pennsy subjected the Royal Blue Line to its initial disadvantage by burrowing beneath the Hudson River and spiking down PRR rails to the very heart of Manhattan. However, B&O still was able to match the overall running time of 5 hours flat for the fastest trains, even though they could go no farther than the Hudson's west bank with ferry connections. Both routes experienced a change of motive power en route, with the B&O-P&R exchange occurring at Philadelphia, as mentioned, and Pennsy's steam-electric change at Manhattan Transfer, N.J., just east of Newark.

Under wartime orders of the United States Railroad Administration, B&O in 1918 scored a notable competitive

Baltimore: Mount Royal Station, located 1.5 miles north of old Camden Station at the north end of Howard Street Tunnel, opened in 1896 as the centerpiece of B&O's electrified Baltimore Belt Line. Commuters' autos fill the fore court in this 1942 scene.
Baltimore & Ohio

Washington: Doubleheaded 4-6-2s on a Royal Blue Line train approach Washington Union Station, beyond which rises the U.S. Capitol dome, in May 1937. The two tracks closest to the tower at right are B&O's Metropolitan Division from Harpers Ferry, W.Va.
A. D. Hooks

victory by being granted entrance to Penn Station in New York. The revised routing went over Lehigh Valley between Bound Brook and Newark, then to PRR, completely bypassing CNJ. Needless to say, this arrangement was a bitter pill for the PRR to swallow. It's been said that during the eight years B&O trains used Penn Station, ticket clerks were instructed to automatically sell only PRR tickets unless the customer specifically asked for B&O. By 1926, the unwanted tenant was evicted and was sent back across the Hudson to CNJ's Jersey City ferry terminal.

SPECIAL LOCOMOTIVES

The guidance of B&O's noted motive-power chief, Col. George H. Emerson, brought revolutionary changes to Royal Blue Line equipment and engines that culminated in dieselization. First, Emerson needed a new high-capacity locomotive that could equal the performance of Pennsy's great K4s Pacific. So in 1927 Baldwin outshopped class P-7 Pacifics 5300–5319, popularly dubbed "President class" because each carried the name of an early U.S. president on its cab. Their basic dimensions bore remarkable resemblance to those of the K4: 27x28-inch cylinders, 80-inch drivers, and nearly similar boilers and grate areas. But the higher steam pressure (230 pounds vs. 205) of the P-7 afforded slight edges in tractive effort and potential horsepower, at least on paper.

Like the high-drivered B-17 Ten-Wheelers of 1901, the P-7s were designed primarily for Royal Blue work and for such had the U.S. presidents' names as well as a special paint scheme. The P-7's color scheme began with a basic overall livery in standard coach olive green; lettering and striping was in gold leaf. Dark-red trim embellished certain small parts. Beginning about 1935, with the appearance of blue passenger cars, P-7s began acquiring a new livery of matching deep blue without striping. Finally in 1943, the presidents' names were removed.

When the P-7s arrived in 1927, B&O's standard Royal Blue power consisted of hand-fired class P-5 USRA light Pacifics. which ran between Washington and Philadelphia. On the Reading, G-1sa Pacifics had been relaying B&O trains east to Jersey City since they were built in 1916. The heavy stoker-fired P-7s changed all that and began running straight through from Washington to Jersey City. (This arrangement applied only to passenger engines; in steam days, B&O freight power could be seen east of Philly only on rare occasions of emergency.)

