

The view of the viaduct from in front of the diner

Why the Erie was the quintessence of coach travel

GEORGE W. HILTON

I THE NOSTALGIA for the passenger train that characteristically appears in *TRAINS* leaves me cold, since it dwells on the luxury aspects of the service which never bulked large in my experience, or—more to the point—in my ambitions. I am not much of a sybarite at best, and in the period when I ran up most of my 60,000-odd miles on passenger trains—from the late 1940's to the early 1960's—I was living on the salary of an instructor or an assistant professor, which at that time didn't allow for much high living. If the *Broadway Limited's* master room allowed one to take a shower while traveling, the fact was interesting (about like the details of injectors) but not immediately relevant to me. My style of taking a shower while traveling was to pay for one in the El Paso YMCA one afternoon while changing trains, breaking six straight nights in coaches.

Oh, I traveled Pullman occasionally when someone else was paying for it, and at least twice when there was no other way to ride trains I wanted to cover—the *Century* and the *Panama*; but I never really enjoyed it. I found no comfort on those thin foam-rubber mattresses, there never were enough blankets, I never got the ventilation right, and the berths were too low for adequate night observa-

tion out the window. In a coach seat, one was aimed at the action day or night. In a Pullman, one always consciously was trying to sleep. The way to sleep in a coach was to try to stay awake as long as possible, until you couldn't hold up your head any longer. It worked fine.

I rode coaches in every clime and place, straight through from Vancouver to Toronto on the Canadian Pacific, both routes of the Rio Grande through the Rockies, the *Zephyrette* on the Western Pacific from end to end, and both the *Golden State* and the *Imperial* on the Southern Pacific-Rock Island. I became a prodigious expert on lightly traveled coaches, where I could be reasonably certain of having a double seat to myself overnight. Early on I discovered that the *Philadelphia Night Express* out of Pittsburgh had a through coach for Washington that the world had passed by—as close to a private car as the coach passenger ever came.

I refuse to engage in an effort to identify the summit of comfort in coach travel. Those who think in such terms may argue out the relative merits of the Pennsylvania's 44-passenger coaches designed for the east-west trains in the late 1940's, the SP's leg-rest cars used on almost all of the road's major overnight trains, and the Santa Fe's hi-level

equipment. To evaluate coach travel on the basis of comfort is to yield to the values of the voluptuaries in the Pullmans. Rather one should evaluate coach travel by the purity of the experience, the embodiment of the pains and pleasures of life ahead of the diner.

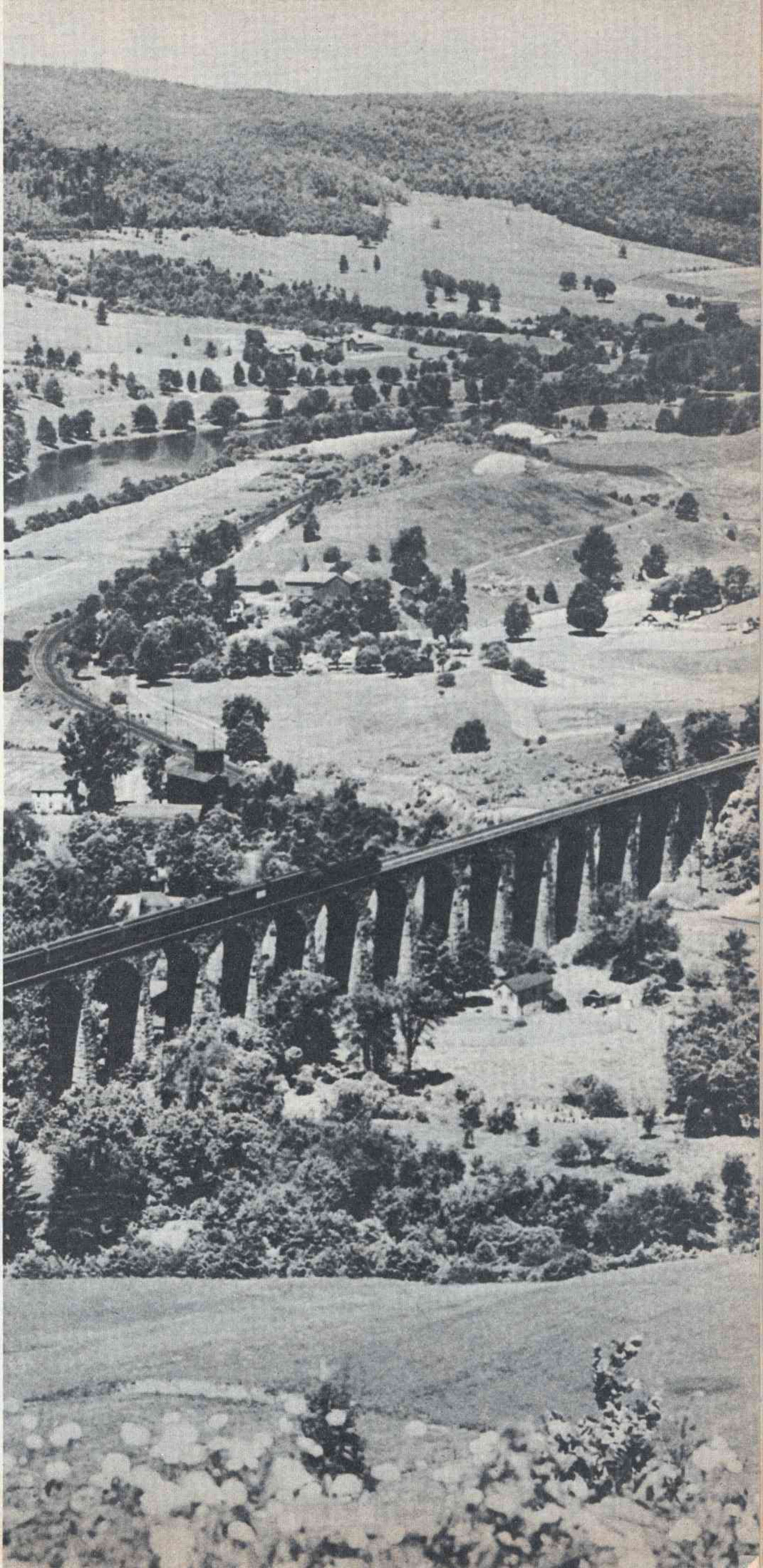
BY THAT STANDARD, the quintessence was the Erie. First, one could usually save about \$7 by taking the Erie instead of the Pennsy or the Central; nothing could be quintessential in coach travel without being cheap. Second, the trains carried Pullmans, so that one could always congratulate oneself on forgoing the option of alleged luxury. The whole operation was standard railroading, down to the consist of the passenger trains: head end, two coaches (one for long-distance passengers, one for local), diner, and Pullman. On the east end, the trains usually ran heavier; the consist typically expanded eastbound at Youngstown. The railroad was not situated to make a big pitch for passenger traffic and was too broke to modernize to the extent most other major railroads did, but the coaches were nicely refitted and well maintained. The food in Erie diners was good, worthy of more praise than it ever got; and the waiter brought a pair of mints in a

