

# Take a ride on the Seashore Lines

The Pennsylvania and Reading went from competition to cooperation in South Jersey • **By Robert S. McGonigal**



PRR's influence on the Seashore Lines is evident in this March 13, 1955, scene at Atlantic City of PRSL Baldwin AS16 6014 and PRR K4s 7279.

Frank C. Kozempel photo

“Hey kid,” the crewman called as his GP38 and caboose stopped at a switch just north of the Pennsylvania-Reading Seashore Lines station at Cape May N.J. “Ever been on a cabin car?” Not knowing exactly what a “cabin car” was, I said I hadn’t, and he invited me aboard. My first train ride on anything other than a passenger car ended 200 feet later as we eased to a stop on one of the station’s three stub-end tracks.

PRSL was the product of the 1933 merger of PRR affiliate West Jersey & Seashore Railroad and the Reading Co.’s Atlantic City Railroad, whose predecessors had been established to whisk pleasure-seekers to the new seashore resort of Atlantic City. The Camden & Atlantic Railroad arrived first, via Haddonfield, in July 1854. Atlantic City began to boom after the Civil War, inspiring the creation of the Philadelphia & Atlantic City Railway, whose line, via Clementon (and right beside the C&A beyond Winslow Junction), opened in 1877. “Narrow-gauge fever” was rampant, and the flat, straight P&AC was built to 3-foot 6-inch gauge.

Meanwhile, another company, the West Jersey Railroad, had opened a line from Camden down to Cape May via Newfield in 1863. Cape May was already well established as a shore resort, thanks to easy water access from Philadelphia.

Less dependent on shore-bound passenger travel than the two Atlantic City roads, the WJ enjoyed a more diversified traffic base and eventually covered more territory. The West Jersey came under the control of the Pennsylvania in 1875, and the giant road extended its reach to Atlantic City with a branch from the WJ at Newfield that opened in 1880 under the West Jersey & Atlantic name.

With three roads vying for Atlantic City traffic, a rate war ensued, the upshot of which was PRR’s acquisition of the C&A and the sale of the P&AC to the Philadelphia & Reading. Under Reading control, the P&AC was standard-gauged, double-tracked, and renamed Atlantic City Railroad. Competition between the proxies of the region’s two rail powerhouses was fierce. Camden–Atlantic City schedules became ever faster. ACRR expanded into WJ territory with a line from Winslow to Cape May, with branches to several shore points, completed in 1898. Two years earlier, PRR grouped its properties into the West Jersey & Seashore.

Also in 1896, PRR opened the Delair Bridge, a direct rail link between Philadelphia and South Jersey. Previously, all shore trips from Philadelphia and points west or south involved a ride on a PRR or Reading ferry across the Delaware River. Freight cars crossed on carfloats. Now

PRR could offer a single-seat ride all the way. However, it took time for trains to loop out of Philadelphia and onto the WJ&S at West Haddonfield, so the ACRR remained competitive, and many WJ&S trains continued to originate at Camden (and ferry service hung on until 1952).

The key was speed, and the rivals operated some of the world’s fastest trains. In February 1904, for example, a regularly scheduled WJ&S train dashed the 53 miles from West Haddonfield to Atlantic City in 39 minutes. Graceful, high-wheeled Atlantics did the honors.

The original West Jersey route to Atlantic City was too roundabout to figure in the speed wars, but it hosted commuter traffic into Camden and was threatened by interurban schemes. PRR electrified the line with a 650-volt D.C. third-rail system in 1906; Newfield–Millville also was included, but with overhead wire. Only passenger service was electrified, using a fleet of wooden M.U. cars. A few miles on the east end, as well as the branch to Somers Point, were shared with the Atlantic City & Shore Railroad—the “Shore Fast Line”—whose trolleys ran between Atlantic City and Ocean City.

