



WEST SIDE

A final Conrail passenger move on New York's West Side Freight Line

Story and photos by Kent Patterson

NEW YORK CENTRAL'S West Side Freight Line, more formally named the 30th Street Branch, was the only direct freight railroad line into Manhattan. It was just 10 miles long, but maintained to mainline standards, and was even electrified for three decades. Vital for freight, mail, and express into the 1960s, it afterward saw a protracted decline. By 1982, under Conrail ownership, only one customer was left: The *New York Times*, which received rail shipments of newsprint from Canada.

That March began "30th Street's" final days. Briefly, the *New York Times'* newsprint was actually trucked to a just-built New Jersey plant. It was a convoluted ship-

ping move on the eve of ending. Subsequent cars would be more directly routed to the Jersey plant.

The other rail customers on Manhattan's West Side had evaporated over three decades. Lesser known, and rarely referenced in employee timetables, was an extension of the line to lower Manhattan's St. John's Park in the meat-packing district. This part of Manhattan's once very blue-collar West Side was dubbed Hell's Kitchen.

Today, a more gentrified lower West Side hosts the lower elevated portion as Manhattan's High Line Park, an area with restaurants, galleries, condos, and museums near the Hudson River waterfront.

The railroad's West Side plan involved closing for a lengthy service hiatus and conversion from a downgraded freight secondary into Amtrak's Empire Corridor link from Spuyten Duyvil to Pennsylvania Station. A tube was bored about 1990 from the old freight line above 30th Street, curving down to Penn Station.

Conrail had one oddball task before ceding the trackage to Amtrak for the multi-year rebuild — the removal of two privately owned passenger cars at the now-unused yard at West 30th Street. The cars belonged to rail enthusiast and Metropolitan Transportation Authority real estate staffer Peter Oblatz.



STORY

Obletz's cars were New York Central No. 404, a dining section from a twin-unit diner, and an ex-Santa Fe lunch-counter-dormitory car (since converted to privately owned diner *Epicurious*). The cars were stored in a fenced-off area of the West 30th Street Yard, near a closed New York Central brick yard office. Today the West 30th Street Yard is an MTA/Long Island Rail Road day-storage yard for Penn Station, but originally this yard was the New York & Hudson River Railroad's southern terminus, then simply named the Hudson River Railroad, completed in 1849.

Big changes began in the late 1860s when 'The Commodore', Cornelius

Vanderbilt, acquired the New York & Harlem Railroad and built the 7-mile Spuyten Duyvil & Port Morris Railroad to access the Harlem Line, permitting Hudson trains to reach the first Grand Central Station in central Manhattan in 1871. Grand Central Station then was the eastern end of a developing greater New York Central System that Vanderbilt was assembling to reach Chicago.

With virtually all passenger traffic diverted to Grand Central, the West Side line's importance grew, as only NYC had direct freight access to Manhattan Island (the New Haven did reach the Bronx). Other railroads reached Manhattan Island

TOP LEFT: The crew poses at West 72nd Street after the car pull. From left: Brakeman Morgan Davis, Engineer Frank Sorci, Conductor John Walpole, and Brakeman Richard Vallieu. Fireman Dave Riley, not shown, was getting coffee. This area has since been redeveloped. At right, the figure walking may be the cars' owner, Peter Obletz.

ABOVE: In addition to Manhattan-bound newsprint loads, road-switcher OP-11's consist generally included a few empty plastic resin and flour loads for the former NYC Putnam Division. Sugar empties came from Yonkers, plus some lumber, food items, etc. The disused signal bridge and unused Track 2 reflect the line's decline, much of which took place during Penn Central's years.



ABOVE: A yard once packed with freight now shows its rusty rails. In making up the return block of 15 or so cars for the Oak Point Yard, the crew used some vacant tracks for easier switching, giving the illusion of a full yard. About 1980, West 72nd Street ceased operating as a service yard with its remaining road freight consolidated to Conrail's ex-New Haven Bronx yard at Oak Point.



via their marine fleets of tugs and barges and river piers. Some of these operated small service yards adjacent to their marine access. NYC also maintained a robust marine operation, interchanging with roughly eight New Jersey railroads. This once-vibrant cross-harbor trade dried up by the early 1970s.

