

Off-loading at Little Creek



At an isolated outpost of the vast Penn Central system, a Baldwin diesel unloads a Chesapeake Bay carfloat

BY WILLIAM E. WARDEN • Photos by the author



Here's a question: In 1970, what railroads operated in Norfolk, Virginia?

Well, there was the Norfolk & Western, of course. And the Norfolk Southern (the original one); the Norfolk, Franklin & Danville; Seaboard Coast Line (former Atlantic Coast Line); the Southern; and naturally the Norfolk & Portsmouth Belt Line. Throw in the Chesapeake & Ohio for good measure, as it provided a bus to take train passengers from downtown Norfolk to C&O's station in Newport News.

Fine, but you forgot the biggest railroad of them all — the Penn Central.

The Penn Central?

Yep. For PC freights wandered down the former Pennsylvania Railroad's 192-mile Delmarva Peninsula line with its sand dunes, vegetable farms, and saw grass from Wilmington, Del. (the "Del" of "Delmarva"), through the likes of Pocomoke, Md., and Nassawadox, Va., to that spit of land at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay known as Cape Charles, Va.

From the Cape, freight cars bound for Norfolk and South Atlantic Coast points were transferred to carfloats — much as in the case of New York Harbor — and gritty tugs nudged them

Far corner of PC's empire



Baldwin DS-4-4-660 switcher 8354 has coupled to the first two cars and is ready to haul them off the carfloat *Captain Edward Richardson* onto solid ground. It's May 23, 1970 — more than two years into Penn Central — but the locomotive, barge, and tug are all ex-Pennsy.



Baldwin 8354, still lettered PRR, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Belt Line SW1200 108, one of its 14 from 1956, wait for the carfloat to arrive from Cape Charles. No. 108 will distribute the cars to other Norfolk roads.

across the Bay's 17-mile width to Norfolk's Little Creek, where the PC had a modest sized yard. The PC tracks, after wandering around Norfolk and effecting a couple of interchanges with the old Norfolk Southern, finally ended up across the Elizabeth River in Portsmouth. Today the Bay Coast Railroad operates the southern 64 miles of the Delmarva line, and Cape Charles and Little Creek are still linked by carfloat.

Little Creek is best known as the home base for the U.S. Navy's extensive Amphibious Fleet, and Penn Central tugs virtually rubbed hulls with LSTs and other naval craft.

Much of the naval base was off limits to civilian train-watchers, but the carfloat dock was not. At one time passenger ferries from Cape Charles had tied up at this inlet, making it hard to keep everything secret — in fact, as a lad back in the late 1930s I rode the upper deck of one of these Chesapeake Bay ferries.

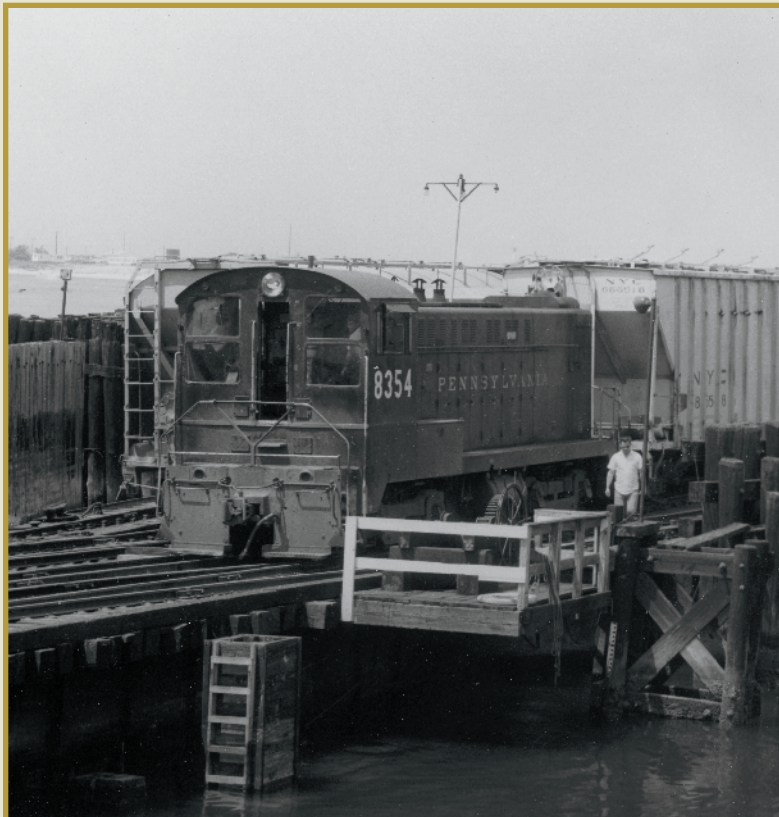
I had known of the carfloats long before ever seeing one. But it was only through the hospitality, grace, and knowledge of veteran rail author and photographer H. Reid that I had the good fortune of finally encountering firsthand the berthing of a freight train at Little Creek. The date was May 23, 1970, and there was a curious mixture of sights, sounds, and odors in the little yard — tracks that ended abruptly at the edge of a long wooden pier, the screech of gulls competing with the hammering of diesel engines, and the usual scents of grease and diesel fuel contrasting with those of creosoted piles, hemp lines, and the potpourri of saltwater harbor aromas.

