



Author Jack Neiss's nemesis—Penn Central E40 No. 4973—stands at Morrisville, Pa., on March 21, 1976. Behind the former New Haven passenger motor are ex-PRR E44 freight units. Neiss liked the 4973's Hancock air whistle, but its exposed air-brake pipe caused him grief.

George W. Hamlin

BAD-LUCK



Penn Central 4973 and I just couldn't seem to get along

By Jack Neiss

The E40 was not one of my favorite locomotive types; in fact there were occasions when, during my time as a Penn Central engineer at Harrisburg, Pa., I could have run each one of them off a dead-end siding and walked away smiling. One E40 in particular seemed to have it in for me.

E40 was Penn Central's classification for a group of electric passenger locomotives it inherited from the New Haven when the NH became part of PC on January 1, 1969. Built by General Electric in 1955 and wearing the splashy "McGinnis" livery of orange, white, and black, the 4,000 h.p., dual-cab motors were classified EP5 by NH and numbered 370–379. They constituted the first U.S. locomotive fleet to employ silicon diode rectifier technology, in which alternating current from the catenary is changed to D.C. to furnish power to relatively small, diesel-style traction motors. Equipped with pantographs and third-rail shoes, the EP5's handled NH intercity and commuter trains between New Haven, Conn., and both the Pennsy's Penn Station and New York Central's Grand Central Terminal in New York City.

The complex units had a checkered career on the cash-starved New Haven, and by the time of the merger, only six were operable. In addition to reclassifying them, PC renumbered the E40's into the 4970 series and confined them to New Haven–Grand Central trains, having the older but more reliable ex-Pennsylvania GG1's cover the Penn Station trains.

Under PC, the E40's plodded along, drawing their power from overhead catenary on the ex-NH main line and third

rail on the ex-NYC line into Grand Central. Soon, deferred maintenance began to take its toll. The E40's had a habit of catching fire, usually at the most inopportune times and locations. After one particularly smoky fire during rush hour in the Park Avenue Tunnel leading into Grand Central, PC withdrew the motors from service in 1973.

That might have been the end of the EP5/E40 story, but there was one more chapter. By 1974, Penn Central was bankrupt, short of motive power, and doing whatever it could to try to hold itself together. It pulled two of the beasts—4973 and 4977—from the dead line, removed their steam generators and third-rail equipment, and put them into freight service on former PRR electrified lines. It was in this setting that my regrettable association with them began.

In the process of reconditioning the E40's, PC also removed one pantograph from each unit, making them more vulnerable out on the road, should "pan" damage occur, than when they had their original two. This also precluded running with both pans up, as was sometimes done with GG1's to combat ice build-up on the catenary during winter storms. This was a concern of shop personnel at the Enola Yard electric pit near Harrisburg, the west end of PC's former PRR electrified territory. The E40's had at least one redeeming quality, though—PC never removed their Hancock air whistles, which had a beautiful sound. As a musician, I enjoyed hearing a Hancock toot for grade crossings, quite unlike the atonal blastings of other PC locomotives.

ELECTRIC



New Haven EP5 No. 374 (top) wears NH's splashy "McGinnis" livery at 125th Street station, Manhattan, in NYC third-rail territory. Sister 373, now designated Penn Central E40 No. 4973, rolls a commuter express under ex-NH catenary at Mamaroneck, N.Y., on April 20, 1973.

Top, Jim McClellan; above, George W. Hamlin

ACT 1: OH, DEER!

My first experience with an E40 came when I was firing in passenger service in late 1974. I was working with engineer Harold Picking, a delightful gentleman, on Mail 10 from Harrisburg to Meadows Yard, east of Newark, N.J. We were assigned the 4973, which we picked up from the engine exchange crew in the Harrisburg passenger station. Neither Harold nor I had run an E40 before, though we had heard about their somewhat dubious reputation. Harold shook his head, noting that although 4973 had been banished from passenger service, it now was being entrusted with a priority mail train.

Mail 10 wasn't especially heavy that night, just 12 ex-NYC Flexi-Van container cars and a cabin car. After the inbound set of diesels cut away, we coupled up, made our air test, and off we went. The

4973 handled the train rather nicely, surprising both of us at its agility in quickly getting up to track speed, 65 mph. We both noticed the difference in cab signals. In place of the PRR style of three tiny white vertical lights, the aspect for "clear" was a single green light. "Cute," I thought to myself. Harold noted it was making things look a lot like Christmas.

