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Gone but still an icon

Even though it's been gone

from mainline railroads for more than 30 years, the caboose remains an icon of railroading. For more than 130 years, virtually every freight train in North America was trailed by a caboose. More than just a symbol or a vital center of operations, the caboose was, for many in the public, a human connection to railroads: A friendly wave from the conductor or brakeman on the platform or in the cupola window was the period at the end of the sentence as a train rolled past.

The caboose was replaced in the 1980s and '90s by the end-of-train device—that blinking, automated box known as an EOT or EDT—which continually monitors brake-pipe pressure and can send and receive information and commands from the head end. The rear-end crew is gone: the conductor moved to the locomotive and the brakeman position was eliminated or likewise moved forward; crew size was reduced from four to three or two. Railroads saved millions of dollars annually by eliminating the caboose, but at the price of becoming more distant and impersonal.

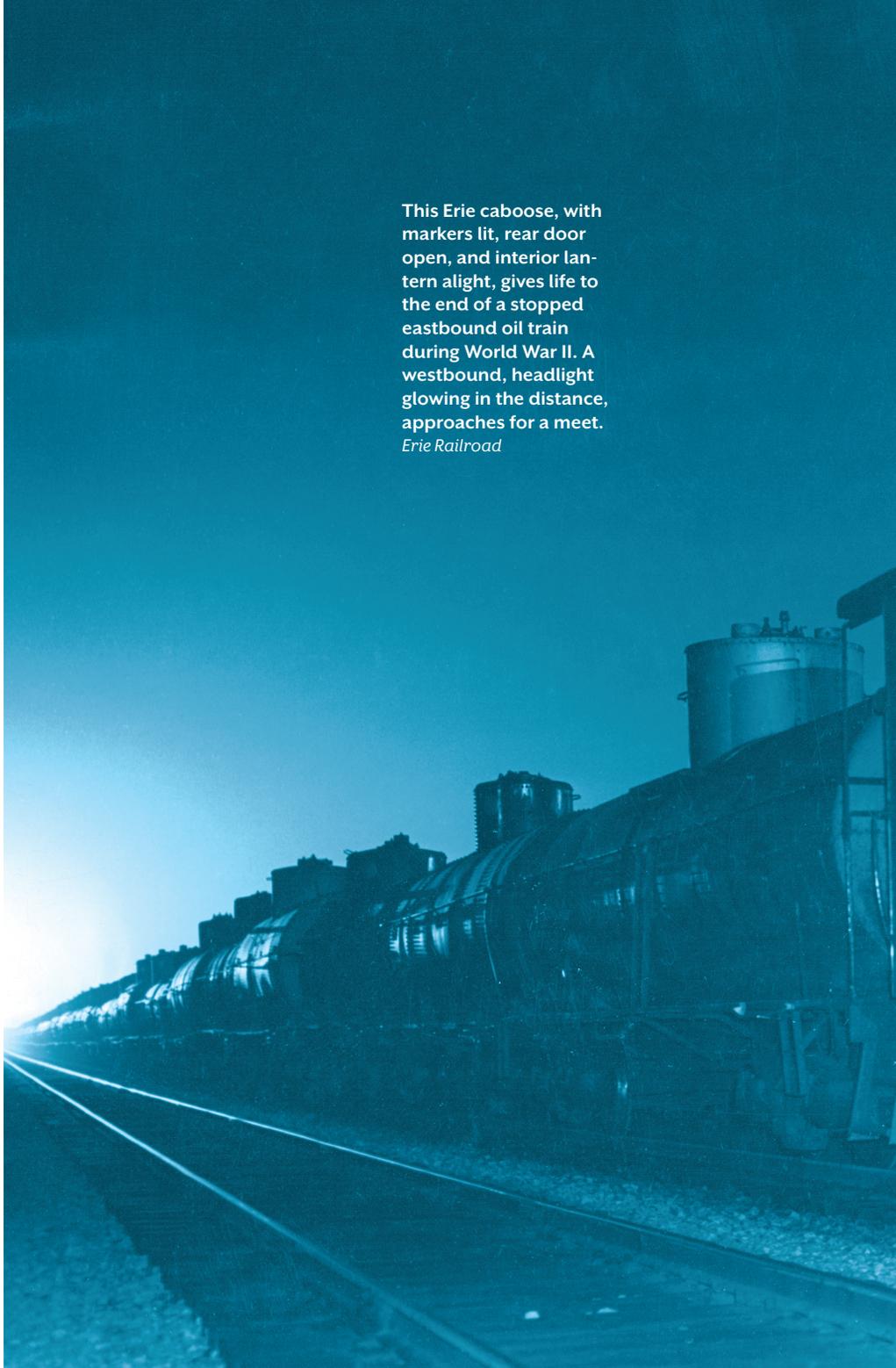
Although a few cabooses remain in service, mainly as platforms and shelters for crews during switching, transfer, and reverse moves, the days of cabooses on mainline freight trains have long since passed.

