

Final Years for the Toledo & Ohio Central Caboose - 1960s **by James M. Cavanaugh**

Now nearly completely gone from the industry, the caboose still flourished on the T&OC in the 1960s. Also known as the cabin car, this classic piece of rolling stock was a small home office, kitchen and efficiency apartment on the rails. The caboose offered a soft seat with a panoramic view of the passing countryside and the train ahead, and served as a secure warm, dry shelter from the wind, rain and snow.

When the State of Ohio still maintained its full crew law, an over-the-road freight train crew was five men. The engine crew included the engineer and fireman, who operated the locomotives. The train crew had three men - the conductor plus two brakemen. The junior brakeman, also called the "head man," rode up front with the engine crew, and the conductor and senior brakeman, known as the "flagman," rode the caboose.

The conductor was technically the captain on a freight train, receiving train orders and holding authority to instruct the engineer generally on train movements, and managing the process of picking up and setting off cars along the route. On our 100+ car T&OC freight trains, the conductor rode nearly a mile to the rear of the locomotives, with little means of communicating with the engineer. So other than a brief initial discussion of the train orders and any major switching moves planned for the trip, the engine crew and head brakeman operated independently of the conductor for the preponderance of the trip. The conductor did the train's paperwork back there, kept a lookout for any trouble with the train stretched out ahead. The flagman handled switches at the rear end when the train entered and left sidings, and also went out on the rear platform to snag train orders from the operator's hoop as we passed block stations on the mostly manual-block T&OC. At any point where the train was assigned to do substantial switching work, the conductor often would walk forward, or we would have arranged for the train to stop, back up and pick him up.

In my late teens when I started working on the T&OC, a heavy haulage single-track branch of the New York Central, I was usually the junior brakeman riding the engine. That was fun, being where all the action is, with the thrill of the roaring locomotive and a full forward view of the railroad out in front. However, as time passed and I accrued a little seniority, I would occasionally be the flagman. This also could occur when I was working as a member of a regularly assigned crew; if the regular flagman were off I would be temporarily promoted to flagman until he returned, with the head brakeman job being filled off the extra board by a more senior man. Also, when I was working the extra board, if there were two extra brakemen called for our crew and the other one had come over from the Pennsylvania Railroad after our merger, I would be the senior guy as the T&OC home man even if the visitor were much older.

That always gave me a thrill. I loved riding the rear end of the train for lots of reasons, mainly because it was relaxing and a change of pace from the noisy and busy engine.

Up front there was always some task to do, which meant getting on your wet coat, climbing down from the cab in the freezing rain or snow on a dark night with your small lantern. Riding along, you listened to the roaring diesels and the screech of the air horn blowing for grade

crossings drown out all other sounds. When stopped, the engine and air compressors still purred behind, and the chatter on the radio became more intelligible, often fascinating. The lights on the dashboard and radio glowed white, yellow, orange, green and red at night. While sometimes stressful, it was seldom tedious.

The caboose existence was the exact opposite -- usually there was nothing to be done except keep a lookout. It was quiet down to the edge of being spooky at times. But back there you could hear everything -- when rolling there was the rumble and occasional steel-on-steel cry of the wheels and clacking of the rail joints, rattle of the brake chains and linkages and the slamming of the draft gear and couplers running in and out, the noise of the passing towns, with the crossing gate warning bells approaching and then trailing off at an ever lower pitch due to the Doppler effect after you passed. When stopped, the subtle sounds of the train itself, with occasional quiet hissing air lines and a distant deep bang as unevenly bunched up slack in the train slowly eased out and distributed the tension of the draft gear. In the early evening as the rails heated by the sun during the day shed heat and began to contract at the joints you could hear their little groans. You could hear the wind, rain and snow hitting the windows, birds and animals outside, especially the wild ones at night like screech owls and foxes shrieking, the ever-present Ohio night sound of a distant farm dog barking, the whoosh of the draft from the hot stove flue. The caboose was cool in summer, warm in winter, protected and safe. Man is a den animal, and to me the caboose was the ultimate safe, warm haven.

The Beautiful Little Machine

As best I can tell, historical references suggest the caboose originated on U.S. railroads as early as the 1830s in the form of a hut erected on a flatcar. The word "caboose" comes from a Low German and later Dutch word "kabhuse" for a small cooking shack on a ship's deck.

Rail photographs from the Civil War era show the freight train caboose emerging as a shelter (with a small heating stove) for the train's brakemen who set handbrakes on the moving cars upon the engineer's whistle signal. From an early time, the caboose began to include features such as bigger windows and a loft cupola to provide improved visibility to inspect the train while under way, and also carried oil lamps visible to other trains from the rear. Following the advent of air brakes in the later 1800s, the caboose also carried an air valve with which the crew could activate the brakes from the rear. Designers added living amenities such as bunk beds and lavatories. By the 1920s or 30s, electrical lights and systems with batteries and alternators began to appear.