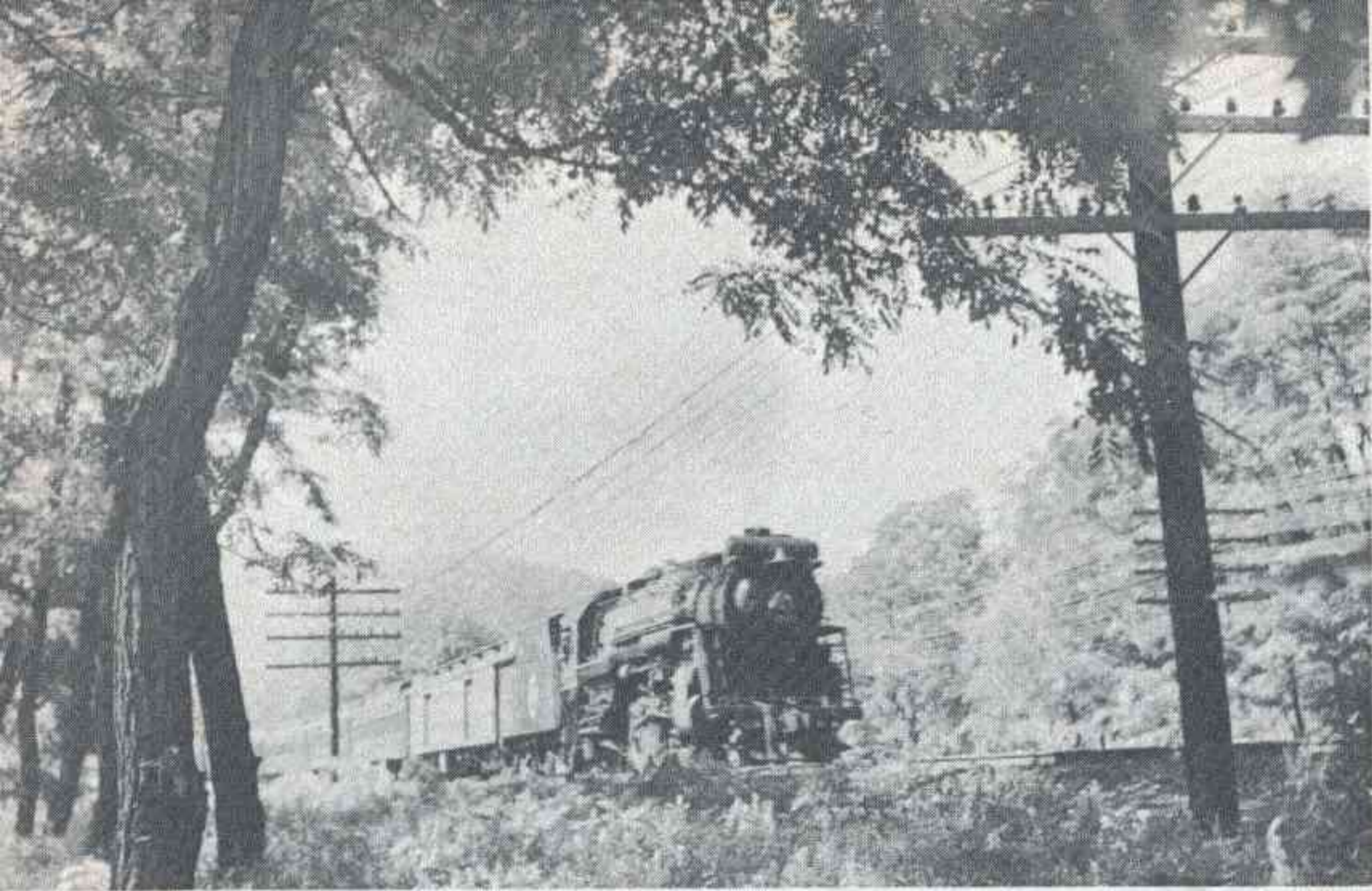
STARRUCCA VIADUCT at Lanesboro, Pa., was a scenic highlight of a ride on Erie Railroad mainline trains.

cellophane bag with one's change, which always seemed to me a nice gesture from a road so unpretentious about its passenger operations. Remarkably, though, the Erie's passenger volume held up better than that of most of the more famous passenger haulers; people didn't fly to Hornell and to Jamestown until relatively late.

So few passengers rode the Erie from end to end that the conductor invariably asked anyone presenting a ticket between Chicago and New York if he was going straight through without stopping over. I trained myself to answer, "Of course," in as imperious a manner as possible. Why not? I never really had any business en route; any business I had was always in Chicago or in Washington, where the *Capitol Limited*, an infinitely more comfortable train, could have taken me directly. The only reason I had for being on the Erie was to enjoy the Erie, and that was reason enough.

