

# *Rail and Transit*

*Canada's Railway Magazine*

September - October 1979

\$2.50



# THE WITT ERA

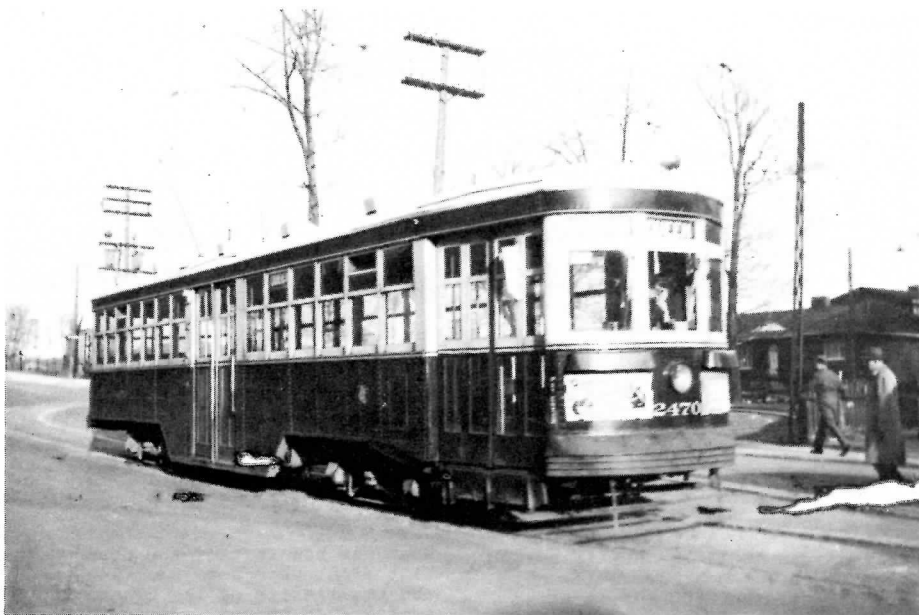
by Larry Partridge

In the time period from 1938 until 1963, the familiar Peter Witt streetcars of Toronto were running on numbered days. During those years, few people could envision the time when these workhorses of the Toronto streetcar fleet would finally retire and disappear from the roster forever.

When I was 6 years old, I had the good fortune of an uncle working as a motorman for the then Toronto Transportation Commission (it was shortly changed to Transit). Many were the times from then until he retired in 1960, that I rode the cars with him, and even a couple of occasions when I had a brief turn at the controls in the yard, at the end of a day's run. During those times, my uncle would reflect back on his days with the TTC and its predecessor, the Toronto Railway Company, which he joined in 1916. We had many long talks, but unfortunately the era of the tape recorder wasn't in vogue then, so most of what I'm setting down here comes from memory of those chats. As well, both of us didn't take many pictures during those years, my uncle because of his job and family, and myself because I didn't own a camera or even knew then how to operate one. So it's mainly the memories I have to rely on, plus information I later picked up from many sources, to relate here just how the era ended.

So let's turn the clock back, and come to the year 1951. The important decision taken here was the removal from passenger service of car 2300; it became the new training car at the Hillcrest Shops, and would remain in this capacity until replaced by air electric PCC car 4000. A group of the large Witts had been transformed into one-man operated cars, with some others transformed partially. But the big story was centered around Yonge Street, and Kingston Road, where these two routes still enjoyed trailer train service with a crew of three to operate them.

The new subway system was fast approaching completion, and the days for many of the large Witts were numbered even then. Into 1952, the decision was taken to retire trailers on Kingston Road, and large Witts ran along with small Witts and PPCs. But the large Witts were at a disadvantage; they continually held up gaps in service, as they never seemed to finish loading! They were finally removed from Kingston Road service, and used mainly on King and Queen for rush hours.



