

Traction Caboose

By George Paxon

The humble caboose is probably as much a well-recognized symbol of railroading as is the steam locomotive. In the “good ol’ days”, you always found one on the back of a steam road freight train. When growing up it was such a thrill to watch a train roll by. We often counted the cars, inspecting carefully each one as it passed, even though where I came from, there was rarely anything except dirty old red, and sometimes black, Pennsy coal hoppers. As the train rolled along at a snail’s pace, we eagerly awaited the certain-to-eventually-appear, freight car red, Pennsy caboose, or cabin, in Pennsy lingo. This provided the only variety in the otherwise drab procession. As the caboose passed, we would look for a conductor or brakeman on the rear platform and give him a big wave usually getting a friendly wave in return. Some of you were probably more fortunate and lived along what was a bit more “up-market” rail line and had merchandise trains to watch every day. This would have provided you with a much greater variety in car type, reporting marks, and color than we had.

But, then occasionally even we would break loose, walk into town and across the Monongahela River bridge, and take up a commanding position near the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie track to wait for a train there. Now that was a considerably better show than on our side of the river. There was considerable coal traffic coming off the Monongahela Railroad and down river on the P&LE, but quite a few trains were of a merchandise nature, came through at what we thought was break-neck speed, and had cars from many railroads and every sort of car type known to a young boy. That was real train watching! And at the end of each train, there was sometimes a strange caboose. We found it a bit weird that it did not have the obligatory cupola but had bay windows instead. And it was sometimes green!

We forgave the P&LE for those sins as the train was really a fantastic show compared to the drab coal trains on our side of the river.

If I could train watch now, I don’t think it would be the same without the caboose.

But traction freight trains were quite different. There, a caboose was a rare sight indeed. Some traction lines did use them. These were usually lines that operated more like a steam road than a “down the middle of the street” trolley type operation. And they tended to be lines that had longer runs and longer freight trains.



Photo 1

Traction freight trains more often than not were very short affairs with just a few cars being not all that uncommon. Electric locomotives usually had spacious cabs so there was plenty of room for trainmen as well as enginemen. And, with the short trains, it was not a long walk when a trainman needed to go to the rear of the train to protect there or to assist with a backing or switching move. For most traction lines, a caboose was unnecessary.

Illinois Traction System was a larger than usual traction line and a big user of the caboose. It turned into the Illinois Terminal Railroad as a Class 1 operator of diesel locomotive pulled freight trains when its traction days were over. Eventually, it ended up a part of the ever-expanding N&W. They had a nice variety of caboose cars with most home built.

I had to build a model of a novel style of ITS caboose for my Mountain Electric, and it should provide good service on our layout. See Photo 1 for the finished model and photo 2 showing the car under construction. The prototype for this Illinois Traction caboose started life as a somewhat standard short wood caboose with a cupola. When growing freight car height made visibility from the cupola difficult, the ITS shopped some of these cars, installed home-made steel bay windows and added years to their usefulness. They were car numbers 900, 901, 903, 906, 923, 925, and 936. The M.D. McCarter photo collection, an excellent source of prototype info, includes several photos of these cars both before and after conversion to cars with bay windows. Car Works did import a nice model of the car as well. A local friend of mine down here has one of the Car Works models which I offered to purchase a while back. When he told me he did not want to sell it, I started work on building my model of the car from scratch. He has since changed his mind, but I told him I did not need his model any longer. If I play my cards right, I might end up with a second one for a good price now that I am not all that hungry for one!



Photo 2

ITS had similar cars in basically two series, numbered from 949 to 958, made of steel, slightly longer, that ran on old de-motored passenger trucks. I am not positive of all the details of their history, but they were all built in the Company shop as well. These steel cars did not shout "build me" as loud as did the wood ones. Car Works imported models of the 951 to 958 cars as well. Drawings for them can be found in *Mainline Modeler*, January 1993.