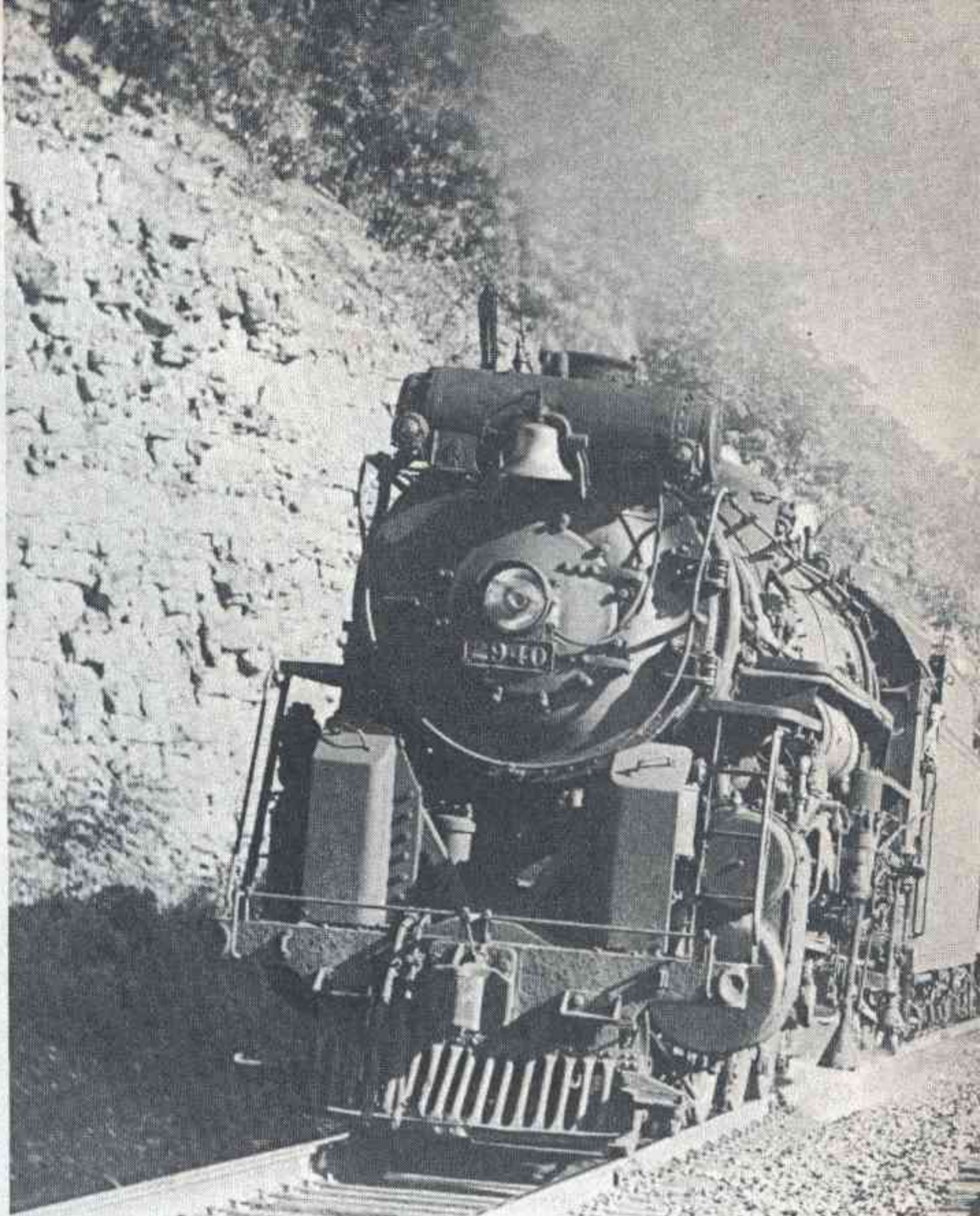
I'm not sure the Erie was "The Rail Trip of a Thousand Wonders," but I'd be as willing to accord it the honor as I would the *Mexicano*, which made that slogan famous. Scenery was only one of the wonders. Scenery has always seemed to me secondary to the opportunity to watch a railroad; railroading is human accomplishment and scenery



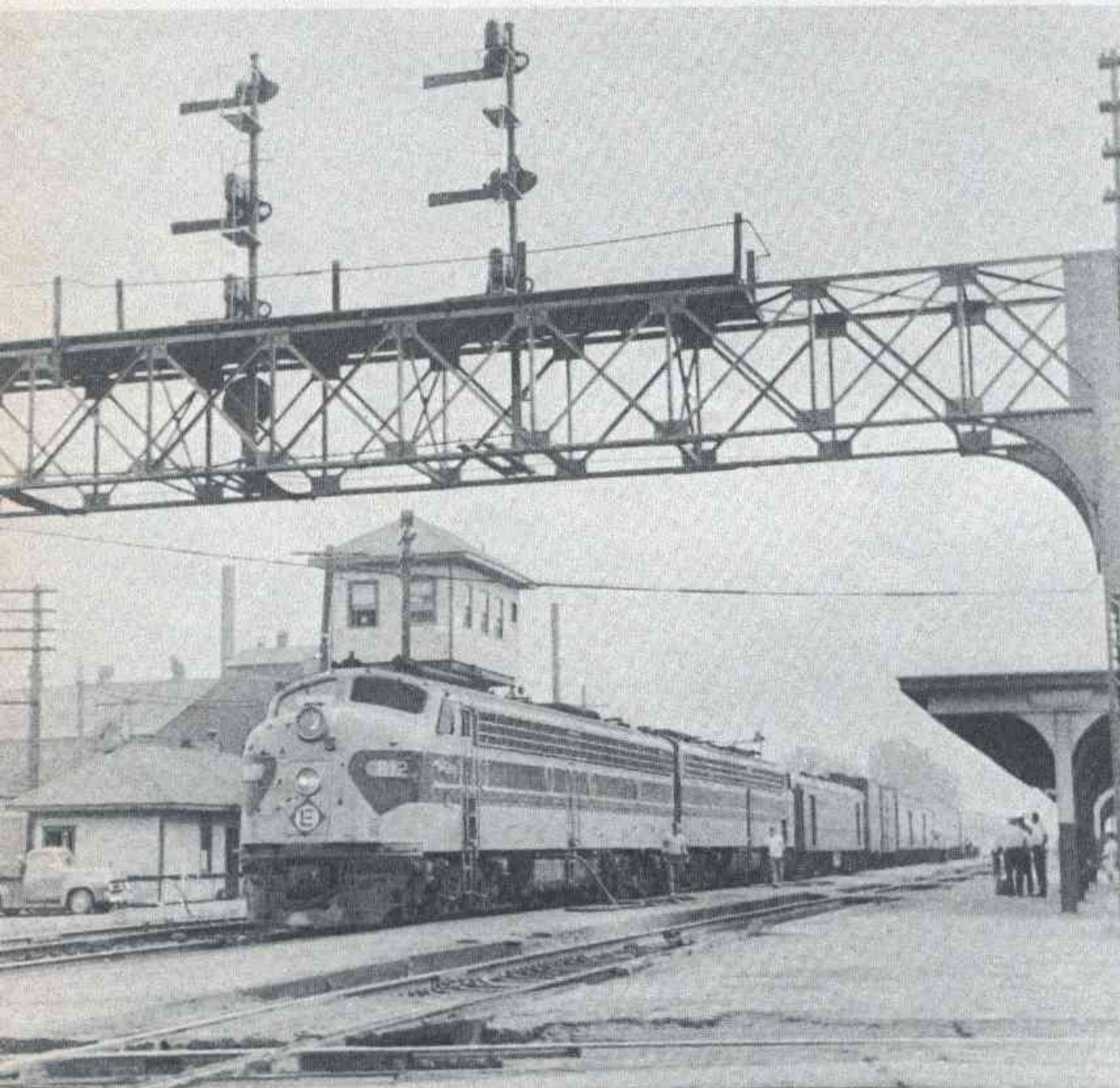


David R. Connor.

STANDARD RAILROADING on the Erie: Erie Limited behind 4-6-2 2923.