The famous Brill Peter Witts had had Bay Street as their home route since 1933, when they were transferred to St. Clair Division from the old Dundas Division. They had the best trucks and motors on the system, which gave little trouble, and many hadn't even seen an overhaul. But the bodywork was very inferior, and suffered greatly from salt damage during the winter, when

TTC Witt 2470 westbound on the Queen Route having just left Neville Loop in Toronto's east end. April 1945. JTA Smith/UCRS Coll.

Witt 2462 southbound on Bay Street at Front heading for the Ferry Docks on the Bay Route, just prior to the opening of the Subway in Feb. 1954. Mel Smith photo/DW Smith coll.

roads were salted during snowfalls. In their early days, the Brills had hauled trailers, but on the hills of the Bay route, this was considered dangerous. However, most of these cars carried their couplers until 1947, when they were all removed.





Entering into 1953, the Brills continued to operate on Bay, while on Yonge Street, the 2500 series along with the 29s and 30s, were still in train service. By now, the Yonge route had been cut back to Eglinton from Glen Echo, and a new yard near the Toronto Harbour Commission building had been opened to accommodate cars, as Eglinton Carhouse was directly affected by subway construction, and many cars could not be stored there. As will, cars requiring maintenance were taken to Russell Division in the east end during the night.

During the subway construction, Yonge trains were often diverted, and as well, many trailer train combinations were kept intact, due to car moving restrictions because of Harbour Yard's size, and the number of cars stored there. This continued right up to the end of the Yonge carline; and many motor cars had carried the same trailer for two years.

1954 was the year of exelceration. On March 30, 1954, the Yonge subway opened. During the morning of that day, Yonge trains carried on as if nothing had happened, but in the afternoon, about 1:30 pm, the trains ran south to Harbour Yard for the last time, never to go north on Yonge again. As well, the Bay St. Brills ended service. In the months that followed, all of the 25s, 26s, 29s, and 30s, as well as the odd

numbered 27 and 28 series trailers, the last on the Toronto system, were scrapped, with some managing to live a little longer as cottages, work sheds, and homes. One of these was 2835, which still reposes in a vacant lot near Honey Harbour, Ontario, but alas has been stripped to just a shell.

What was now left of the proud Peter Witt fleet were some 23s, 24s, and the small Witts of the 27 and 28 series even numbers. Their lives were prolonged as Toronto would need these cars for several years as rush hour extras and specials. Only with the addition of second hand PCC cars over the years would the Witts remaining see ultimate retirement; and it was during this period that I came upon what was left, and was given the chance many others were given of riding out with the end of the Witt era in Toronto.

With the disappearance of the Yonge and Bay routes in 1954, changes were made. One of these was in the Dupont route, which largely replaced the Bay cars. Dupont cars ran to the docks and to a loop on Christie Street, so in a sense, Bay service hadn't entirely disappeared, but had been given a different name.

During these years I suppose myself and others could be found doing the same thing. Waiting downtown during the evening rush hours, patiently letting as many as 10 PCC air electric cars go by, waiting for that one tired old Peter Witt to come along, its outside paint covered by dust and dirt; but the sounds were what captured most of us (had many of us known that the air electric PCCs would also be gone shortly after the Witts, we'd probably not let so many go by!).

Those sounds are still etched firmly in my mind; the air brakes, hissing as the car started up; the doors, center and front, with sliding and folding operations; and of course, that definitely recognizable gear whine, which was a cross between an unfed dog chasing a cat, or a rusty buzzsaw cutting through petrified wood.

Left: Trailer train with 2552 in charge, southbound at Yonge and St.Clair. Another southbound trailer train (Right) at Yonge and Wellington. Both by Mel Smith/DWS Coll.

Even the cars' appearance, both exterior and interior, would still be reflected to me long after they were gone; those windows which often reminded me of greenhouses; the draft vent windows, which probably gave more of a draft than they prevented; the open back window in summer, which allowed a through breeze during the hot summer days; and of course, the 6 seater in the back of the car which was often used like the family couch by those of our society who had had one too much. My uncle often recalled many nights when he would be on late shift, and one of these denizens of the night would enter, haphazardly drop his fare into the box, and then proceed to stagger to the back of the car to his waiting bed. This he occupied until my uncle came across an intersection (his favourite was the one at Queen and Church, going eastbound on Queen), when he would take the car across rather quickly; the occupant of the back seat suddenly being awakened from his other world by being deposited face down on the floor of the car.