The loss of the caboose stirred strong emotions among those who

follow railroading, with outcries rivaling the demise of steam locomotives. Other than locomotives, cabooses captured the interest and attention of railfans and modelers more than any other element of railroading, and although they won't be coming back, we are fortunate that many photographers documented cabooses

This Erie caboose, with markers lit, rear door open, and interior lantern alight, gives life to the end of a stopped eastbound oil train during World War II. A westbound, headlight glowing in the distance, approaches for a meet.

Erie Railroad



and their operations throughout the 20th century.

The goal of this book is to show the tremendous variety of cabooses that ran on North American railroads: wood and steel; four-wheeled and eight-wheeled; short and long; with bay windows and cupolas; old and modern. We'll look at how cabooses evolved



over time, see what caboose crew members did, how their duties evolved, and how cabooses played a role in train and railroad operations.

You'll see caboose photos from a variety of railroads as we examine many common designs, variations, and details. Although space precludes providing detailed roster and class

information for all railroads, fortunately for railfans and modelers alike, dozens of excellent books have been published that focus on cabooses of individual railroads (and sometimes individual caboose classes). Many magazines and historical societies have published extensive articles including history, construction, drawings, and paint and

lettering schemes (several historical sites and individual railfans have posted information online as well).

And now, sit back, turn the page, and enjoy an extensive tour of the world of cabooses. As you travel back in time, you'll gain a deeper understanding of how this symbol of railroading continues to endure.

Reading upgraded its cabooses over the years with the 1950s addition of radios and electric interior lights and markers (powered by an axle-driven generator) and flush toilets. Sealed windows and safety glass were installed during the 1960s, with the inner windows on the sides plated over. The original caboose red scheme gave way to green and yellow beginning in 1965, with all remaining cabooses repainted by the early 1970s.

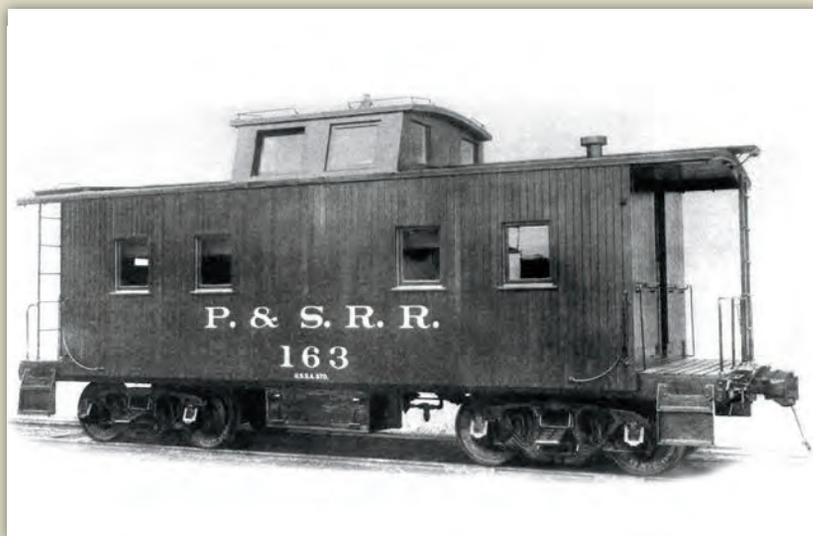
The Reading cabooses served long service lives, with 119 still in service when the railroad became part of Conrail in 1976 and more than 100 still rolling in 1981. The wood-sheathed NMN versions were generally the first to be retired (they were off the roster by 1970), with the all-steel cabooses going to Conrail.