PACIFIC 2940 is in charge of the Erie Limited as No. 1 hugs the

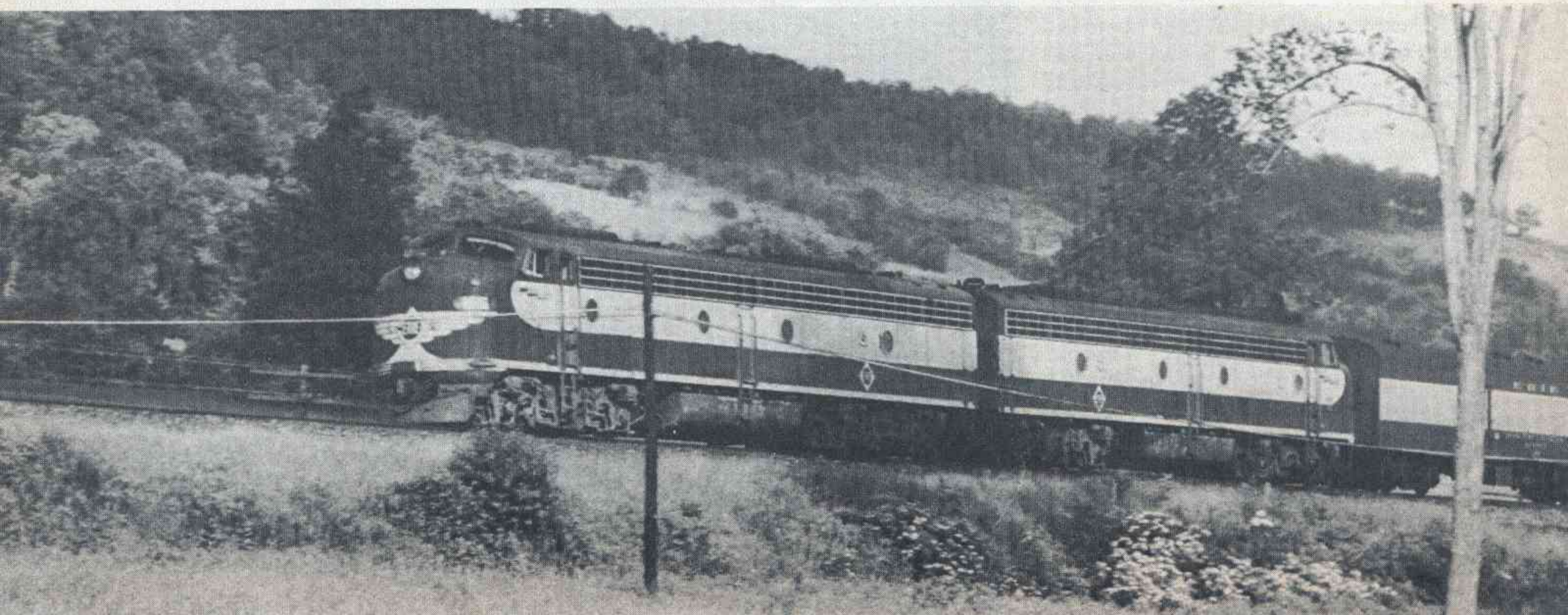


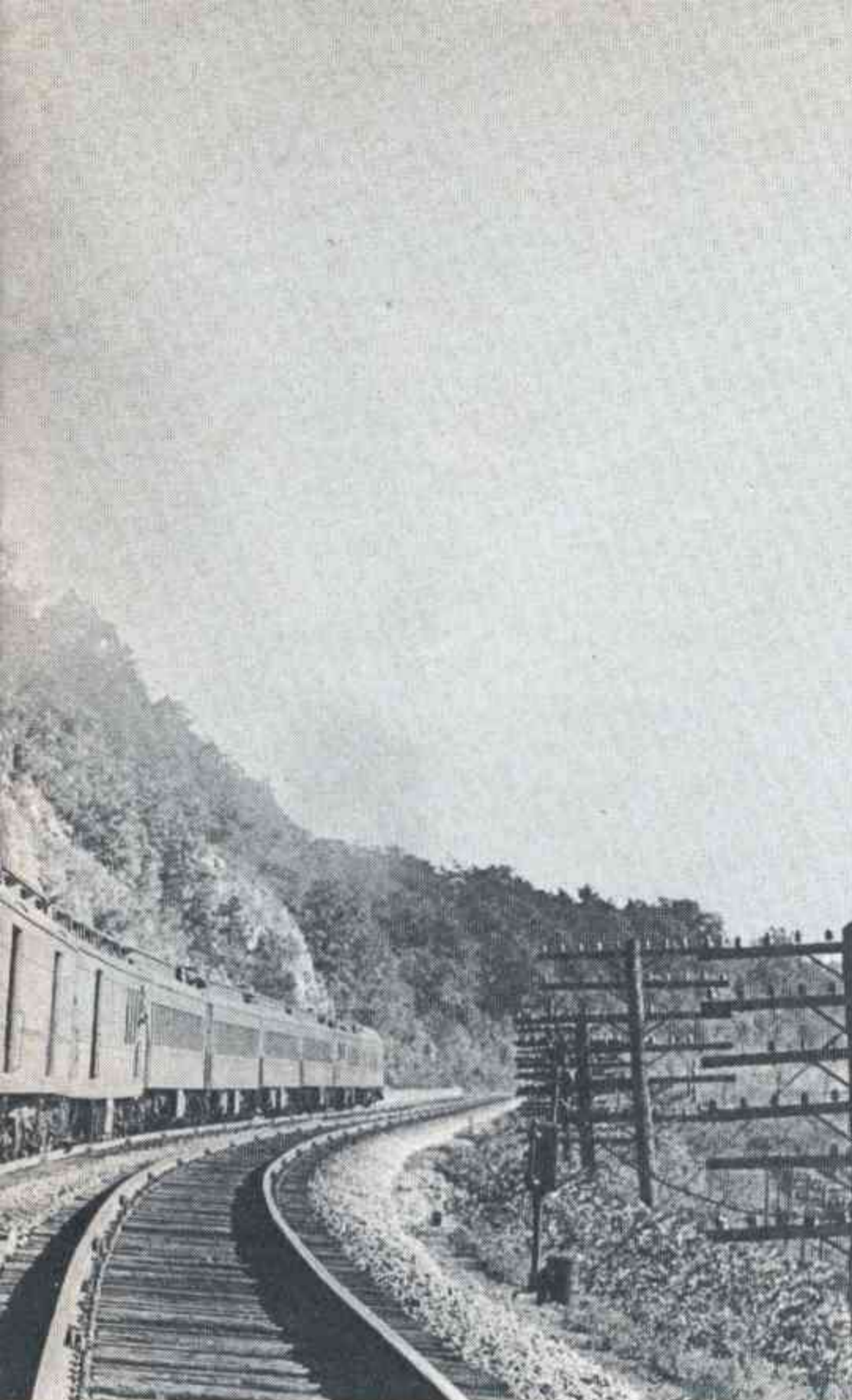
John C. Illman.

