

Sunday Newsday

THE LONG ISLAND NEWSPAPER

SUNDAY, OCT. 23, 1994 • \$1.50 • NASSAU

THE ROADS & RAILS ON LONG ISLAND



As LIRR Renovation Ends, Who's Laughing Now?

The Long Island Rail Road had a kind of fan appreciation day on Thursday, giving away danish and coffee in the morning and little pocket calendars at night.

Nobody mentioned this month's very important 25th anniversary. But more on that in a minute.

The occasion Thursday was the completion of the \$190-million renovation of the LIRR's facility in Penn Station, which is a misnomer of sorts since the real Pennsylvania Station was torn down 30 years ago, leaving a labyrinth of underground concourses and track platforms for the trains to arrive and depart from. Commuters put up with the renovation for the past 36 months, and have something to be thankful for since it was completed six months ahead of schedule.

There was also a nifty ceremony which brought Gov. Mario Cuomo down to what is the long 34th Street corridor, where he spoke about the accomplishment with the passion of someone old enough to remember the old Penn Station and the psychic damage caused by its demolition. Between the departure of the Dodgers and Giants in 1957 and the Pennsylvania Railroad's decision to sell off one of this country's remarkable architectural wonders, a lot was lost by New York and by the people who — from whatever borough or suburb they came from — thought of themselves as New Yorkers.

The improved amenities of the renovated LIRR's marquee stop include air conditioning and new station information boards. And more space, a new waiting room and one of the most elegant clocks ever built, designed by Vietnam Wall designer Maya Lin and called "Eclipsed Time."

For Cuomo, who is running for re-election, what seemed especially nice was the opportunity to deliver on a promise rather than make one. And in that there is a wonderful irony of time — taking us back to that very important anniversary.

For of all the Long Island Rail Road's historic moments in the past 160 years, Cuomo and the railroad's officials somehow — and who can blame them? —



From left, MTA Chairman Peter Stangl, veteran commuter Ed Perlman of Northport and Cuomo unveil plaque last week dedicating renovation at Penn Station

Newsday / Jim Cummins

managed to forget that this month marks the 25th anniversary of when the LIRR was declared the "finest commuter railroad in America."

The man who made this momentous declaration was Nelson A. Rockefeller, who as governor of New York in the summer of 1969 made a promise to a meeting of Long Island businessmen at the old Garden City Hotel that "within two months" the LIRR would be No. 1. It wasn't quite what he meant to say, but now he couldn't back down. So Rockefeller returned on Oct. 7 that year to declare that "we have become officially the finest commuter railroad."

It was perhaps the original railroad joke.

"Maybe it was the best thing he ever did for us, putting his foot in his mouth like that," says soon-to-retire United Transportation Union general chairman Ed Yule. Before he became a union leader, Yule was a conductor, and he remembers how the railroad at that time was in disarray, with equipment falling apart and trains constantly being canceled.

"We had our own conductors' jokes . . . you know, like the cars are so old they haven't fixed the arrow holes," he says, laughing. "We had the greatest customers and they put up with everything. . . if a train suddenly dropped under forty mph, they lost their lights." Yule remembers Rockefeller's promise, and its unanticipated consequences.

"We knew that the railroad was a joke," he said. But once Rockefeller got himself involved, "he had to do something, and that something involved money. Money to fix things up. He did us a great favor."

The real truth on this unnoticed little anniversary is that not only did the governor make a mistake, but that he refused to admit he had misspoke.

"This is a true story," says former LIRR public relations chief Hank Boerner, who for the first time has revealed his own accidental participation in Rockefeller's great promise. "I wrote a speech for the governor but nobody on his staff told me that the governor hated reading prepared speeches and wanted to speak from cards. He took the speech, but instead of reading it, simply absorbed what I had written and then spoke off the cuff."

And so instead of reading what Boerner had written — that "the railroad had been working to solve its problems, that it had made some strides and expected to make even more improvements in the next sixty days to put it on the road to becoming the finest commuter railroad in the country —

Rocky simply cut out some words and declared it would be the finest in sixty days."

Boerner headed the railroad's public relations department for four years and says it was the ideal preparation for his subsequent career as a crisis-management consultant. One of his most vivid memories is how the LIRR grew to national prominence fueled by daily examples of ineptitude that were publicized by local disc jockeys in the morning and the "Tonight" show's Johnny Carson at night.

"I dreaded his show every night," says Boerner, who can't recall the jokes but remembers their impact. "It didn't help morale." As for Carson, his secretary in Santa Monica said last week that her boss didn't want to be interviewed about the LIRR and that, anyway, he didn't remember any of his jokes.

Boerner said, "We were so bad, all he had to do is mention us and people began to laugh . . . sort of like the same reaction you used to get when you mentioned Brooklyn."

Which in a roundabout way brings us to the present, and the recent dispute between Carson successor Jay Leno and Amtrak, the National Railroad Passenger Corp. Leno has been cracking jokes about Amtrak, and Amtrak decided it didn't want to spend its advertising money with his show's network, NBC.

"My advice to Amtrak would be to chill out," said Boerner, who should know. "After all, it's only topical humor, anyway."

THE RAIL RIDER



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