

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO US!

A condensed history of the Harrisburg Chapter NRHS,  
by Allan G. Crist, Chapter Historian

After two abortive starts over a span of four-and-a-half decades, the Harrisburg Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society can take pride, come April 29, 1984 upon having attained 25 active, unbroken years of existence.

It took some doing! In a sense, it has achieved its own "reincarnation" after twice dying, in effect, in infancy. Happily, the continuity from a short-lived birth on September 15, 1940, has been maintained in the person of the sole still-active member from those days: Richard H. Steinmetz, old-time newspaperman, author, and avid historian of railroads, trolley lines and canals. (Still around as this was written, although no longer active in today's organization, are three other 1940 charter members: E.D. Emerick, Franklin C. Hoffman and Walter V. Schimmel.)

More recently, existence of that nearly-forgotten chapter has been documented in the form of the original charter of the Harrisburg Chapter, identified as the 14th in the NRHS. That document was uncovered in a "housecleaning" of documents by Hugh R. Gibb, current NRHS Historian, and passed along to Tom Seaman, who only shortly before had yielded our Chapter's presidency. Prompted by that discovery, Dick Steinmetz recalls that he had been at the NRHS' organizational meeting in the 1930's, and that, as a member of the Lancaster Chapter and in his capacity as first Editor of the NRHS Bulletin, he printed that organization's Vol. I, No. 1 and some later issues on a hand press in the bedroom of his Wormleysburg home. Besides Steinmetz, Emerick, Hoffman and Schimmel, the 1940 charter members were: Paul G. Keller, Robert E. Fisher, Augustus Wildman, Robert K. Calhoun, Joseph H. Rissinger, Ralph Hirst, John R. Keifer, John S. Roth and Henry K. Hamilton.

The trail of the pioneer Harrisburg Chapter seems to end there, overgrown by a long disruptive World War II and the absence of records indicating any chapter activity. But with war's end, Dick and a few others managed to reignite some interest. His minutes (also unearthed and returned to us by Historian Gibb) of successive meetings of what Dick referred to as "the inactive Chapter" reveal a sadly brief existence. Joining him at his home for a November 1947 session were 1940 Chapter "holdovers" Keller, Schimmel and Henry Hamilton, plus Hugh Hamilton, at Keller's instigation. Keller was named President, Schimmel, Treasurer, and Steinmetz, Secretary. Skipping over December, the tiny group assembled next in January, decided on 50¢ annual dues and forwarded those together with national dues to the NRHS Treasurer. Then there were refreshments and talk about railroad matters. That was the high point of activity, for each succeeding month the minutes were concise in the extreme: "No meeting was held during this month," although there had been some exchange of correspondence with national officers concerning further activities. But finally, in January 1949, came the entry: "No meeting due to poor interest. All future meetings cancelled until further notice." Based on information available to us, none ever occurred.

But now we come to the genesis of Chapter Number 45, whose 25th birthday we are celebrating. It was put on paper at our request, not long before his 1982 death, by William M. Echternach, Jr., well remembered as a great raconteur, avid traveler, excellent and prolific photographer, painstaking scale modeler, and inventor of brain-torturing "What Is It?" slides of greatly-magnified photographs of common objects.

In the Spring of 1955, then Chairman of the Hobby Committee of the local Bell Telephone Pioneers, Echternach was approached by William Wehner, the Pioneers' Secretary, as to whether Bill could make use of the Pioneers' newly-furnished meeting room at 305 North Second Street. Bill corralled various railroad modelers and other railfans, who gladly accepted the offer, and in growing numbers started regular meetings. They called themselves The Harrisburg Railroad Enthusiasts, although "our meetings were very informal, having no officers, dues or programs," Bill wrote. "We merely gathered around large tables, helped each other with modeling problems, perused the railroad books which were brought to the meetings, discussed walking rights-of-way, showed postcards, prints and slides, and had general bull sessions." But, with downtown stores open evenings, parking posed a problem; so, as Bill recounts, he made use of his telephone company position for permission for the railfans to use the Bell conference room at 400 South Second Street, where, "being only a block from the Nationwide Inn gave rise to the dinner meeting on an optional basis."