Unlike other rolling stock, the caboose was not a revenue producer for the railroad. It was a necessity to comply minimally with federal and state crewing laws and union agreement rules that required men to ride the rear end of trains for safety purposes, to watch for hotboxes that could cause a derailment, and to protect the rear end against overtaking engines. The railroads, actively lobbying against these laws, had little incentive to replace or modernize cabooses. Although most cabin cars we rode in the 1960s dated from the World War II era up through the 1950s, we occasionally found ancient examples dating from as far back as 1906.

The NYC Road Caboose

Two models of cabooses were in use on the New York Central immediately prior to the 1968

NYC-Pennsylvania Railroad merger. The standard road freight cabooses were a 40-foot 6-inch purpose-built symmetrical all-metal green-liveried cabin car with bay windows for observation, and short covered platforms at both ends, with full crew amenities. The alternative was the NYC switching and terminal caboose, which was actually a bit longer flatcar, but with a very Spartan little metal box cabin with minimal crew comforts.



NYC Road Caboose

The NYC road caboose design featured short covered platforms at each end with dimpled non-slip steel decking, steps and grab irons, with a handbrake wheel at each end connected to the brake linkages by a chain, and a ladder to go on top of the car. These handbrakes were invariably in good working order, which was not always the case with freight car handbrakes. The cabin's red running lights (called "markers") were in lantern-type boxes mounted on the side stanchions on the corners of the rear platform, along with red reflectors. The latter were visible from a great distance if caught by the beam of a locomotive headlight. The corner stanchions also had small steel cylindrical flag receptacles welded on at a 45-degree angle so the crew could put red or green flags in them. (The flags were also "markers.") During the steam era the T&OC would run trains in multiple short sections, with the first sections carrying green flags and the last one carrying red. If a crew had been instructed to take siding at a location and meet an oncoming train, they would watch for the red flag of the last section, and then would call the dispatcher on the phone box at the head end switch, and say "NT-7 No. 3758 is by the south end at Hayes, with markers," and the dispatcher would authorize them to throw the switch back out onto the main and proceed.

Inside the NYC road caboose there was a flip-top work desk and seat at either end, on the left side looking out the door, with double deck bunks on the right side. At the rear "B" end, just forward of the bunks, there was a "booth" seating with a pair of two-person benches and a worktable in between. Technically the road caboose had no directionality, but this design had an "A" and "B" end. Usually they were placed on trains with this "B" end booth to the rear so

the conductor sitting there was closer to the rear door. Halfway along the car's length, the road cabins had bay windows on each side, and just inside these sat the characteristic feature of the NYC cabin, a pair of reversible black-cushioned armchairs. Like the engineer up front, the conductor sat on the right, facing forward. The air brake valve was positioned on the outer wall of the lavatory just ahead of the conductor's seat, with a 5-inch rotating wheel handle with rounded finger grips.