Local passenger trains operating from the Bronx to 30th Street were discontinued by the early 1930s. Other passenger moves on the West Side were unscheduled and included some rail-enthusiast excursions. The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus also used the 30th Street Yard for its circus train into the 1970s.

And then there were the rumors. My favorite involved comedian Jackie Gleason storing a private passenger train at 30th Street, but research quickly disproved that. Gleason indeed traveled aboard private cars, but he simply chartered available rolling stock.

All things come to an end, and I received advance word of the Conrail run to collect Mr. Oblatz's passenger cars when working as an extra-list operator assigned third trick — the midnight shift — at Spuyten Duyvil's DV Tower.

Naturally, I told a couple of close friends of the special move. One of them, Walter, a Grand Central yardmaster, came along. He arrived at 30th Street by bicycling from lower Manhattan.

The move was simple. An Oak Point road-switcher, I believe it was OP-11, crept down from 72nd Street Yard to 30th Street to haul away the two cars. Mr. Oblatz was there with a friend as car attendants. These cars were to be set out on track 77, a short

siding behind DV tower. OP-11 then would continue to Oak Point Yard, finishing up. Later that night, Conrail's Oak Point-to-Selkirk freight would take the cars north.

A pair of Electro-Motive Division SW1500s of early-1970s Penn Central vintage did the honors. At the 72nd Street Yard, we dropped four newsprint loads at the *New York Times* track and also left a handful of cars there from other work, mostly at Yonkers.

Frank Sorci was the engineer. Having our group tagging along clearly annoyed him but he went along with everything and even posed for a photo. Going south (timetable eastbound), Frank parked his train for a spell to play cards with conductor Morgan Davis and the brakeman, possibly just to make me nervous about missing the afternoon light.

The car pick-up at 30th Street was uneventful. A few fans showed upon reaching 72nd Street, and some daylight remained. Here, after stopping briefly for pictures, the crew grabbed six empty newsprint (and other) cars, and headed back towards Oak Point. A quick stop at DV was made for the passenger car drop. Mr. Oblatz asked if I could run him to a supermarket so he could ice-up. He bought food and 10 bags of ice to fill the lunch counter's ice storage to serve as a temporary icebox. There was no lighting or heat on the cars, just flashlights.

And that was that for passenger moves on the old 30th Street Branch. Soon it was out of service. Amtrak's rebuilding project (including Spuyten Duyvil's swing bridge) began a couple years later; it reopened for Amtrak use in 1992. **I**



ABOVE: We ran as light-engines to the 30th Street Yard, opened a padlock to a gate accessing the equipment, made an inspection, and left in minutes. The overhead bridgework was the once elevated West Side Highway. Just steps away is the High Line Park — a re-usage of the St. Johns Park track-age. Short line executive Howard Pincus credits Peter Oblatz as a leader among those advocating the High Line's regeneration as an innovative urban park.

BELOW: Looking northward to 72nd Street where the yard's throat and approach tracks converged beneath new parks and roads: part of a Robert Moses-inspired 1920s and '30s urban renewal project to better cloak the West Side Line from street running in an effort to curb the railroad's loud, smoky footprint. A staircase once descended from 72nd Street to the yard office and tracks. A brief clip in the 1964 film *The Pawnbroker* shows the area in busier days.

ABOVE: Spring 1992 revealed a newly reopened two-track West Side *Empire Service* access Spuyten Duyvil to Amtrak's Penn Station. An inbound mid-morning Rohr Turbo train from Albany-Rensselaer passes at Riverside Park (part of the mentioned city urban renewal project, this was once a more industrial area). There have been numerous discussions about bringing Metropolitan Transit Authority/Metro-North commuter service to this line as well.