About 10 miles out we passed through Roylton and started our uphill climb toward Elizabethtown. About halfway between those points, around Conewago, the two main tracks passed through a deep rock cut protected by slide fences. This area of the Conewago Hills is home at times to a sizable deer population . . . and they were out on this night. Harold said he counted seven; I counted nine, all running up No. 1 track ahead of the train. *Boom . . . boom . . . boom . . .* and suddenly our view through

the windshields turned red and our train was going into emergency braking.

We stopped about a half-mile east of Conewago, the view ahead still an eerie shade of red but the cab-signal indicator showing a bright green. A weird contrast, but there it was. As I dug in my grip for my flashlight, the conductor and trainman showed up from the rear end, still dressed in their Amtrak uniforms from their trip west the previous day on train 31, the *National Limited*.

While Harold was busy trying to restore the air brakes and reporting our plight to State (Harrisburg) and Cork (Lancaster) towers, I walked with the train crew to the front of 4973 to investigate. As expected, we found deer remains splattered all over the front and side of the locomotive. One of the unfortunate animals had hit the angle cock with such an impact that it broke the brake pipe off behind it, which is why we'd gone into emergency.

So, there we sat for more than 3 hours, unable to go anywhere because of the broken brake pipe, as we waited for other locomotives to pull or push us into the clear. Daylight was now upon us, illuminating the gruesome mess. We finally ended up being pulled back to Roy interlocking by a Harrisburg yard crew, the E40 riding along with the automatic brake cut out and angle cocks closed between it and the lead car. Harold and I rode the 4973, making sure that if we somehow became separated from our train, we could quickly apply the independent and hand brake on the locomotive and bring it safely to a stop.

Mail 10's consist was added to the rear of another eastbound at Roy, and Harold and I stayed with the 4973 for its limp back to Harrisburg. It was a shorter day than usual, but an interesting one—a bit *too* interesting for my taste. Although this bit of bad luck could have befallen any locomotive, I would later come to expect such misfortune with the 4973.

ACT 2: SOMETHING IN THE AIR

In early 1975, I left my regular Harrisburg–New York passenger assignment firing on trains 42 and 43, the *Valley Forge*, to begin locomotive engineer training classes at the PC instruction facility in Wilmington, Del. This took a few months, consisting of both classroom and on-the-road sessions. During that time, I saw the 4973 only once, shoving on the rear end of a westbound iron-ore train coming through Overbrook. I figured PC had gotten wise as to

where to best utilize a troublesome locomotive like the E40: in helper service on the Main Line west out of Philadelphia.

By mid-1975, I was on Amtrak passenger trains once again, not yet promoted full-time to the right-hand side of the cab, even though I had had brief stints as a promoted engineer on the Enola road list and in my hometown of Lancaster. I was working the Harrisburg–Washington section of the *Broadway Limited*, which ran down PC's "Port Road" along the Susquehanna River. Because of my seniority and interdivisional qualifications, if the crew dispatcher ran out of engineers, I was often called on one of my relief days to fill a vacancy or extra assignment out of Harrisburg or Enola. Sure enough, one Sunday afternoon the phone rang; it was Tony, the Harrisburg side B-trick crew dispatcher calling.

"Hey, Jack?" Tony inquired. "Feel like takin' an extra TV-2 over to Morrisville, then deadheading back home? A Jersey crew will take it from there." Instead of running through to North Jersey, the power and crew would change at Morrisville, Pa., the east end of the Trenton Cut-Off that bypassed Philadelphia.

I accepted this assignment readily because I knew that not only would I get paid for the TV-2 run, I'd also be compensated for my regular *Broadway Limited* assignment the following day if I didn't get back to Harrisburg in time to have adequate rest before the *Broadway's* 6:20 a.m. sign-up time.

So off I went to Harrisburg from my home in Elizabethtown. But I had an odd feeling during the drive. Drop the power at Morrisville? Odd for a TV train (from "Trail-Van," PC's term for its intermodal trains), even an extra one. When I got to the Reilly Street yard office in Harrisburg, though, I discovered this TV-2 was actually a TV-2E—E for empty, a ferry move of 40-some TTX flatcars from the Harrisburg terminal to the ones in Weehawken and North Bergen, N.J. I had once handled 157 empty TTX flats with a single E44, so this train's length didn't bother me. What got my attention was TV-2E's power—the 4973.