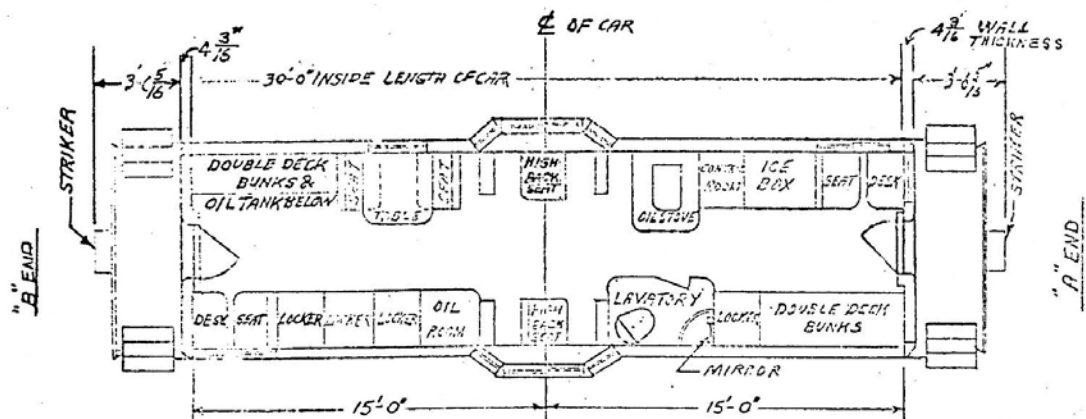
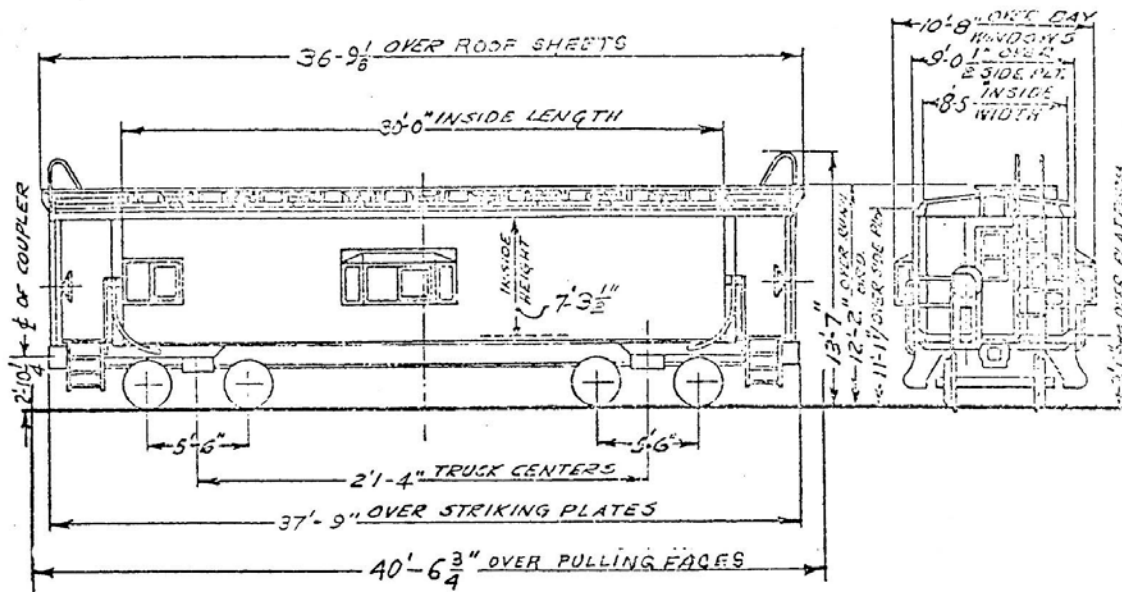
The caboose had a metal-bowl toilet or "head" in a tiny closet just ahead of the conductor's seat (fairly clean and nice compared to the filthy awful heads on locomotives). This flushed by means of a gravity-fed system with an overhead water tank, which also supplied the washbasin inside the lavatory room. The forward "A" end of the caboose away from the worktable booth had the stove in an open area on left side facing forward, and by the front platform door were an upper and lower bunk set on the right side and another single small seat and flip-up top desk opposite. There was an icebox under the rear bunk lower berth where we kept our water bottles, drinks and lunch pails. The entire cabin had a sturdy linoleum floor, kept in pretty good shape to avoid tripping accidents that were always lurking when you moved around in the lurching car. The inside walls and ceiling were covered by composite material painted a faded institutional green.

Under the lower bunk forward, which lifted up to reveal a tool chest, and in several lockers opposite the booth area, there was a supply of fusees (sulfuric flares which you could strike like a friction match against a piece of sandpaper on their own cap and which were visible for a good mile), torpedoes (small square firecrackers which clamped onto the rail with soft lead straps and exploded with a sharp report if a train ran over them), a spare air hose and air hose wrench, and usually a spare coupler knuckle and pin, and a few red and green hand flags with wooden spindles. There was at least one big fire extinguisher and often some smaller hand-helds resting in mountings on the walls. Overhead running the length of the walking area was a metal pipe grab rail. You always had to be ready to grab this in a half-second if you heard the slack running in or out.

The caboose had overhead lights above the booth worktable, in the lavatory and at critical locations running forward, controlled by several wall switches.

The stoves on NYC cabin cars were oil-fired, fed from an overhead fuel tank. While welcome on a freezing night, they suffered from a very crude regulator valve. While designed to allow you to control the heating rate, in actuality they had two settings: "off" and "way too scorching hot." Once the stove was on, we sometimes had to open one or both doors to keep the temperature at a tolerable level.

The interiors of road cabooses were kept fairly clean, well swept out and wiped down. The black plastic cushions on the seats and bunks were in good shape and clean. Notably the windows and doors all had rubber gaskets and seals kept in good condition. This helped keep out the dust and grit which was everywhere on the railroad, and which led to the omnipresent filthiness in most nearby buildings and on the trains themselves.