One of the characteristics of the Witts in those years was the fact that everytime you were out watching for them, it always seemed to be a rainy day. Many times I stood at Queen and Yonge during the evening rush hour, waiting patiently for one to come along, while my skin drank in large amounts of rain, which led to me being constantly inundated with several colds, bouts of pneumonia, etc. But to me it was worth it, as I felt I was witnessing something that would eventually pass from existence. Little did I realize that the time would come soon enough.



The small Witts saw more service during these years than did the large cars on the regular routes, the large witts being used mainly for school charters, and special bathing cars for school children. As well, they were often chartered for picnics and trips to High Park, so in a sense they saw their own legion of service.

While most of the cars were well maintained, many of them badly needed cleaning, and this was a characteristic of the cars which had come during the end of Yonge and Bay service. During that time, cars were hardly ever washed, and they were always of a rather filthy exterior appearance. But one turn through the wash rack, as this did occur at times, made them look shiny and new, and many of the cars did receive paint jobs from time to time.

But time had caught up with the Witts. The TTC had made several purchases of second hand PCC cars over the years, with cars coming from Cincinnati in 1951, Birmingham in 1953, and Cleveland towards the end of that great system. Some of the Witts which were in bad condition were scrapped; and the torch made the first call towards the large Witts of the 23 and 2400 series.

But 1957 was the turning point. In that year, the TTC purchased 30 PCC cars from Kansas City, and this made redundant several Peter Witts, mostly of the large car class. It was at this time that my uncle made an observation about car maintenance.

Cars were often brought into Hillcrest Shops on rotations when they required work. My uncle liked to tell about the car that was sent into Hillcrest one day for a new floor, which was installed. The day after the car had the new floor installed, someone decided that its useful life was over, and placed it on the scrap list! And the order was carried out. Things like this often carried on, right up until the end of the era.

Five large Witts were involved in a unique experiment. They were completely rebuilt structurally, to see if their life could be prolonged for future use as rush hour cars on some routes. One of the cars of this group was 2424, which of course is one of the three restored cars now running in this city. Now owned by the Halton County Radial Railway Museum at Rockwood, it is temporarily on loan to the TTC.

As time went on, many more cars disappeared, never to reappear again, except perhaps as razor blades or new fenders on autos. It was very difficult to keep track of these subtractions from the fleet, and I didn't get much chance to do this while in school, and my uncle at this time was involved more and more in his job and family.



ABOVE:Rear end shot of Witt 2744 at Russell Division.It was to be another nine years before the Witts made their last run in regular service.MIDDLE:Northbound trailer train on Yonge Street at King.About the only recognizable building is the Hotel Victoria in the background.BOTTOM:Brill Witt southbound on the Bay route at Bay and Front.ALL by Mel Smith/DWS Coll.



Then came the changes. By 1961, there were only two large Witts left, 2300 and 2424. 2300 continued as the training car, and 2424 was used as a special car, mainly for school children. By now the Witts were slowly approaching more than 38 years of service, and the TTC was having thoughts of keeping a standard fleet. Needless to say, this would result in final retirement of the Witts, and an all PCC fleet. Looking back now, even I am surprised that the Witts lasted as long as they did, when most cities had retired their standard conventional equipment much earlier, and replaced it with PCC cars. But Toronto had made good use of the Witts, and would continue to do so until the very end, which now was only two short years away.

In 1962, large Witt 2424 was finally retired, and became part of the collection of the Rockwood Museum. 1962 saw more cars removed from service and lined up in front of St. Clair and Russell Carhouses, but they were still active in case the TTC needed spare cars for emergencies, which indeed did happen.