The South Jersey carriers suffered after World War I, as automobile ownership and highway miles soared. A heavy blow was the opening in 1926 of the Delaware

River (later renamed Benjamin Franklin) Bridge. Although the trains were still faster than driving or taking a bus “down the shore,” ferry and rail traffic plummeted. Non-shore local business fell as well. The Great Depression made things worse. The seasonal nature of the roads’ business meant that physical plant required for the three busy summer months was vastly underutilized for the other nine.

A literal bright spot in this period was the 1929 launch of the *Blue Comet*, a specially painted Central Railroad of New Jersey train between Jersey City and Atlantic City that ran on the ACRR south of Winslow Junction; it lasted until 1941.

### Moving toward merger

A state commission formed in 1929 to study the South Jersey transit situation proposed a merger of the WJ&S and ACRR and the consolidation of their passenger terminals in Camden and Atlantic City. In addition to the savings the carriers would enjoy by abandoning redundant facilities, many grade crossings—an increasing source of conflict—would be eliminated. The parent companies balked initially, but, under pressure from the state, eventually came to terms. Reflecting its share of traffic and route-miles, PRR would hold 67 percent of the merged company; the Reading, 33 percent. The combination took effect on June 25, 1933, and the Pennsylvania-Reading Seashore Lines was born.

Camden operations were based at Pennsy’s ferry terminal and an improved station at Broadway that served PRR and Seashore Lines trains and connected with a new subway line that reached Philadelphia via the Delaware River Bridge. PRSL’s most impressive edifice, the new Atlantic City terminal, opened in September 1934. The merger also saw the abandonment of 83 miles of line, including the WJ&S between Woodbine Junction and Cape May and the ACRR from Winslow Junction to Atlantic City.

Management responsibilities were split between the parents, with PRR in charge of mechanical matters. PRSL was assigned about two dozen steam locomotives at any given time—all ex-WJ&S or ex-PRR 0-6-0’s, 2-8-0’s, and 4-4-2’s—until 1952, after which diesels could handle most off-season duties. Summer was a different story, and Seashore Lines leased power, mostly 4-6-2’s, from both parents until the end of steam in 1957. Likewise, PRSL’s passenger rolling stock was of



At Hammonton (top), Reading G-3 Pacifics in commuter service wait out a June 1954 weekend. An M.U. train for Millville shares a platform at Woodbury with gas-electric M-401 in early 1948.

Top, Frank C. Kozempel; above, E. F. Wiegand



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Not all lines shown



**K4 5432 on a Philly–Wildwood express ducks under one of the connections at Winslow Junction, whose tower is in the distance.**

Frank C. Kozempel photo



**RDC M-403 (top) left Lindenwold as the rear half of Cape May train 361 on August 21, 1975; now, uncoupled here at Tuckahoe, it has become train 261 for Ocean City. GP38 2003 is with 2002 and Baldwin 6024 at Pavonia Yard, Camden, in March '73; note 2003's extended cab front.**

Top, Frank C. Kozempel; above, Bill Lane coll.



Pennsy design and was routinely augmented by cars from PRR and Reading. Engines of one parent pulling cars of the other were a common sight.

World War II brought too much of a good thing. Demand for passenger travel skyrocketed on the PRSL, while its parents, flooded with traffic themselves, could not provide as many cars as in peacetime. The upswing in business made 1943 the only profitable year in Seashore Lines history.

In 1948, responding to pressure from the New Jersey Public Utilities Commission to improve service, PRSL began a program to upgrade 60 P70 coaches. The PUC agreed to let PRSL end the project after 40 cars if the road purchased 12 of the Budd Co.'s new Rail Diesel Cars, which arrived in 1950–51. The self-propelled cars were ideal for PRSL's Cape May Branch, on which a single train might contain cars for Ocean City, Wildwood, and Cape May; the elimination of locomotives in such an operation greatly reduced costs. After 1968, 10 RDC's (2 were lost in a 1958 shop fire) covered all PRSL passenger service.

