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—Brian Solomon, January 2020

Chapter 2

The road to Conrail: Predecessor lines

Peekskill, N.Y., still looks like Penn Central on the afternoon of January 23, 1977, as U33B 2902 and GP40 3000—the first New York Central GP40—lead an array of four-motor GE and EMDs on westbound symbol freight NG3. This was a hot freight from Oak Point Yard (Bronx) to Southern Pacific at Roseville, Calif., via Chicago & North Western's Proviso Yard (Chicago). The empty Pacific Fruit Express refrigerator cars had delivered fresh produce to New York's vast Hunts Point Market on eastbound symbol freight HP2.
George W. Kowanski



Conrail's Monroe, Mich., local works the Ford Motor Co. stamping plant (visible just above the end of the first boxcar) north of the River Raisin in July 1982. *John Uckley; Brian Schmidt collection*

executing PC's operating philosophy with far greater success than PC had accomplished. A measure of this success was the more efficient movement of freight and its sustainable profitable operation.

Complicating Conrail's planning strategy was that although its yards were inefficient and costly to operate (and expensive to bring to modern standards), fixing them represented one of the most effective means to lower costs, speed traffic, and improve service. Almost immediately the railroad began rehabilitating some of its most important yards to help cut costs by moving traffic more expeditiously. However, it took several years before Conrail formulated a comprehensive yard strategy to most effectively serve its present and future traffic.

During 1977 and 1978, Conrail undertook a detailed study of its 18 most important yards in order to decide how to best focus investment and reconfigure its yard network. It prioritized its major yards for investment as follows: DeWitt, Oak Island, Allentown, Elkhart, Conway, Frontier, Selkirk, Collinwood, Stanley, Avon (Big Four), Buckeye, Enola, Junction (Detroit), Croxton, Rutherford, Waverly, Elizabethport, and Bison. Those at the top of the list would remain as core carload classification yards, while those toward the bottom would be downgraded, repurposed, sold, or abandoned. In 1979, Conrail accelerated its efforts by focusing on lowering dwell time in its busiest classification yards.

Dwell time is an efficiency measure; shorter dwell time indicates a more efficient yard.

As Conrail matured, it focused on moving its profitable traffic, placing increased emphasis on intermodal and unit trains that bypassed classification yards and smaller marshalling facilities. Scaling back light branchline traffic coincided with continued declines in small-customer carload traffic, which further reduced the need for traditional yards. Once vast and busy facilities—like New Haven's bustling Cedar Hill Yard—were gradually phased out as traffic diminished.

Let's take a look at some of Conrail's key yards.

DeWitt

DeWitt Yard was strategically situated on the Chicago Line at East Syracuse, N.Y., close to important junctions with lines running northward to Montreal, to the Lake Ontario port at Oswego, and to connections with the Corning Secondary that extended southward into Pennsylvania coal country. Historically, DeWitt had been one of New York Central's most important yards, and was first on Conrail's list for investment.

DeWitt worked in tandem with Selkirk Yard in the classification of Chicago Line traffic. Conrail's *Visitor's Guide to DeWitt Yards*, published in October 1979, explained that this vast yard opened in 1928 as America's first hump classification facility with electronically controlled retarders. When New York Central



The leaves had begun to turn on October 13, 1997, when sequentially numbered GP38-2s worked Altoona-based local WIAL-46. This train served industrial sidings off the former PRR Middle Division Main Line at Mapleton Depot, Pa., to reach a US Silica plant. *Brian Solomon*

Conrail's GE Super-7 fleet was inherited from the Monongahela Railway, and these engines largely continued to work the coal trains of their former owner. On September 28, 1998, a trio of Super-7s shove a loaded unit train out of the Bailey Mine on the Monongahela's Manor Branch at Time, Pa. *Frank S. Novak*

suffix. So at busy times, Conrail might schedule both an SEEL-A and SEEL-B between Selkirk and Elkhart. However, where Conrail only listed one symbol but traffic warranted additional service in the same 24-hour period, an extra train could be operated using an X suffix. For example, on a busy day between Oak Island and Buffalo's Frontier Yard a second daily OIBU (Oak Island to Buffalo) would be assigned the symbol OIBU-X.

Conrail's mixed-freight Alpha symbols evolved over the years resulting in numerous changes, anomalies, and inconsistencies in the system. Conrail routinely added and abolished freight schedules as traffic flows changed. The list on page 170 includes many Conrail road freight alpha symbols used between 1979 and 1999. Although lengthy, it is not a comprehensive compilation and not all of these symbols were active simultaneously.

Unit trains

Bulk commodities such as coal, coke, grain, and ore being carried from a single loading point to a single final customer/unloading point were moved in unit trains—trains where all cars operated under a single waybill (as opposed to separate waybills for each car).

Unit trains were assigned train-specific symbols that employed a completely different code system than that for mixed carload road freights. Most coal unit trains served electric utilities located across Conrail's territory or on connecting lines. In 1994, Conrail listed more than 160 different unit coal train symbols, although not all would have been active at the same time.

Coal trains had a three-unit alpha code beginning with the letter U followed by two letters loosely describing the consignee and destination. This was followed by numeric codes to indicate direction and other train particulars. The "UNS" symbol was assigned to trains moving coal from mines on the Monongahela Railway to New York State Gas & Electric's plant at Somerset, N.Y. Over time the unit train system was refined to provide more specific information including the type