AUTHOR HILTON remembers fondly the beanery in the Marion (O.) station.



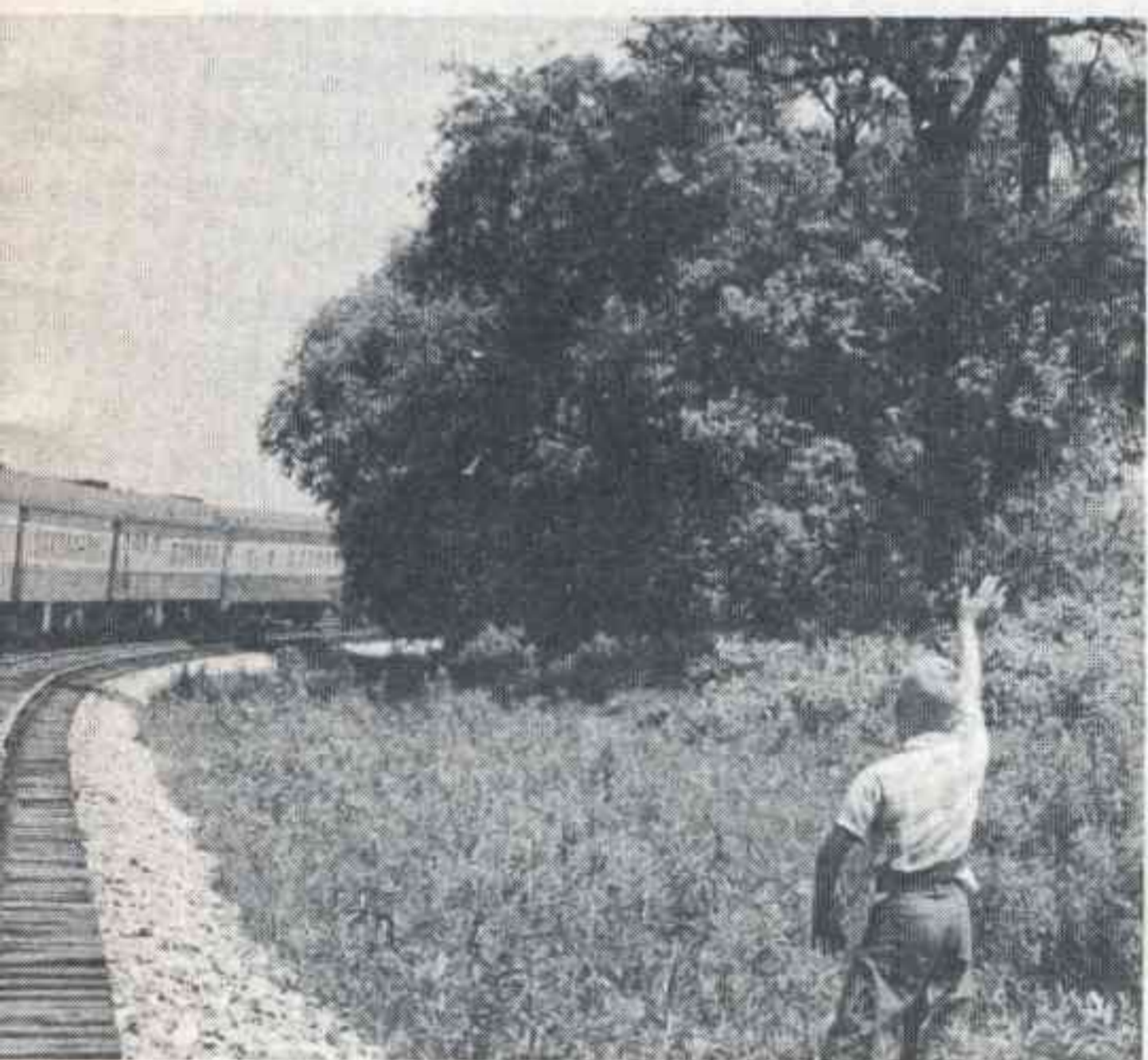
QUINTESSENCE: head-end cars, two coaches, diner, and Pullman.





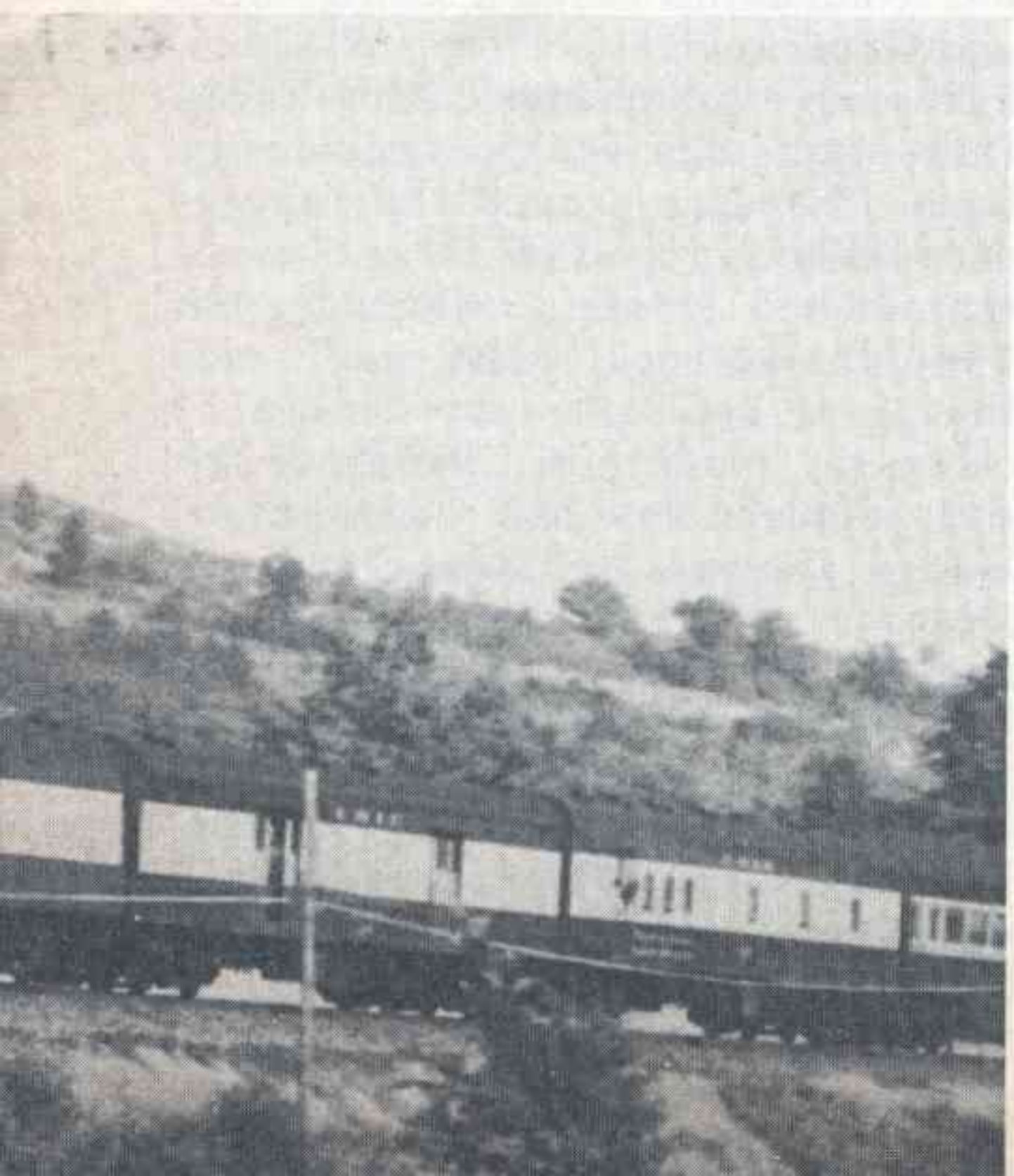
H. D. Runey.