Since the Royal Blue Line was a high-speed route convenient to B&O's Mount Clare Shops in Baltimore, it provided an excellent testing ground for Colonel Emerson's experimental steam locomotives of the 1930s. Several big Hudson and Mountain types, the famous duplex-drive 4-4-4-4 No. 5600 which carried Emerson's name on her cab, the One-Spot 4-4-4 *Lady Baltimore*, and the Two-Spot 4-6-4 *Lord Baltimore* were put through their paces here, some making only

Philadelphia: Passengers board the St. Louis-bound *Diplomat* on April 23, 1958. B&O's Philly depot stood just across the Schuylkill River from PRR's 30th Street Station, hidden by the train in this photo.
Aaron G. Fryer

Elizabeth, N.J.: The Royal Blue Route crossed the Pennsy's competing Washington–New York line five times. At the northernmost crossing, EA diesel No. 55 and an EB bring a westbound train into CNJ's Elizabeth station as a PRR train passes overhead.
Classic Trains collection

Jersey City: The *Royal Blue* leaves the Manhattan skyline behind for the final time as it departs CNJ's terminal on the Hudson River on April 26, 1958. The next day, rail passengers would have one choice between New York and Washington: the Pennsylvania.
Don Wood

brief appearances. There also was a 21st President-class Pacific, No. 5320, *President Cleveland*, built at Mount Clare in 1928. She was a class P-9, differing from a P-7 principally in having an Emerson watertube firebox and Caprotti poppet valve gear.

Most of Emerson's experimentals did well, but one casualty involved the frail and slippery *Lady*, whose 84-inch drivers and light weight couldn't withstand the rigors of Royal Blue work. Her stay was brief, for after a few break-in runs she assumed her intended mission on B&O's subsidiary Alton Railroad between Chicago and St. Louis; unfortunately, she did poorly there too.

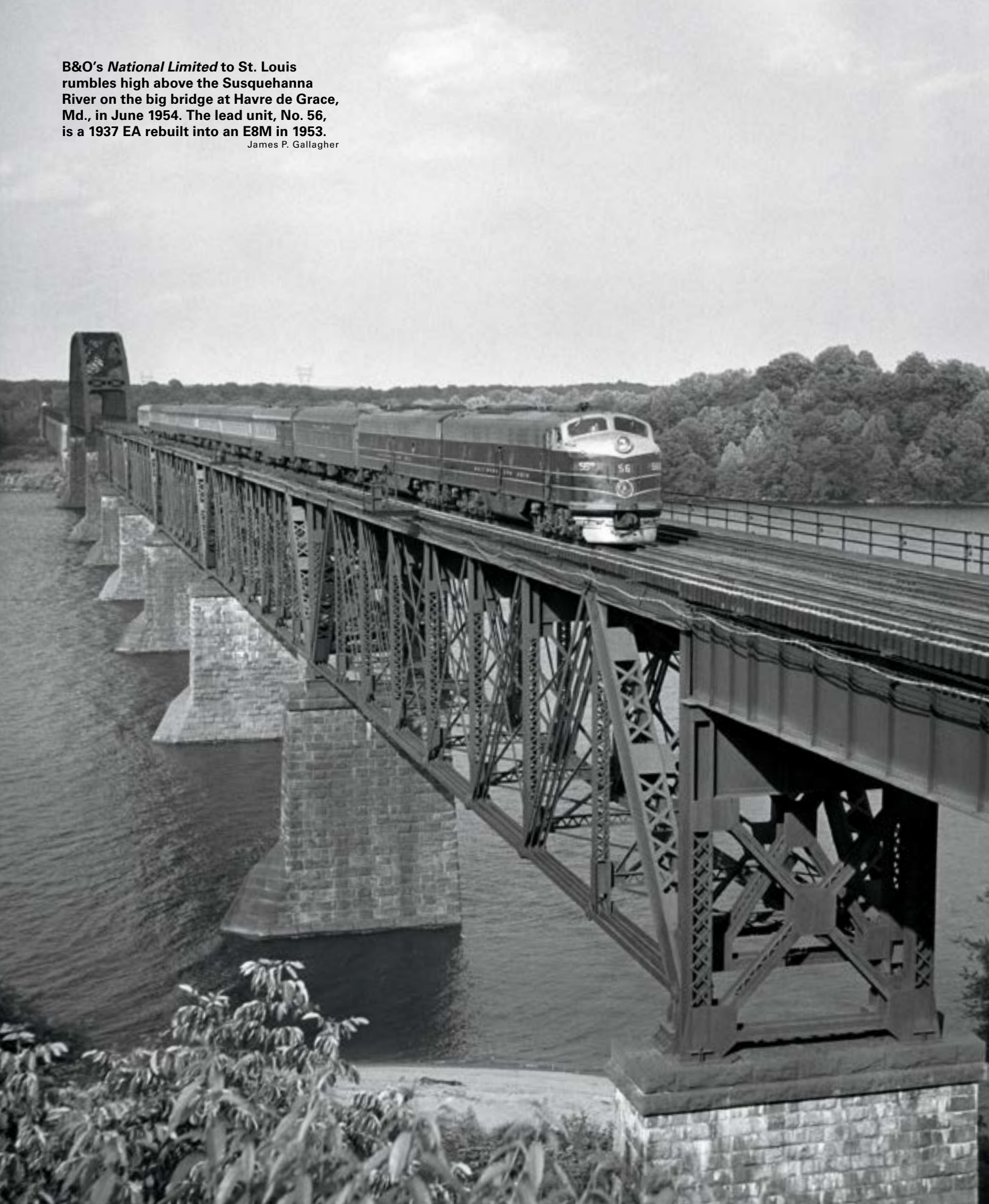
In one sense, every steam experimental may be considered a casualty because the exhaustive tests to increase capacity served only to prove that Electro-Motive diesels provided the capacity and economy Emerson so diligently pursued in motive power. Therefore, the most successful experimental of them all had to be America's first single-unit passenger diesel, the 1,800 h.p. box-cab that broke in on the Royal Blue in 1935. Two years later, B&O had America's first single-unit streamlined diesels running in the form of EMD EAs. In original or rebuilt 2,000 h.p. (E8M) form, they powered the Royal Blue regularly to its final day of operation.

