



TRANSIT IS MY BEAT

BY ROY E. WALTERS

TRANSIT TROUBLE CYCLE — IS IT NOW REPEATING

With the big trouble in Queens the evening rush hour of August 30th, that will live long in the memories of those involved, have come remarks such as: The subways were never like this; the subways are going from bad to worse; it's nothing but fires and floods and trouble; luck holds out that someone doesn't die or is killed in these subway troubles. Mainly, it began with the Grand Central station fire in June and other interruptions, mainly fires, since.

Fire and water danger is not entirely new to the subway system. Neither is man failure, whether in operations or lack of information during delays (which is man failure in work clothes of another color) and neither is "people panic" and hysteria. As a matter of fact, regardless of who is at the helm of subway management—and this is no glossing of today's 3-Member panel—serious troubles take place and, I notice, underground incidents come in cycles spanning years.

'46-'48 Bad Years Too

Through the years, I have kept my own home records of major transit breakdowns in Greater New York, including fires, floods, collisions and strikes. In reviewing these diary-like records, the evening of the recent trouble, I was amazed to notice that we are now in the second year of what had been a three-year cycle of major transit trouble that began in April '46 and concluded October '48. The worst of it lasted twenty-nine months. This was preceded, strangely enough, by a 90-day "warming up to trouble" and was concluded by another 90-day tapering off of major trouble. Transit, then too, made many headlines of the wrong kind, and much of it especially affected subway and

elevated operation in this very locale.

I give you now a digest of the items I found in my records:

Transit's bigger troubles kicked off April 20, 1946 with the burning of the Bridge St. station on Easter Eve in which four Myrtle "el" cars were destroyed where they sat. This sparked twenty-nine months of headaches.

Then on June 3rd and 4th came power slowdowns that affected almost the entire BMT, the Jamaica and 14th St. Lines in particular. An evening rush hour, then the morning rush.

June 10th was big trouble, but morning rush hour had just been avoided. At 9:36 A.M. an explosion rocked the Kent Ave. powerhouse and every BMT train and trolley in Brooklyn stood still.

There was trouble elsewhere too: June 25th, twenty Staten Island railway coaches (same as those now on West End Loop) were destroyed in the spectacular fire at St. George that ruined the old ferryhouse—which needed replacing, anyhow.

In the next eight months were numerous power slowdowns on the BMT and IRT too numerous to list. These were capped by a serious delay in the morning rush hour of March 26, 1947 that snafued the 14th St.-Canarsie Line but good. While there followed a calm in underground troubles, a new cycle began here that lasted five months within the greater cycle of war: bus and trolley accidents in all the boroughs, some with loss of lives, but not to passengers. When this subsided, the subway flooded, stalled,

Man, Nature vs Rider

Like the Bridge St. fire, there came a new spark that erupted into a wave of serious mishaps. On Aug. 21, 1947, an IND motorman, allegedly intoxicated, sped an "F" train (passengers testified

well. As early as Jan. 5th, "wet coal" produced a power slowdown that crept all morning rush hour trains out of Eastern Division—these lines, all.

On Aug. 26th was a torrential downpour around 4 P.M. that flooded the 14th St.-Canarsie Line in the vicinity of Montrose, but for the most part from Bedford to Morgan. Tunnel phones were dead. Signals showing wrong colors, trains sent around curves by lantern language. The third rail glowed orange beneath flood waters that covered it. I saw this. What's more, the weather was sultry. The water was quite high at some stations, but every train kept moving.

Right on the tail of this, came the worst yet: Sept. 15, 1947—a night to remember—quite like this Aug. 30th. A fire at the Kent Ave. powerhouse halted every BMT train, every trolley car and every trackless trolley in these boroughs! Trains that left Broad St. around 5:40 that evening, never reached Eastern Parkway until after 9. And very few left these trains, stalled like flies all along the Broadway Elevated, Lexington and Myrtle. The reason: no outer railing on the structure and having to walk between third rails and stalled trains, passing wheels and third rail contact shoes at track level. Too, no fans—and the night was sultry. (I was on the tracks on Lexington Ave., along with others, and helped some women to climb down, guiding them on the hike to Gates Ave. station. They nearly became hysterical crossing the switchtracks over Ralph Ave., avoiding third rails that retain some voltage.)

One month to the day, Oct. 15, 1947, there was a short in the IRT river tunnel beyond the Hotel St. George, trains stalled and windows were broken in panic that followed smoke.

On Oct. 30th, 120 passengers were in near-panic on the H&M in an electrical fire downtown Manhattan.

Then, Dec. 23rd, riders in an IND Eighth Ave. Local felt fear when the motorman collapsed. The conductor took over the controls and operated the train.

The Big Snow!

Who can forget Dec. 26, 1947, the blizzard? It wasn't until New Year's Eve, that ten of forty bus lines were running again in Brooklyn and 25 of the thirty remaining trolley lines.

Trouble carried into 1948 as

well. As early as Jan. 5th, "wet coal" produced a power slowdown that crept all morning rush hour trains out of Eastern Division—these lines, all.

On Feb. 3rd, a water main burst at Lexington & E. 23rd and knocked out the East Side IRT four busy hours, affecting 400,000.

Then, Feb. 5th, there was near-panic in the H&M again as four trains were left without power beneath North River.

On Feb. 11th, a severe sleet storm caused two Third Ave. El trains to collide at E. 42nd St.

Fire destroyed a wooden work train and some Lexington BMT elevated cars at the (upper) Canal St. station out of Eastern. This happened on March 6th.

Next, March 11th saw another bad sleet storm in severe cold weather that badly slowed evening rush hour trains mostly in this general area.

Heavy rains snarled the Wilson Ave. trolley line in a big way at Stanhope near Myrtle. Twelve cars in the rush hour direction, April 1, couldn't attempt the flood. All seemed fairly quiet (except for minor tieups) until Sept. 29th when a West End train derailed in rush hour near the DeKalb Ave. station, ripping up rails and ties. Some 1,400, after a wait, walked the tunnels to the platform.

On Oct. 24, 1948, 73 people were injured when two Flatbush Ave. trolleys met violently, head-to-tail, near the Botanic Gardens.

To top off accidents and technical delays, the union on Oct. 26, 1948, began a long bus strike that left all Manhattan bus-less except for city-owned routes, the few. Thus ended the cycle of fear and inconvenience and sometimes danger.

And so goes the new cycle, testing whether the New Yorkers of today can take it as well as those of twelve and fourteen years ago. For how long?

Address mail for this column to Transit, Ridgewood Times, Brooklyn 27. Name withheld upon request.

EXPAND PROGRAM
Augustus Peck, Supervisor of the Brooklyn Museum Art School, announced that the School is expanding its program for the 1950-61 school year.

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