cliffs above the Chemung River near Waverly, N. Y.



R. E. Gabbey.

This was dieselized, green-and-gray Erie Railroad.



isn't. This may be a blind prejudice on my part, but insofar as scenery is an attraction, I give highest marks to the verdant eastern mountain country. The Ma & Pa/Western Maryland country is the best, but the Erie territory almost anywhere east of Youngstown, and especially east of Binghamton, places second. The Starrucca Viaduct was a major accomplishment set in delightful scenery, and the upper Delaware River to the east was lovely beyond overpraise.

THE LEADING WONDER of the Erie to me was negative: how a railroad could have been strung out over 999 miles through the northeastern United States with so little traffic origination. The Erie always seemed to me like a broken field runner, picking its way among sources of traffic as if dodging onrushing defensive backs, getting a solid tackle only once, in Youngstown. Binghamton wasn't bad for traffic, but the Pennsy had most of what was in Elmira. Akron was a major wonder; the Erie threaded the city between the Pennsy and the Baltimore & Ohio, which naturally got all the industrial sidings; the Erie might as well have been in a cornfield. West of Marion were the actual cornfields. The wonder of them was that nobody had managed to convert them into factory sites. The Erie had an industrial development office; I owned a map it had issued, so I was sure it existed. What did it do? One visualized assembly plants, warehouses, and breweries on that flat land, but they weren't there. Had Bippus and Bolivar ever originated anything? Would Lima ever engulf the Erie south of town with factories? The entry into Chicago was the champion. The line cut neatly south of the Gary-Whiting-Indiana Harbor industrial complex in Lake County, Indiana, serving Crown Point—the county seat, no less—before going into Chicago on a terminal company which didn't originate anything for the Erie either.

The Erie's nudity of origination outside of Youngstown made it almost entirely an end-to-end carrier, mainly of eastbound freight. This wasn't all bad, from either a traffic department's point of view or a fan's. Sitting on the left side of an Erie coach, one had upwards of 24 hours of fast freights to watch passing by, first with the road's great Berkshires, later with the company's characteristic GM and Alco cab units. Plenty of freights gave proof of the Erie's well-advertised wide clearances—dating from its broad-gauge begin-

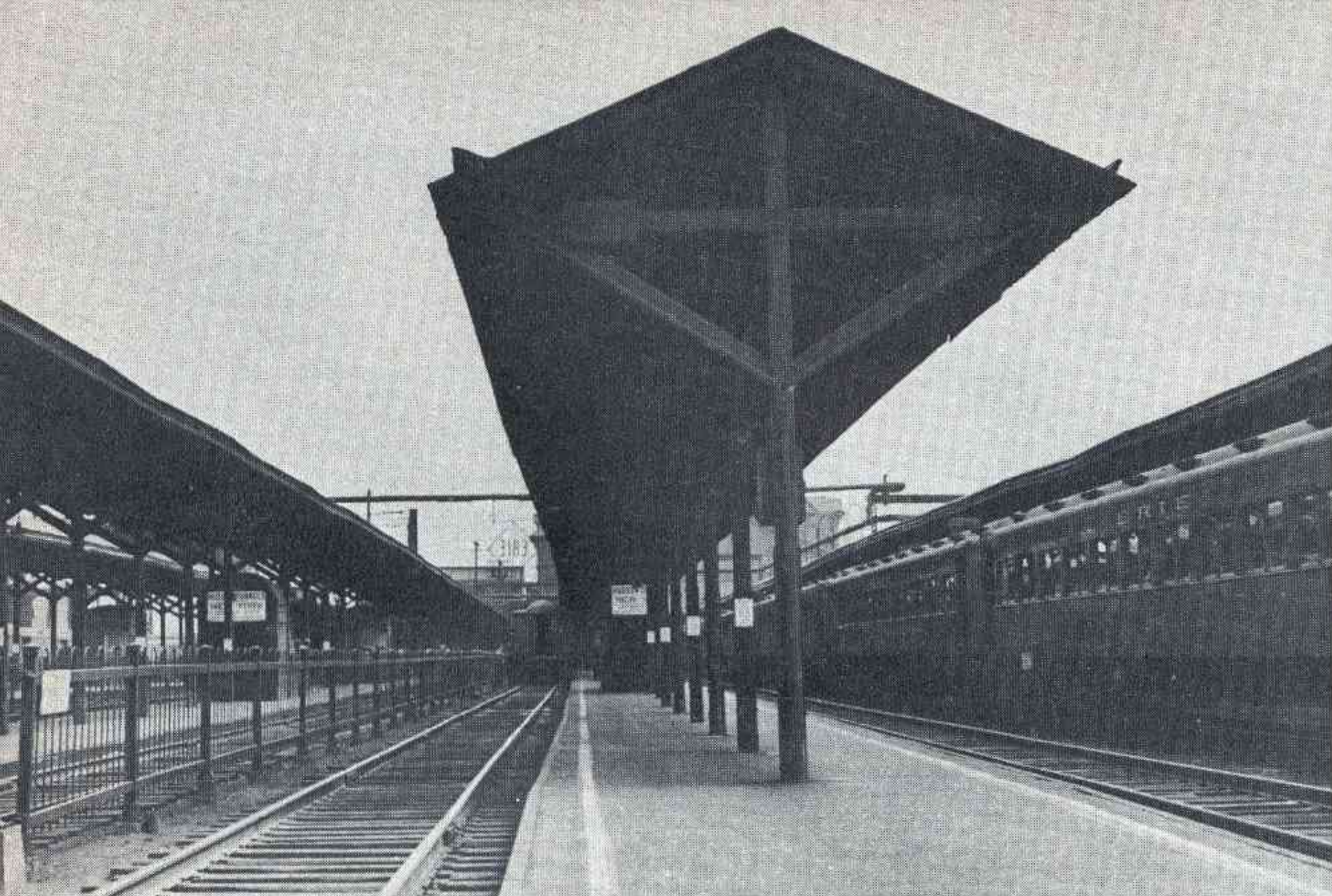
nings—as boilers, fractionating towers, and outsize machinery went by on flat cars.