The Washington–Jersey City route was the only place on the entire B&O where steam locomotives scooped water from track pans. These were at Stanton, Del., and Swan Creek, Md., 33 and 63 miles, respectively, south of Philadelphia, roughly every 30 miles along the 96-mile Philly–Baltimore segment. The Reading had track pans at Roelofs, Pa., and CNJ at Green Brook (Dunellen), N.J. Including standpipe water spouts at Philadelphia and Baltimore (Camden Station), six water-supply points were possible en route, but with 11,000-gallon tenders, the P-7s didn't always take water at every track pan.

Track pans were constructed of rolled steel plate, were about 8 inches deep, and were fed by gravity from a nearby tank, with the water level controlled by float valves. The Stanton pans were 1,450 feet long, while those at Swan Creek measured 1,300 feet — rather short compared with those on New York Central and Pennsy, which measured up to 2,500 feet. Maximum scooping speed was 55 mph. The amount of water that could be picked up varied from 2½ to 2¾ gallons per lineal foot of scooping distance, meaning that somewhere over 3,000 gallons might be secured from the short B&O pans. Speed had a lot to do with how much water actually got into the tank, for too fast a gait would throw much water aside; 35 to 45 mph was considered an ideal scooping speed on most roads.

PIONEERING EFFORTS

Throughout its lifetime of illustrious service, the Royal Blue Line was noted for



B&O's *National Limited* to St. Louis rumbles high above the Susquehanna River on the big bridge at Havre de Grace, Md., in June 1954. The lead unit, No. 56, is a 1937 EA rebuilt into an E8M in 1953.
James P. Gallagher

special and lavish attentions to its equipment and services in order to keep one jump ahead of the competition. The line was run almost like a separate part of the railroad and nearly always received innovations first. Although the Royal Blue Line operated as a valuable connecting link in forwarding through cars for B&O's east-west services, it also existed as a line catering to its own clientele with its own equipment pools. For all practical purposes, most through trains ended at Washington and were reswitched for the Royal Blue portion of the runs; even diesel units seldom went through.

B&O in 1929 tried the first experimental air-conditioned car. The weight of coach 5275 was increased by 7 tons with this installation, which — before the advent of mechanical refrigeration equipment — featured iceboxes beneath the car into which were placed 300-pound blocks of ice. The following year, B&O's Royal Blue Line became the first to use a regularly assigned air-conditioned car, dining car *Martha Washington*. And in 1931, the *Columbian* between Washington and Jersey City became the world's first fully air-conditioned train.