After the brakeman and I got on the locomotive, I found myself laying my hands on the control stand and telling it, "Behave! Behave! Don't hit anything . . . please!"

The brakeman looked at me. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just attuning myself to the energies around me, I guess."

"Whatever," he replied.



By August 1973, the E40's had been banned from Grand Central, and 4973 was dead at New Haven (top). Reborn as a freight hauler, 4973 lost a pantograph and got a fresh coat of paint.

Two photos, Paul Carpenito

We were off and running a few minutes later as I related to the brakeman about how I'd been on this same locomotive at the head end of Mail 10 when it hit several deer at Conewago.

"Was that you, man? I heard it was a real mess!"

I continued with my story as we approached the spot where the gory incident had occurred, not realizing that I was starting to lose my main reservoir air pressure. Suddenly the brakeman and I started to hear noises—a loud thumping from back in the carbody, followed by the odor of something hot.

I brought the train to a stop at Elizabethtown station. The 4973's air compressor had blown its high-pressure cyl-

inder, which in turn had ruptured the head-cap and rendered going any farther on our own nearly impossible.

"So much for your attunement," the brakeman noted. Maybe he was right.

This time we got lucky, though. There was a westbound light-power move of three diesels coming at us on No. 2 track.

The quick-thinking train dispatcher had them cross over in front of us, couple on, and pull our train to Lancaster. There we

were met by the local trainmaster, who, searching for an excuse as to what went wrong, suggested that "maybe I hadn't run it right." Now, how does one run a locomotive "wrong" and burn up an air compressor? We were eventually given the three diesels for the remainder of our

**WE STOPPED A HALF-MILE
EAST OF CONEWAGO,
THE VIEW AHEAD STILL
AN EERIE SHADE OF RED.**



The two freight E40's were eventually relegated to local jobs in New Jersey; 4973 works train A-1 west at Princeton Junction in 1976 (top). In June '76, by now under Conrail auspices, 4973 has failed on A-1 at Brown Yard near South Amboy, so a GP30 and RS11 have been called in.

Top, Ralph Curcio; above, Ted Steinbrenner

trip to Morrisville, which, in the absence of the 4973, was uneventful.

We set off the 4973 on the express track at Lancaster before we departed eastward, where it sat for about a week. I heard it had been taken to Morrisville for an air compressor replacement and reassignment to local freight and transfer service on the New York Division, so maybe I was done with it.

That was not to be, as the 4973 and I were destined to meet once again.

ACT 3: FIRE!

Two weeks after the air-compressor incident, Tony the crew dispatcher called again. "Hey, Jack, you wouldn't be interested in running a light-power move to Morrisville, would you?"

"Well that depends, Tony. As long as it's not the 4973."

Tony didn't know what locomotives would be in the light-power move. I accepted his request anyway, because I had missed a trip earlier in the week and needed the extra cash. To make sure, though, I called the Power Desk.

"Right now," the guy on the Power Desk told me, "it's the 4460 [an E44] and another unit tagged on the rear. It's the one you keep screwing up all the time, the 4973. Don't destroy it too bad!"

Well, at least I wouldn't be *on* the 4973 this time. If all went OK, it would just follow peacefully along behind the E44 and cause no trouble. At least I hoped so.

I met my fireman in the crew office, a younger fellow off the Enola yard board named Terry who was making his third road trip. He was a really nice guy, an avid railfan, and a fellow member of the "long-haired hippie-type" railroader

community. We hit it off immediately.

We found our locomotives over on No. 8 track where the change crew had parked them: 4460 with 4973 live-in-tow (pantograph up) behind. I turned the rear headlight of the E40 on "dim" for a marker, checked everything inside, then walked ahead to the E44. I was met along the way by the Harrisburg trainmaster, who was doing a safety-rule check and seeing if our timetables and rulebooks were up to date and in order.

"Jack," he said, "you gonna get that 4973 to Morrisville in one piece, or am I gonna have to start drivin' to Conewago as soon as you leave?"