The Erie's other major glory was its stations. Some of the eastern ones must have had President Polk's portrait among the bunting when they opened. Dearborn always was a disappointment to me. It was not a really good example of Victorian architecture, as was Grand Central a few blocks away, and the modernization of the interior in the 1940's created something appropriate to the Santa Fe, not to the Erie and the Monon. The old Jersey City terminal, at the other end, was pure Erie—ancient, black-painted, unpretentious. The champion, however, was at Marion. There, at the crossing of the Pennsy's Sandusky line, stood a fine rambling station with a porch for a platform, with a restaurant that was the archetype of the railroad beanery. That restaurant wasn't built; it just arose out of *Railroad Magazine* fiction. The Engine Picture Kid should have had dinner there; Eddie Sand must have had a meal ticket. When I was riding the *Lake Cities* I usually planned to get a quick sandwich and some tea there while the train was serviced.

This implies that I didn't head for the diner at every opportunity—and I didn't. Another of the aspects of the standard nostalgia for the passenger train against which I inveighed at the outset is the invariable presumption that one lived it up in the diner throughout the trip. At least as many passengers were devoting their ingenuity to avoiding the diner as were to anticipating going there. Diners were pleasant enough, but they were expensive compared with almost any other way of taking meals on a trip, and many of them weren't all that great as restaurants. Basically, most coach passengers would have been inconsistent in mixing some pretty spartan travel with something as expensive as the usual railroad diner. Since I did enjoy diners as a fan, I pursued a mixed course, usually limiting myself to one meal in the diner, eating other meals before leaving and after arriving, plus taking snacks in stations, or packing some Cracker Jack in my bag. That latter stuff was pemmican for a coach passenger: compact, well-packaged, satisfying, and easy to dispose of. I could even give away the toy in it to a kid in the coach—the company of one's fellow man was a joy of coach travel not to be dismissed lightly.

My plan for meals on the Erie depended on which train I was taking. On the *Lake Cities* eastbound, I'd

AMONG the attractions offered by the Erie: a saving of \$7, good food in the diner, and coaches designed for overnight service. No. 1 is shown at Wellsville, N. Y., in 1958.



Henry J. Ehlbeck.



JERSEY CITY TERMINAL: "pure Erie — ancient, black-painted, and unpretentious."

"ERIE TRAINS were not notably punctual. . . ."

follow up the sandwich at Marion with dinner in the diner leaving Youngstown, and then have breakfast in New York after arrival. When I was to ride the *Erie Limited*, I usually had dinner at the Berghoff Restaurant on Adams Street in Chicago in the late afternoon. The food was better than in virtually any diner but much cheaper, and since the place was owned by a brewery, the beer was excellent. The hops in the beer were a soporific that helped in getting to sleep in the coach. I'd have my one meal in the diner at breakfast, get lunch at the Binghamton station, and have dinner after arrival, usually at an Indian restaurant—something hard to come by outside of New York. A good way to travel? Absolutely—cheap, scenic, a mixture of the fascination of railroading and the pleasures of life off the trains.

COACH TRAVEL on the Erie was my one passion in life which almost proved fatal. Shortly after the merger with the Lackawanna, I left New York on the *Limited* in delightful sunny weather and I particularly enjoyed the trip through the Southern Tier. Erie trains were not notably punctual, but we stayed approximately on schedule to Hornell. I was in the second coach, on the left-hand side as usual. Approaching Hornell, the brakeman came up to me to tell me that the crew would cut out this coach at Hornell, and he asked me to move up into the first coach, which would carry the Chicago passengers. I complied, but without much enthusiasm. I moved into the only vacant window seat, which was on the right side, about over the front trucks. Cutting out the coach cost some time, so that we left Hornell about

10 minutes late. The engineer, a man named Sullivan—first name unknown—took the train out of the station fast, but when he was still within a train length, I felt him give the train an emergency brake application. I did a relatively unsuccessful push-up on the seat in front of me, and felt the unambiguous sensation of wheels bouncing across ties. I left the seat immediately and ran out the rear door of the coach. As anticipated, I found the head-end cars liberally distributed about the countryside, and with a shudder such as I've rarely experienced, I saw why Sullivan had big-holed it. A freight had been approaching from the Buffalo line; Sullivan had seen that a collision was inevitable and realized that if he didn't stop the train dead, the freight would hit the front coach instead of the head-end cars. Atypically I had been on the right side of that coach, and I recognized that if Mr. Sullivan hadn't known what he was doing, I would have had an elderly Alco hood unit in the right hip. And if I was lucky, I'd have gotten off with a limp for life.

What seemed odd to me was that two soldiers were running around, obviously in some agitation, with their rifles over their shoulders and otherwise ready for action. I hadn't seen them previously, and this was the Erie, not the Ferrocarril Nacional de Someplace. From where had they come, and why did they appear in such distress?

I found out fast enough. The sealed baggage car the freight had hit was filled with nuclear weapons. The soldiers were the guards. This naturally made cleaning up the wreck a bit more than a routine operation. Since the collision had occurred right at the switch between the Buffalo line

and a single-track stretch of the main line to the west, it effectively tied up all operations through Hornell—and this, of course, was the Erie's major junction in the entire area. The Erie's inclination was to build a shoo-fly for the main line around the wreck, but the local officials called the Atomic Energy Commission in Washington to check on safety problems. The AEC told them there was no danger of a nuclear explosion, since nuclear weapons do not contain their fusible materials in shipment; but some risk did exist of a conventional explosion of the detonating devices. The AEC counseled against building the shoo-fly, of attempting to move the baggage car, or even of allowing whistles to be blown in Hornell until a safety engineer from Washington could be flown up to examine the weapons and to remove the detonating devices.

I deduced that I was going to become a good bit more familiar with Hornell than I ever had been before. I walked up into the central area and found the town a fine, graceful old community with arching trees and Greek revival porticoes all about. I dined in a promising-looking Italian restaurant, then walked back to the train. The area around the baggage car had been roped off for a distance that looked grossly inadequate, but I couldn't go back to the coach, even though it had not been derailed. I called my parents in Chicago to tell them that the Erie had a little problem in Hornell, so I wouldn't be in Dearborn in the morning; then I settled down to read in the Hornell station. Shortly after midnight the trainmaster at Hornell told us we would be moved to Jamestown in company buses and then carried on to Chicago on a special train being made up for



TRAINS: Wallace W. Abbey.