Various members of the group belonged to various NRHS chapters--mostly the Lancaster Chapter. Discussion led to all but two of the participants, who didn't want any organized formality--constitution and bylaws, elections, dues and the like--voting to form the NRHS chapter we have today. For awhile, at least, there was a continuing association between the Enthusiasts and the NRHSers, an undated notice in our records having been addressed to members of both groups. It called attention to a November 10 meeting at Carroll P. Sanders' home in Harrisburg. There were to be an auction of railroadiana and a "grab bag" for 25¢, "light refreshments to follow." Sanders and Marlin O. Swartley comprised "Your Committee." And the Harrisburg Evening News of January 15, 1959, ran a story about the "Railroad Enthusiasts" as "a unique organization that is apt to talk about almost anything," under Echternach as Chairman and Keifer as Secretary-Treasurer. With it was a picture of them with a display of toy and model trains at the Pioneers Lounge to stimulate membership.

Along more formal lines, a series of early 1959 letters from Carrel I. Tod, then NRHS Vice-President, Membership, responding to Wayne Riddle's questions about organizing a chapter, suggested that "Yes, we had a former Harrisburg Chapter, but that is so long ago I think it would be better to start all over again." The correspondence exchange culminated in Tod's letter of April 29, 1959, offering "congratulations on a flying start" with 20 members enrolled. Tod, in a concurrent letter to NRHS Treasurer Ernest Kovacs, threw a verbal bouquet to Wayne as having been "the moving spirit" in the Chapter's birth. But Wayne told members at a meeting later that year that Echternach deserved the credit for having started the wheels turning in May 1958.

Continuity from the abortive organization of 19 years earlier was provided in the extant list of 1959 charter members: Steinmetz, Keifer and Henry Hamilton. Transferees from the Lancaster Chapter were: Hamilton, Riddle, Steinmetz, Harold Stahle, Jr. and Ben Peters, Jr. Despite his 1940 antecedents, Keifer was among those listed as "new" members, with Edward H. Beaver, Echternach, Robert G. Gurley, Stanley Eisenhard, Jr., Charles O. Hoffman, John H. Brown, Robert E. Runk, Augustus Wildman, Sanders, Swartley, Vincent J. Ciardo, Herbert W. Klink, C.L. Siebert, Jr., and Robert M. Musser completing the roster.

Echternach was elected President; Keifer, Secretary-Treasurer, and Peters, National Director. Whether it had become the NRHS's 36th chapter, as Tod stated in his congratulatory letter, or Number 45, as it appears in Historian Gibb's record, doesn't count for much in the large scheme of things. No matter what, it evidently was in full stride, with Sanders carrying the title of Editor, running off Volume I, Number 1 of the Harrisburg Chapter News. "This is our first addition [sic] save it who knows it may become a

collectors item. As some people collect anything," he suggested. It told of such coming events as a June 14 meeting and tour of the Harrisburg "Diesele" shops, hosted by Robert Runk; a planned June 5 convoy of members' cars to Northumberland, and possibly a later visit to the Strasburg RR as "a family affair." His July issue told of an upcoming picnic at Swatara Park and of plans--subsequently carried through--for the Chapter to put together a display of old trains and other railroad-related items in a Market Square store window in connection with observance of Harrisburg's centennial.

Echternach yielded office after a few months, subsequently being awarded the rare distinction of honorary life membership. Riddle succeeded to the Presidency, followed by George Eschbach through 1961. Since then, Presidents have been Denys W. Martlew, 1962; William K. Volkmer briefly in 1963; succeeded by Howard Sanford, Jr., through 1965; Martlew again in 1966; George A. Cazakoglu in 1967; Ronald Chandler, 1968-1970; George L. Beane, Jr., 1971-72; Reverend Howard M. Walker, 1973 and part of 1974; Riddle again for the rest of 1974 through 1977; Charles Davenhall, 1978-79; Edwin H. Olmstead, 1980-81; Thomas F. Seaman, 1982 and until resignation early in 1983; and Fred Wertz filling out the remainder of that year and elected for 1984.

Another sense of the Chapter's permanence and status came in the form of incorporation in 1971 to cover legal liability in case of railroad trip accidents, to permit acceptance of gifts of railroad-related equipment and to help secure a permanent meeting place. And just to make it complete, the Chapter obtained a corporate seal in 1974 (although it has yet to have been pressed into service). Much more important, finally, after three years of negotiations, the Harrisburg Chapter was granted Internal Revenue Service exemption from payment of Federal taxes and the sought-after charitable organization status, the latter designation allowing individuals to take income tax deductions for making contributions to us.