In addition, Reading had begun selling off many cabooses (especially older cars) from the late 1950s onward. These went to more than a dozen other railroads including Akron, Canton & Youngstown; Ashley, Drew & Northern; Belfast & Moosehead Lake; Belt Ry. of Chicago; Cedar Rapids & Iowa City; Elgin, Joliet & Eastern; Maryland & Pennsylvania; and Savannah & Atlanta.

Adopted by others

The industry (particularly neighboring railroads) quickly acknowledged the excellence of Reading's design and began building or ordering their own versions. The various railroads made individual modifications and improvements, including interior furnishings, window type, and trucks, but the lineage of all of them was unmistakable.

The Western Maryland in 1936 was the first to copy the Reading's cabooses. Similar cabooses were soon built by the Pittsburgh & West Virginia; Lehigh Valley; and Central Railroad of New Jersey; they eventually became generically referred to as the "Northeastern" design. Most were built by railroads' own shops; the Reading itself



USRA cabooses

The United States Railroad Administration (USRA) took over operations of the nation's railroads in December 1917 in response to large-scale traffic congestion and shipping delays (especially across multi-railroad routings) at the onset of U.S. involvement during World War I. This control lasted until March 1920. During this time, the USRA developed several standard modern railroad car designs in addition to a range of standard steam locomotives. Many of these designs remained popular with builders and railroads long after USRA control ended.

Along with freight cars, the USRA developed and adopted an eight-wheel caboose design in December 1919. In an era of all-wood cabooses, it represented a modern design, with a steel frame to withstand forces of pusher locomotives as well as to better handle increased train sizes and speeds and provide more safety in the event of rear-end collisions. The USRA car had a centered cupola and wood-sheathed body over steel framing. The interior was also wood-sheathed, and specifications called for a wood (tared canvas) roof. Four-wheel trucks with cast bolsters and sideframes were specified—a number of different truck designs were used by railroads, including archbar, Andrews, and Bettendorf AAR standard.

The USRA itself did not order any cars built to this design, but as with USRA freight car designs, the caboose drawings and designs were offered to manufacturers and railroads to meet contemporary requirements. Boston & Maine; Pittsburg & Shawmut; Ulster & Delaware; and Central Vermont were among the railroads that built cars to the basic USRA design (individual details were left to each railroad's determination).

Although the total number of USRA-design cabooses built was small, the design was a key in the development of the Northeastern caboose, as the Reading and other builders adopted steel sheathing and other improvements to create a distinctive, iconic design.—*Gordon Odegard*

Pittsburg & Shawmut no. 163 was built by American Car & Foundry following the USRA wood caboose design. It rides on Andrews leaf-spring trucks. Note the below-floor equipment box and the lack of curved grab irons above the end ladders.

American Car & Foundry

Lehigh & New England's five Northeastern cabooses were built by Reading in 1937. After retirement no. 580 was restored; it's part of the Tri-State Railway Historical Society collection in New Jersey.

Dick Wallin; Don Heimburger collection



Delaware & Hudson acquired Northeastern cabooses second-hand from Lehigh Valley. Number 35802 is ex-LV 95109, one of the railroad's later cars with round end windows.

Don Heimburger collection