THE ERIE: "wide clearances . . . plenty of freights . . . cornfields west of Marion."



TRAINS: Wallace W. Abbey.

THE WESTERN TERMINUS: "a disappointment."

us. We were herded into a pair of ordinary school buses from the Maintenance of Way department and headed for Jamestown. The buses apparently had governors set for 35 mph, and I can't recall a slower or more uncomfortable trip. At 4:30 a.m. we pulled into Jamestown where an Erie passenger unit, baggage car, and two coaches awaited us. That train gave us the fastest ride I can ever remember on the Erie; we were into Chicago an hour ahead of the *Lake Cities* schedule. When the *Lake Cities* made it I never did find out.

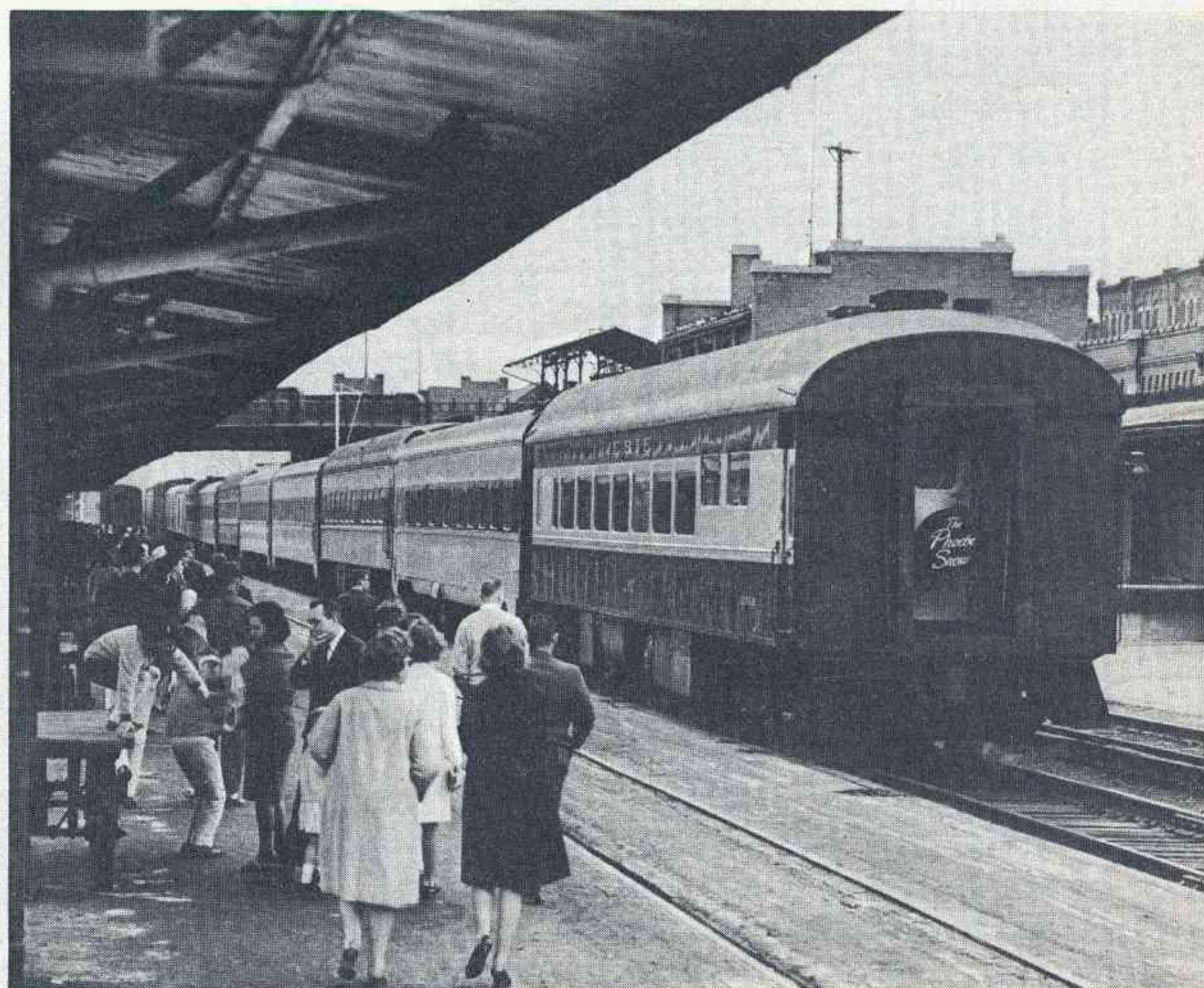
I MADE only one more trip on the Erie, eastbound on the *Limited* around 1965, but I didn't enjoy it much. The railroad wasn't my Erie anymore. The trains had been rerouted through Scranton, missing the part of the main line I had enjoyed most; the Erie Lackawanna had adopted Lackawanna colors for the passenger cars; and the coaches were former Lackawanna postwar equipment which, although they were more modern than the Erie's upgraded standard cars, obviously were designed for day service and had neither enough leg room nor enough toilet-lounge space for overnight trains. All of that I could forgive readily as justified by economic considerations, but what was unforgivable was giving the *Limited* that idiotic name *Phoebe Snow*. Being a west-end man, I considered the new name an affront to the Erie and I never used it in conversation; but to my amazement, most people I knew found the name a delight.

My time on the Erie, or in any other coaches, was fast running out. I wasn't an instructor or an assistant prof anymore, and if now I could afford the luxury I had never really wanted, I couldn't afford the time to

be on the rails at all. Together with the millions who never had loved the passenger trains, I gave them up and turned to the instantaneous communications machines people call jets. I had one last fling in 1966 on a trip to all the Midwestern and Northwestern cities that had had cable car lines in the 19th century—almost all of which I did by rail. The last night I ever spent on a train was on the *Cascade* from Eugene to Oakland—in a coach.

On the other hand, riding those trains was so basic to those of us who loved them that to face its ever

stopping is difficult. Perhaps when we are gone, the same as the trains are, our ghosts will ride those rails forever. Arthur Dubin will order the King's Dinner on the *Panama*, Dave Morgan will have a Seagram's VO in the *Lark's* triple-unit lounge, and afterward Bill Moedinger will collect their tickets back in the Pullmans. But he won't find me there. I'll be up in front of the diner, in the through Jersey City-Chicago coach on the *Erie Limited* east of Binghamton in a window seat on the left-hand side, watching carefully so that I don't miss the viaduct. **I**



J. J. Young, Jr.

THE LAST LAUGH: On April 25, 1965, a green Erie parlor-diner, substituting for the regular tavern-lounge, brings up the rear of No. 1, the former Erie Limited.