"Don't bother," I assured him. "It's in good hands."

"Hey, I'm serious, Jack. Something happens this time around and you're out of service!"

The trainmaster may have been kidding, but I didn't take his comment lightly. The other two times I had been involved with the 4973, I had met with trouble. I was hoping the old saying about bad things coming in threes would not apply in this case.

A half hour later, Terry and I were out of Harrisburg, following a Philadelphia-bound M.U. train. We would run via the Main Line to Glen Loch and then the Trenton Cut-Off to Morrisville. Terry was intent on learning what he could about the physical plant of the railroad, but I avoided saying anything about the 4973's antics at Conewago, unless he brought the subject up. Fortunately, he didn't.

Nevertheless, it didn't take long for things to start to go wrong. We were nearing Lancaster when I turned to look back over my engines on a sweeping right-hand curve. I couldn't believe my eyes—the 4973 was engulfed in thick black smoke. We were running short-hood-forward on the E44, so there was about 60 feet of space between us and the middle of the E40. At 50 mph, neither Terry nor I had seen or smelled anything unusual up to that point, so we had no idea how long 4973 had been burning. I muttered an oath while grabbing the radio handset to call Cork Tower.

"4460 to Cork, over."

"Cork answering the 4460," replied the operator, Dick Herr.

"Dick, the 4973 appears to be on fire! I'm still west of Park City right now—where do you want us to stop in case the fire department needs to get to us?"

Already on top of things, Dick called right back. "Dispatcher says pick a place where you think it's the most accessible



No. 4973 is at Harrisburg on October 23, 1978, never to run again. Within a year, the E40's were scrapped, and Jack Neiss was sleeping easier.

Paul Carpenito

and let me know right away!"

I stopped just west of Cork Tower where there had been a grade crossing for Mannheim Pike. This now was a double dead-end street on each side of the railroad at the east end of the Armstrong Cork Co. complex. Access to the burning 4973 now could be had on both sides of the right of way.

We requested the overhead power be cut on all tracks so the fire department could douse the fire. This was done promptly, but waiting for a man from PC's Electric Traction Department to ground the overhead took another half hour. Fortunately the fire was slow-burning once the catenary power was turned off. The cause of the fire was the failure of an insulated cable somewhere between the pantograph and main transformer. It had rubbed through to the point where the insulation began to break down, enabling the high voltage to arc its way through the cable to other electrical components nearby.

It was decided that Terry and I would continue on with the disabled E40 in tow, its pantograph now tied down and a 30-mph restriction placed on us in case

something else happened. As we continued east, the operator at Thorndale told us we would be relieved by another engine crew at Earnest Yard on the Trenton Cut-Off. We had almost 10 hours on duty already, and the dispatcher feared we wouldn't get to Morrisville before we went overboard on the 12-hour law.

On the taxicab ride from Earnest back to Harrisburg, I told Terry about my other unfortunate experiences with the 4973. "Maybe that engine just plain doesn't like you, Jack," Terry noted. I wondered . . . I really did.

Nothing was ever said to me about the latest fiasco, other than the Division Road Foreman wanting to know all the details of what had happened and how Terry and I had handled the situation. In fact we were given a word of praise for spotting the E40 at a location where it would be accessible to the fire department and other personnel. The trainmaster did not pull me out of service.

I never saw that motor again, which

was fine with me. For a while, though, my name and the 4973 were nearly synonymous. References to that locomotive and me in the same sentence were frequently overheard, followed by some laughter. I didn't mind. I later heard that both it and sister 4977 had been put on local freight assignments out of Morrisville, mostly the A-1/A-2 runs that worked the electrified Jamesburg Branch to Brown Yard near South Amboy, N.J., or taking auto-parts cars up to Metuchen. Both were withdrawn from service for good within a year of Conrail's April 1, 1976, start-up. The 4973

I COULDN'T BELIEVE WHAT I SAW BEHIND ME. THE 4973 WAS ENGULFED IN THICK BLACK SMOKE!

and 4977, along with the other remaining derelict E40's that had never entered freight service, were scrapped in 1979.

Now, after nearly 40 years, my feelings for the 4973 have mellowed. I will always consider that this locomotive and I shared a wee bit of folly in our times together, and those memories always make for a good story from an old retired railroader. ■