

The New York Times

It Went By in a Blur: PATH's 100th



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

A PATH train arriving at 33rd Street in Manhattan.

By [DAVID W. DUNLAP](#)

Published: February 26, 2008

You couldn't miss the 100th anniversary of the New York City subway in 2004. There were speeches, banners, slogans, displays, events and a shelf full of books to mark the milestone for posterity:

Subways, A Century of Subways, Subwayland, Subway Memoirs, The Subway Pictures, Subway Style, The Subway and the City.

But you might easily have missed the centenary of New York's other subway on Monday.

PATH? One hundred years old?

Riders, who were given a free pass from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. in honor of the anniversary, were sometimes hard-pressed to explain their momentary good fortune. Even long memories do not reach too much farther back than 1962, when the [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#) took over the ailing railroad.

I didn't know it was its 100th anniversary until you told me, said Oveta Clinton, 34, of West New York, N.J., as she waited in Newark to board a train for Exchange Place in Jersey City.

What Ms. Clinton definitely did notice was that the late-morning train was far more crowded than usual; standing room only, in fact. This is never like this, she said as she settled in with her coffee and newspaper. This is like 8-in-the-morning rush hour.

Typically, PATH, the Port Authority Trans-Hudson Corporation — né Hudson & Manhattan Railroad Company — carries 240,000 passengers daily under the Hudson River with none of the celebrity or notoriety of its 104-year-old cousin (though New Yorkers have been known to use PATH during

subway strikes to get around Manhattan.)

Like the subway, PATH runs around the clock. But it serves only 13 stations, and [New York City Transit](#) has 468.

So far as is known, [Duke Ellington](#) never performed "Take the JSQ Train." Nor is it known that Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) has been spotted on a PATH train since last April. And all that "H & M" conjures in most minds is a Swedish retailer.

But there was a day—Feb. 25, 1908, to be precise—when [President Theodore Roosevelt](#) could say that the H & M had the "greatest subaqueous tunnel in the world" and was a "bigger undertaking than any Alpine tunnel which has yet been constructed."

The *New York Times* went so far on opening day as to call the Hudson & Manhattan Railroad "one of the greatest engineering feats that has ever been accomplished, greater perhaps than the Panama Canal will be when completed."

The tunneling had begun a quarter century earlier, under DeWitt Clinton Haskin. The project stopped and started and stopped again, plagued by litigation and bankruptcy, until William G. McAdoo took over.

McAdoo was not just the president of the H & M but a figure so synonymous with the system that passengers often spoke simply of riding the "McAdoo Tubes."

[President Roosevelt](#) inaugurated the railroad by pressing a button in his White House office that turned on the electric current in the tunnel. At 3:40:30 p.m., a ceremonial train pulled out of the temporary Manhattan terminus at Sixth Avenue and 19th Street, headed for Hoboken.

The governors of [New Jersey](#) and New York squeezed aboard with other dignitaries. Cornelius Vanderbilt, the commodore's great-grandson, found himself in the unusual position of being just another crushed commuter, but professed, "I would rather ride under the Hudson today hanging to a strap than ride to Albany in a private car."

The train reached Hoboken at 3:51. A crowd of 10,000 gathered outside to cheer the arriving passengers. "The natural barrier which has separated New York from New Jersey since those States came into existence was, figuratively speaking, wiped away," *The Times* proclaimed.

The palmy days did not last long, however. The railroad, which had put many Hudson River ferryboats out of business, was undermined in turn by the automobile. Its busiest year was 1927, when it carried 113,141,729 passengers. In other news that year, the Holland Tunnel opened.

By the 1950s, the railroad was bankrupt. The Port Authority was persuaded to take it over in 1962 as part of the intricate negotiating in the development of the World Trade Center. In fact, the twin towers rose where the railroad's enormous Hudson Terminal complex once stood, with two massive office buildings that were almost identical.

On this site, PATH commuters are eventually to arrive in an architectural marvel that may go a long way—at least symbolically—toward curing any inferiority they may feel about their subway system. The Port Authority has begun building a \$2.2 billion World Trade Center transportation hub and PATH terminal, designed by [Santiago Calatrava](#), a celebrated architect and engineer. It is to open in 2011.

Even earlier, new cars will start coming into service, to replace PATH's aging fleet, most of which dates from the mid-60s to the 1970s. Anthony R. Coscia, the chairman of the authority, said a total of \$3.3 billion was being invested in the expansion and modernization of PATH.

PATH also has advertising inside its tunnels. Working on the principle of the 19th-century zoetrope toy, which created the illusion of motion, a company called Submedia has installed a series of illuminated

panels with static images on tunnel walls. These blur into a continuous image, what the company calls a motion picture outside of the train's windows.

On her way to Exchange Place, Ms. Clinton, who is an editorial assistant, allowed that she liked watching those ads. "That's very cool," she said. "You don't have that in New York."

Another thing PATH has that New York City Transit does not is a \$1.50 fare. That will rise to \$1.75 on March 2, though it will still be cheaper than the basic \$2 subway fare, so a frugal commuter traveling between Greenwich Village and Midtown can still save a quarter by using PATH instead of the No. 1 train.

On Monday morning, however, a PATH employee with a megaphone urged hesitant commuters to push through the turnstiles at the World Trade Center station. "Free rides today, folks," he said. "Free rides. Through the turnstile. Any turnstile."

Dr. Eric L. Altschuler, 39, slipped through one of the freely spinning turnstiles, unaware of the centenary and actually a bit leery about a free ride. For two and a half years, he has commuted from Manhattan to Newark, where he is an assistant professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at the University Hospital.

"Frankly, unusual things can happen on the trains," he explained. "I'm a typical New Yorker. I wanted to make sure it wasn't a ruse."

Once assured that it was purely celebratory, Dr. Altschuler seemed pleased to learn that it was PATH's 100th anniversary and threw in a bit of praise, likening the system to its big-city relation. "Everybody rides the PATH trains," he said. "It's a whole other world, but it's not a museum. It's alive."

When the H & M opened, the scheduled time between Hoboken and 19th Street, in the heart of the Ladies' Mile shopping district, was 12 minutes. On Friday, this reporter was spirited from Hoboken to 19th Street, having made three intermediate stops, in only 11 minutes. But he could not get off at 19th. That station was abandoned by the financially ailing company in 1954.

If one looks carefully and does not blink, the stout columns and vaulted ceilings of the 19th Street passenger platform can still be seen as the train passes through. It is a tantalizing reminder of a moment long ago when the PATH system and the Panama Canal could be mentioned in the same breath.

Ken Belson contributed reporting.