It seems almost inconceivable that with the completion of Pennsy's high-speed electrification to Washington in 1935 that another road would stand a ghost of a chance to compete, yet B&O's special brands of extra service and courtesy continued to fill 18 daily trains for many years. The fabulous performance of GG1 electrics permitted a reduction in PRR's overall running time from 4 hours 40 minutes to 3 hours 35 minutes, while the best B&O eventually could manage with diesels was just under 4 hours.

However, on June 24, 1935, B&O scored a competitive bull's-eye with its new flagship, the *Royal Blue*, the first non-articulated streamliner in the East and the second in America (Milwaukee's *Hiawatha* had debuted a month earlier). The eight-car *Royal Blue* consisted of lightweight Duraluminum equipment built by American Car & Foundry: one baggage car, three coaches, one diner/lunch-counter car, two full parlor cars, and one parlor-observation. It became trains 27-28, replacing the *Columbian*, and initially was powered by experimental Hudson *Lord Baltimore*, which had a clean-lined appearance in the style of British locomotives. On August 22, 1935, EMC's first single-unit road diesel, box-cab No. 50 with two Winton 201A engines, started trial runs with the train.

It's interesting to note that the original *Royal Blue* consist had a twin, a set of equipment built of Cor-Ten steel that became trains 2 and 3, the *Abraham Lincoln*, on the Alton between Chicago and St. Louis. To power this train, which began operation July 1, 1935, B&O supplied experimental 4-4-4 No. 1 *Lady Baltimore*.

By 1937, diesel 50 and the eight-car *Royal Blue* lightweight train were sent to the Alton

The "Bullet" — streamlined P-7 No. 5304 — dashes down CNJ's four-track main line with the *Royal Blue* in the late 1930s or '40s. One of the few steam locomotives to be streamlined twice, 5304 donned a different dress in '47 for service on the *Cincinnatian*.
Frank Quin

Watertube-fireboxed 4-6-4 *Lord Baltimore* — one of B&O motive power boss George Emerson's experiments — has the original lightweight *Royal Blue* in hand at Elizabethport, N.J., in 1937, shortly before the engine and cars were reassigned to the Alton.
R. P. Morris

Another novel locomotive on the lightweight *Royal Blue* was diesel No. 50, forerunner of Electro-Motive's line of E units. Like steam locomotives *Lord* and *Lady Baltimore*, the 1935 box-cab, pictured on CNJ with the *Royal Blue*, was sent to the Alton Railroad.
A. P. Formanek

EA No. 51 — the first Electro-Motive E unit — heads the *Capitol Limited* at Jersey City in 1953, not long before the unit went to B&O's museum in Baltimore. The bus at left brought passengers from New York.
I. W. King, Joel King collection

as well, where they became the *Ann Rutledge*. Mount Clare Shops rebuilt 16 older heavyweight cars, and 8 of them became the improved *Royal Blue*, this time pulled by a completely streamlined P-7a, No. 5304, which was considered so beautiful and graceful that B&O men dubbed her the "Bullet." Otto Kuhler designed her streamlining as well as the entire train and, later, the most handsome blue-and-gray paint scheme for diesel road units.

Although the B&O found little difficulty in filling its 18 daily Royal Blue trains during the hectic World War II years, seasoned travelers knew they had a better chance of finding a few empty seats on the B&O since PRR's 150,000-plus everyday load seemed like rush hour in the subway at all times. B&O's heavyweight cars, rebuilt by Mount Clare Shops and kept in tip-top shape, rode smoothly and comfortably. One of the author's favorite trains was the *Marylander*, which retained its P-7 Pacific after most of the other runs had been dieselized. And who could ever forget the diner's great B&O salad bowl for 85 cents, almost a meal in itself?