Another 1948 PUC order, one that banned the use of wooden cars for the transport of passengers, spelled the end of the electric trains, which had operated only between Camden and Millville since 1931, when WJ&S pulled the plug on the Newfield–Atlantic City segment. Electric service ended in 1949.

### Diesels to the seashore

PRSL's first-generation diesel fleet, acquired during 1950–56, consisted of 34 switchers and four-axle road-switchers. Reflecting Pennsy practice and preferences, the locomotives were dressed in solid dark green with PRR-style lettering—and they were all Baldwins. Most of the bigger units had steam generators, and some assignments had individual engines handling freight and passenger trains on the same day. The leasing of power from the parent roads continued into the diesel era, but became less common as more and more passenger trains came off.

Leisure travel to shore points had all but vanished by the early 1960s. What little service remained was oriented toward weekday commuters to Camden and

Philadelphia. "Pony Express" trains to Atlantic City Race Course, served by a spur east of Egg Harbor, ended in 1967.

Freight traffic, however, was rising, particularly in the growing industrial area southwest of Camden. What became the biggest single PRSL customer, a coal-fired power plant at Beesley's Point just west of Ocean City, opened in 1962. The aging Baldwins could not handle all this, so the road acquired 10 EMD GP38's between late 1967 and early '69 (5 more were ready for delivery in June 1970, but got caught up in the Penn Central bankruptcy and ended up going to the PC).

A long-simmering plan to extend the Philadelphia–Camden "Bridge Line" subway was realized in 1969 with the opening of the Delaware River Port Authority (PATCO) High Speed Line, which used the old Camden & Atlantic right of way as far as Lindenwold. The PRSL track was relocated to accommodate the transit line from there to West Haddonfield, and abandoned into Camden. Seashore Lines RDC's ran only as far as Lindenwold, where passengers transferred to the PATCO line. PRSL's area freight operations

were transferred to Penn Central's ex-PRR yard at Pavonia, located between downtown Camden and the Delair Bridge.

PRSL followed its bankrupt parents into Conrail on April 1, 1976. The last passenger service, operated by New Jersey Transit after 1978, ran to Cape May and Ocean City in October 1981 and to Atlantic City in June 1982. Rebuilt in 1989, the Atlantic City line now sees daily NJT trains from Philadelphia. Freight service on surviving PRSL lines is conducted by Conrail Shared Assets and short lines.

After that short cabin car trip, I rode the Seashore Lines on three more occasions. Time spent hanging around the Cape May station during family vacations was rewarded with my first locomotive cab rides: two trips on GP38 2004 in 1974 to Cape May Point and back. They were thrilling to a young teenager, and revealed the mysterious reason for the extended cab front on Nos. 2000–2009 to be a walk-around dual-control stand. In August 1975—three days after the photo of M-403 on the opposite page, in fact—pine trees blurred past the windows of M-406 at 70 mph on a Lindenwold–Cape May round trip that partially retraced a journey my dad made behind steam in the late 1940s. Those days of high-flying 4-6-2's are gone forever, but short line Cape May Seashore Lines runs genuine PRSL RDC's on tourist trains out of Tuckahoe, so it's still possible to take a ride on the Seashore Lines. ■

## Seashore Lines fact file



(comparative figures are for 1933 and 1975)

**Route-miles:** 413; 307

**Locomotives:** 22; 14

**Passenger cars:** 216; 0

**Motor psgr. cars:** 100 (electric); 10 (diesel)

**Cabooses:** 26; 19

**Headquarters city:** Camden, N.J.

**Special interest group:** Pennsylvania-Reading Seashore Lines Historical Society, [www.prslhs.com](http://www.prslhs.com) (online only)

**Recommended reading:** *By Rail to the Boardwalk*, by Richard M. Gladulich (Trans-Anglo Books, 1986); *Pennsylvania-Reading Seashore Lines*, by Frederick A. Kramer (West Jersey Chapter, NRHS, 2011)

**Sources:** *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2000) and above titles