Meeting places have varied widely over the years although, as Bill Echternach noted, they often have tied in with proximity to suitable eating places which also, on occasion, have provided facilities for the formal business and the usual entertainment finale. A typical example of this format was the use of the railroad-themed Summerdale Junction Restaurant in the mid '70's and early '80's. During that period, business and program portions of the meeting were held in a curtained-off section of the dining room (sometimes to the consternation of other patrons) or, occasionally, in one of the adjacent motel rooms. Disenchantment with not only the meeting arrangements, but with the food quality and service, led to the current use of the Region VI Office of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, also conveniently located in Summerdale within sight and hearing distance of Enola Yard. In earlier years, an occasional meeting site was member Gus Wildman's hobby shop in New Cumberland, appropriately named "The Station"--because that is what the century-old structure had been at Robesonia for the old Lebanon Valley (later, Reading) Railroad before he painstakingly dismantled, transported, and reassembled it on its present grounds. Members' homes provided accommodations once in a while, especially in the '60's and early '70's.

The pattern of business and entertainment activity has varied since the start within the diverse interests of the members: train-riders, camera "bugs," modelers and collectors. Thanks to Harrisburg's status as a rail center, and accessibility to railroad and other transportation "professionals," the Chapter has benefitted from "insiders" views of the industry.

An unusual enterprise of the past few years stemmed from Fred Wertz's instinct for sniffing out possible treasures. His venture to Lewistown in an unsuccessful effort to pry loose a doomed passenger car for use as a Chapter "home" turned up instead--thanks to scrap dealer Walter Molek's understanding and generosity--thousands of cast-off, century-old papers of the Standard Steel Works: orders from railroads, locomotive and car builders across the U.S. and abroad for steel locomotive and car wheel tires, crank

pins, axles, switch frogs and other items; blueprints, tracing cloth drawings, waybills, freight bills, and so on. Volunteers cleaned off a century's coating of fine soot, sorted, catalogued with full descriptions, and offered them for sale through letters to every other NRHS chapter and many other railfan organizations and entered paid advertising in railfan publications, netting a tidy sum in reinforcement of the Chapter's modest treasury. Along with proceeds from auctions of member-donated artifacts, the Chapter has shared some of the resultant "wealth" by donating to such activities as the Baltimore Streetcar Museum, the NRHS Library Fund, and efforts to save the otherwise doomed PRR GG1s 4800 and 4859 for posterity--for aren't they "historical"?

GG-1 4859 was given special attention by the Chapter because of its historical prominence as the first electric motor to pull a passenger train into Harrisburg on January 15, 1938. A grass roots campaign was initiated to save 4859 from imminent scrapping and to restore the G's original cosmetic appearance. The Chapter heartily endorsed this project and went so far as to permit the use of our charitable organization status to collect donations for the preservation fund. Many Chapter members made contributions, and GG1 4859 has now been saved, is in storage and is the object of planning for the final fundraising effort leading to eventual display at the rehabilitated Harrisburg Amtrak Station.

It always has been, and, we hope, always will be in line with the NRHS's efforts towards preserving the history of the steel wheels on steel rails that helped make our nation grow.



#### CHAPTER PRESIDENTS

William Echternach, 1959  
Wayne Riddle, 1959  
George Eschbach, 1960-61  
Denys Martlew, 1962  
William Volkmer, 1963  
Howard Sanford, Jr., 1963-65  
Denys Martlew, 1966  
George Cazakoglu, 1967  
Ronald Chandler, 1968-70  
George Beane, Jr., 1971-72  
Reverend Howard Walker, 1973-74  
Wayne Riddle, 1974-77  
Charles Davenhall, 1978-79  
Edwin Olmstead, 1980-81  
Thomas Seaman, 1982-83  
Fred Wertz, 1983-84

#### 1984 OFFICERS

President - Fred Wertz  
Vice President - Randy Chapman  
Secretary - Joe Heffron  
Treasurer - Ed Olmstead  
National Director - Bill Trotman  
Historian - Al Crist

#### HONORARY MEMBERS

Ray Cramer  
Walter Molek