Restored to service after 8 years in storage at St Clair Division, 2766 is seen here eastbound on the Queensway during a fan trip. The car had been retired in 1965. However, in 1973 the TTC had been persuaded to restore the car for downtown Tour Tram service as well as charters. Later car 2894 was restored as a backup car for 2766. Unfortunately the service did not last, but the service was taken up a private operator on a charter basis with the TTC providing the car and operator. (R.W. Layton) BELOW: St. Clair Division in July 1924 with a line up of 7 Witts and a mixture of various ex TRC cars. St. Clair is now used by the UTDC as a base for the new CLRV's, making 4 generations of cars to operate out of it. (TTC Photo)

No cars were scrapped in February, but one ended life in March. And while February 28, 1963, was supposedly the retirement date for all the Witts, such wasn't the case.

April saw no scrappings, but was the month when time finally ran out for Peter Witt's namesakes in Toronto. Up to this time, the cars had been "retired", but cars were seen being used as specials and emergencies from time to time. The stage was now set for one final appearance by the Bathurst Battleships, and the date was April 24, 1963.

On that day, the International Baseball League season opened at Maple Leaf Stadium, and the Bathurst car line was bursting to the seams, carrying fans to the stadium at the foot of Bathurst St. Such was the demand after the game was over, that six Peter Witts were pressed into service, among these being 2766. Fate was to deal this car a rather rosey future later on.

With this final appearance, the Witts were retired, never to see regular service on Toronto routes proper again. Thus began the scrappings, with 14 cars in May, 3 in June, 14 in July, 9 in August, and a final 2 in September.

1963 saw the end of the large Witts, as 2300 was finally retired as the training car, its place being taken by air electric PCC 4000, which itself would be replaced in 3 years by 4700. 2300 was sold by the TTC to the Canadian Railroad Historical Association Museum at Delson, Quebec, where it went. 2300, however, has since returned to Toronto, and is in storage at Hillcrest Shops, pending a decision by the TTC and the CRHA on its future.

With the last of the large Witts gone, the story now turns to the remaining small Witts of the 27 and 2800 series.

These cars had been involved in rush hour work, with some cars taking turn in base service, but only in limited numbers. As 1963 approached, so was the opening of another subway in Toronto, this time along University Avenue.

That opening took place in February, 1963, and with it the end of the Dupont carline. This had been home to the small Witts for many years, and by this time, 10 small Witts had been scrapped in the preceding month. This left 97 cars still on the property, in various states.

But some have lived on to see another day.