The heaviest consists — which often ran 12 cars or more, including through and local pool assignments — counted among them the *Capitol Limited, National Limited*, and *Shenandoah*, which consequently had the slowest schedules and, with 10 or more cars, rated three diesel units. In CNJ's Jersey City ferry terminal, tracks 16 and 18 were assigned to all B&O trains. Track 17 was removed and paved over for use by the train-side motor-coach transfer. At the outer end of the trainshed there was a flat-platform turntable to turn the buses, which used CNJ ferries to reach Manhattan, there branching out on their respective five routes.

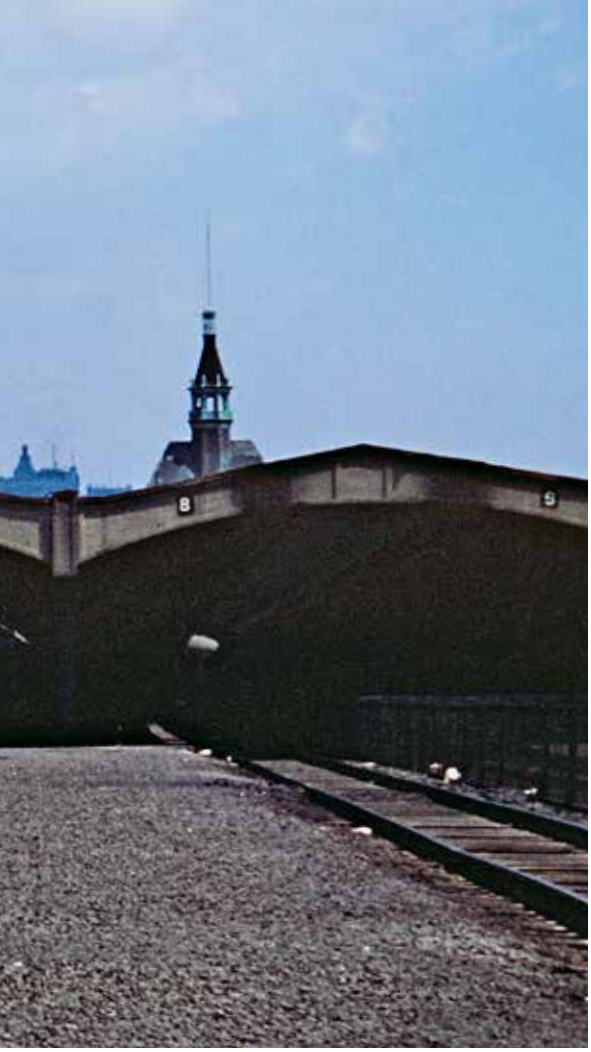
PENNSY GAINS AN EDGE

Perhaps the two hottest competitors of their time were B&O's *Royal Blue* and PRR's *Afternoon Congressional*, which usually highballed out of Washington Union Station side by side. Classic photos from the steam era depict P-7 and K4 straining with every turn of their 80-inch drivers to accelerate faster and outdo each other, and in later years the same contest occurred between EMD diesels and GG1s. On August 15, 1947, both trains inaugurated on-board public telephone service.

However, the competitive stance of the Pennsy's 18-car stainless-steel *Congressional,* introduced in 1952, dwarfed that of B&O's train. The "Congo" had 8 coaches, 7 parlors, a twin-unit diner, and a coffee shop car with a total capacity of about 900. A typical total passenger count for the entire trip was over 1,500. *Royal Blue*'s three coaches and three parlors carried about 375 and handled a maximum of perhaps 600 passengers. An old saying stated, "The man who knows goes B&O," and that about sums it up when one considers the secret behind Royal Blue's long existence.

A good reason for the loyal following of B&O patrons is exemplified by an incident when the road went far beyond the expected in rendering extra service. A railfan excursion train arrived back in Baltimore too late for about 20 passengers to make connections with train 36, the last schedule for Philadelphia. B&O could have said, "We're sorry, but you can easily take a Pennsy train." It would never do this, though, and didn't in this case. Instead, a call went to Riverside enginehouse for a locomotive to pull a special three-car train for the 20 ticketholders.