For someone accustomed to coal drags and unit trains in the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah Valley, this unusual rail marine operation — a melding of steel rail and salt water, as it were — was of more than passing interest. ■

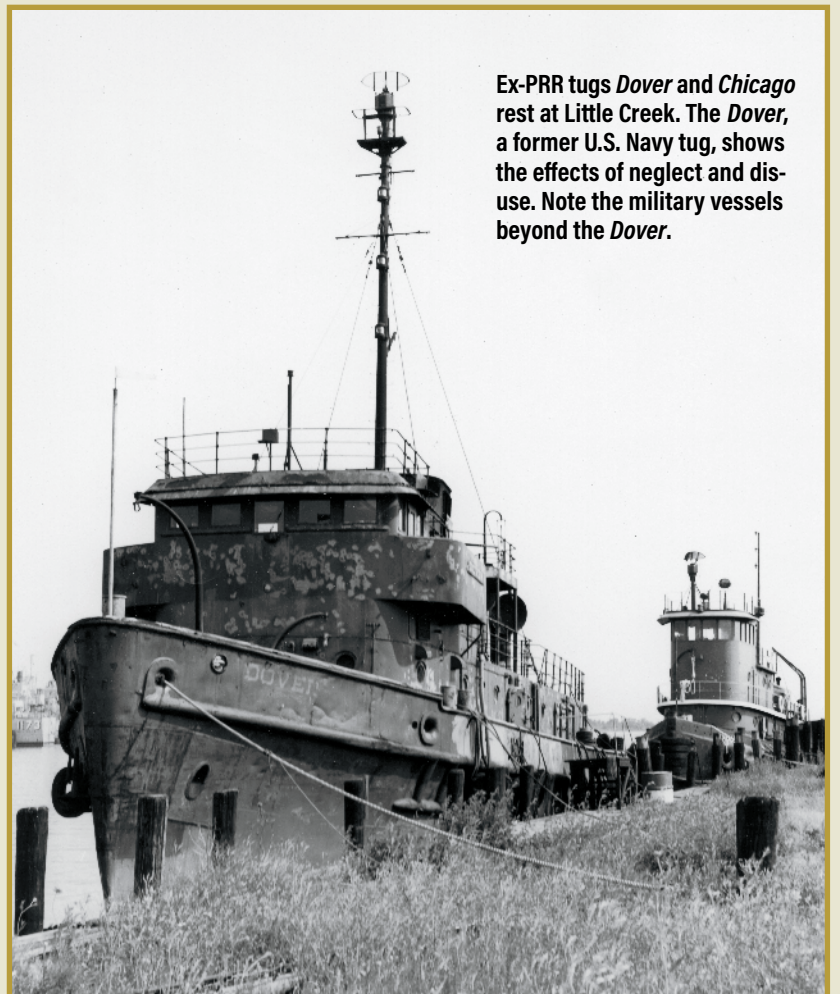
WILLIAM E. WARDEN JR. (1928–1994) was a photographer and author from Waynesboro, Va. He wrote the books Buffalo Creek & Gauley and West Virginia Logging Railroads and contributed articles and photos to TRAINS beginning in the mid-1950s.



Diesel tug *Philadelphia* eases the carfloat toward the Little Creek dock. The flatcars on the outer two tracks carry excess-dimension loads deemed too large to move via Baltimore and Washington.



The 8354 pulls more cars off the *Richardson*. Built in 1949 as 9234, one of PRR's 99 of the model, it became 7834 before the merger, then PC 8354 as new GP38s overtook the 7800s, but didn't make it to Conrail.



Ex-PRR tugs *Dover* and *Chicago* rest at Little Creek. The *Dover*, a former U.S. Navy tug, shows the effects of neglect and disuse. Note the military vessels beyond the *Dover*.