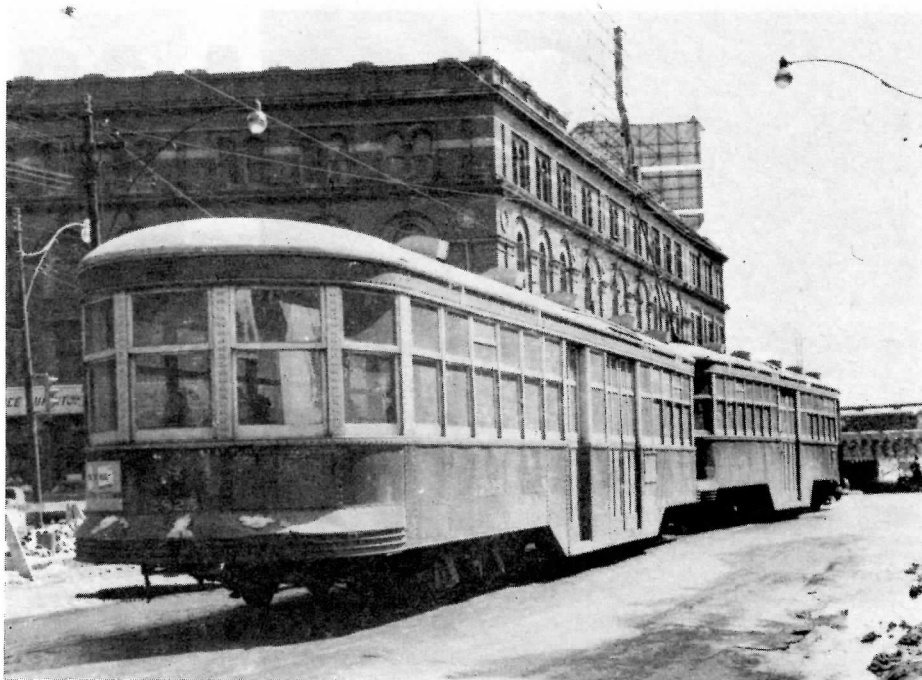


Car 2770 was stripped of parts, and these have been used for restoration at Rockwood of cars 2890 and 2786. 2770's trucks went to a museum in the U.S. No. 2778 found a new home at Trolleyville, U.S.A., where it now resides, completely rebuilt. Cars 2786, 2806, and 2894 went to housemover Charles Matthews. 86 is now at the Rockwood museum, and 06 has been put to use for spare parts. 2894 was purchased by the Ontario Rail Association, which has leased it to the TTC where it is now used for special services. The body of 2802 was later used as the basis of the "Trolley Restaurant", a part of the Village by the Grange Development at McCaul Loop.

One of the more unusual stories involving a Witt was 2802, which was sold for scrap, but was used in a Father's Day promotion by a local radio station. Alas, this car has now disappeared as well.

2898 was sold to the Branford Electric Railway Association in the U.S. where it operates today, still in its Toronto colours.

And now we turn to 2766.



ABOVE:1954 and a Witt train with Harvey three door trailer 2825 just starting the turn from southbound Yonge Street onto Front Street westbound.Mel Smith photo/DWS coll.BELOW:Restored Large Witt 2424 at Long Branch Loop on a joint UCRS-Toronto Transportation Society charter.Ironically the Witt will outlast the younger, by 33 years Birmingham Pullman in the rear.(L.Eyres)







ABOVE:Lineup of equipment at Russell Carhouse that cannot be repeated now:two Witts,trailer shunter,ex TRC wooden car,another Witt and an air electric PCC.LEFT:Peter Witt 2932 and trailer at Exhibition Loop the week after Subway service wrote finis to Yonge Street and the Witt trailer trains on a fan trip that was the last trailer train operation in Toronto and North America.Both by Mel Smith/DWS Coll.BELOW:A Contrast in disposition-two Witt trailer bodies reposed on a farm just near Kleinburg for years before they finally reached the point of no return and were cut up.JTA Smith/UCRS



As the other cars were being scrapped or sold, 2766 managed to escape the torch, and was used for a two year period as a charter car. After a final charter in July, 1965, the TTC deemed the car to be not up to the system's safety standards. It then began a retirement at St. Clair Carhouse for 10 years before fate would again move in its favour.

During that period, many rumours abounded that the car would be sold, and in fact, it received a complete repainting, which was deemed a step in this direction. I made many trips to St. Clair division on Friday afternoons to make sure the car was still there, and each time I was greeted with a glimpse of it poking its nose through the dim light on one of the tracks.

In 1972, came the decision to save Toronto's remaining streetcar system, and with it something else-- a proposal to restore 2766 to operating condition for use as a tour car. It was a happy day indeed on Friday, June 22, 1973, almost 10 years since a Witt car was seen on Toronto streets, that 2766 made a special press tour of its new duties. For many of us who gathered on York St. that night to witness the event, it is something we would never have said would happen in 1965. But here was the actual proof, right down to the gear whine!

Of course, the rest is history. 2894 was acquired from the ORA as a backup car, and later came 2424.

The title of this series has been the end of the Witt era. Truthfully, that took place on February 28, 1963, but did it really end? Looking into 1980, I see three Peter Witt cars still running on Toronto streets, and can only surmise that with the end of one era comes the dawning of a new one. Long may this one last!