The schedule frequency of the Royal Blue Line's nine trains in each direction had to be geared to connect with east-west service at Washington, since a majority of the Jersey City runs carried through cars for these connections. Therefore, most Royal Blue



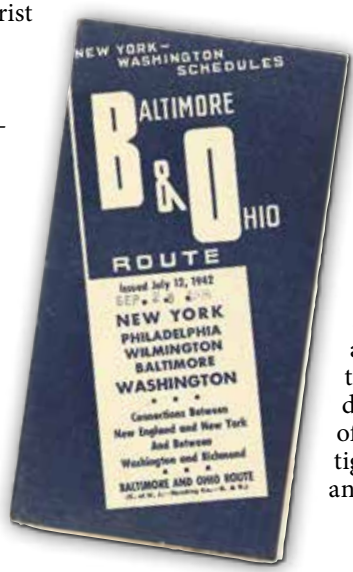
A toddler watches from a rear window of the *Royal Blue*'s observation car as the train departs Washington in the late 1930s. This modernized heavyweight equipment, which replaced the 1935 lightweight train in '37, ran until the end of service in 1958.
Alexander Maxwell

trains ran during the popular daylight hours, spaced from 1 to 3 hours apart between 8 a.m. and 7 p.m. In addition, a slow late-night run in each direction carried Pullman sleepers from Jersey City to and from Baltimore and Washington, 186.8 and 223.6 miles respectively — likely among the shortest sleeping-car runs ever operated.

The Royal Blue Line attracted much business from local sources, but it also depended on through ticketing for a good portion of its ridership. Admittedly, anyone who chose B&O from Jersey City to Chicago or St. Louis could only be a tourist out for the ride, but there were many in-between cities to furnish long-distance riders. B&O made the most of that, advertising "All East-West trains via Washington," so PRR felt obliged to throw in free Washington side trips on most of its long-distance tickets.

Compared with B&O's 18 daily trains — one of them a Philadelphia–Washington round trip — the armada of PRR limiteds seems almost incomprehensible. PRR ran 47 daily trains with hourly service in both directions between 6:30 a.m. and 9 p.m., all New York–Washington trains, and this did not even count the Clockers to Philadelphia. Most Pennsy trains were 12 to 18 cars long, handling up to 1,500 passengers, while B&O per-train tallies were less than half that figure.

By the early 1950s, the Royal Blue Line was clearly in trouble. Trains 9-10, the *Chicago Express* and *New York Express*, had disappeared from timetables, followed by 504-523, the *Marylander*. In a move to save 35-36, the *Washington Express* and *Philadelphia Express*, RDCs — one equipped with a kitchen — were placed in service as trains 21-22, *Daylight Speedliner*, not just to Washington but all the way to Pittsburgh on a daily round trip. New stainless-steel cars also had appeared, especially as through equipment, although domes could not be used east of Washington because of tight clearances in Baltimore and Philadelphia tunnels. The biggest red-ink items included the expensive New York motor-coach service and heavy losses on Pullman and long-distance traffic.



PULLING THE PLUG QUICKLY

No one really believed that the Royal Blue Line could or would fold; and even after the Interstate Commerce Commission approved B&O's 1958 abandonment petition, court appeals were expected to revive the service. That never happened. It seems paradoxically prophetic that after all those years of bitter rivalry, the very presence of Pennsy's hourly service played a major role in helping to kill Royal Blue. So on April 26, 1958, the Royal Blue Line died without fanfare, performing its job superbly, just as though it would be there on the morrow. The following day, 350 employees, 16 diesels, and over 60 cars found no work to perform for B&O. All equipment was deadheaded to Baltimore, and the railroad became freight-only north of there.

BERT PENNYPACKER, a native of Coatesville, Pa., lived in Philadelphia from 1953 until his death in 2009 at age 85. He authored more than 200 magazine articles and 8 books, mostly on northeastern rail subjects.