NYC Road Caboose Drawings

The NYC Long-Platform Switching and Terminal Caboose

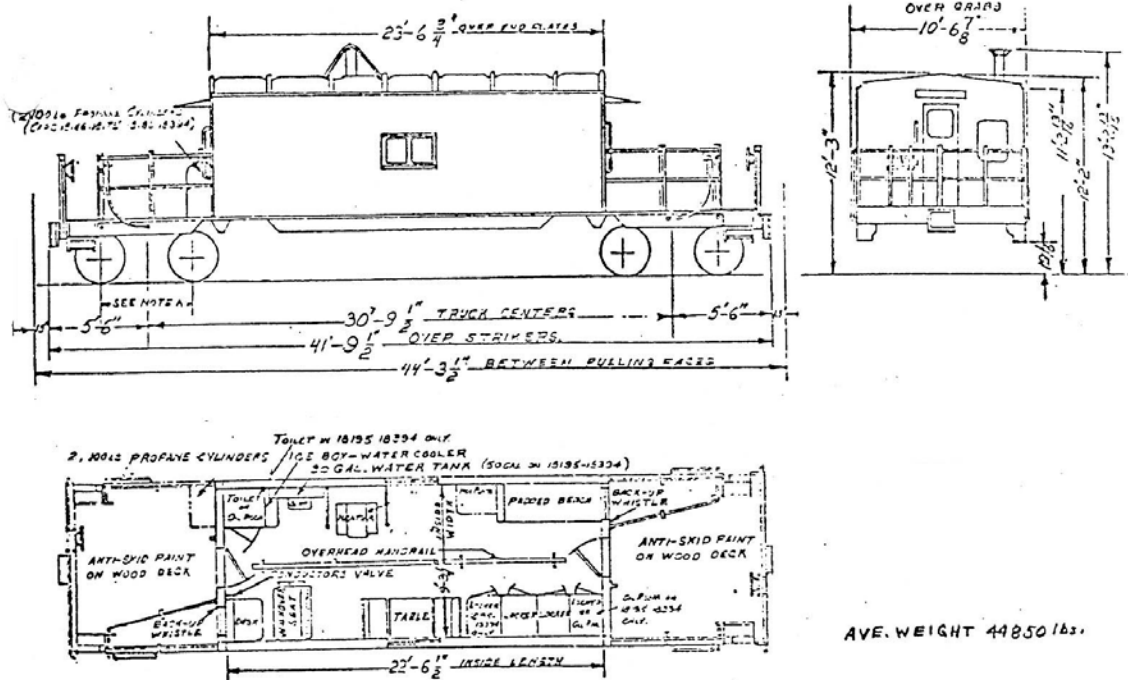
The NYC switching and terminal cabin car was completely different from the road model. Unlike the well-proportioned and nearly symmetrical road caboose, the switching cabin was most unappealing to the eye. While actually longer than a road caboose overall at 44 feet 3 inches, it was made for working outside with only a small box cabin in the middle. This cabin had few amenities. There usually were no bunks or worktable. These switching cabins were poorly outfitted, notoriously dirty and less well maintained.

The platforms at either end featured lots of long grab irons for multiple crewmen. There was also a steel ladder to go onto the roof, but I have no idea why because there was nothing to do

up there. On the road cabooses there was a walkway and the end of the platform top would be close enough to step across to the adjacent car, in case you needed to walk forward. By the 1960s however, our work rules prohibited walking on top of moving cars, and it was really not necessary for any reason.



NYC Switching and Terminal Caboose



NYC Switching and Terminal Caboose Drawings

The Pennsylvania Railroad Caboose

After the NYC-PRR merger, the two companies pooled cabooses on what became the Columbus Division, which included the entire T&OC from Toledo to West Virginia, along with the NYC Big Four in Ohio, PRR Panhandle west of Ulrich Tower, PRR Miami and Bradford/Logansport lines, plus the PRR Cleveland, Akron & Columbus (CA&C) Line. Thenceforth we started to get former PRR cupola cabins on many of our trains. This design was closer to the “little red caboose” known to most of America as the classic rear car of a freight train.

The PRR cabins, at 32-33 feet between couplers, were shorter and more vertical, and more appealing to the eye than our NYC models, the characteristic feature being a small windowed cupola on top halfway along the caboose’s length. PRR cabins had small platforms at either end, like their NYC counterparts, with handbrake wheels and marker lights, but also featuring a pair of vertical I-beams, I assumed for the purpose of adding a rigid external frame as protection against a cargo load shift or a helper engine running through the couplers. A few of these models still featured handrails up on the roof to accommodate brakemen walking atop a moving train, which was most ill-advised and against safety rules by the 1960s.

At the “A” end just inside the front platform door there was a four-seat worktable booth on the left and a washbasin on the right, with the stove just aft of that. The PRR oil stoves seemed to put out less heat than the NYC models, but the cubic space inside these cars was smaller, and unlike the NYC versions, you could more readily control the level of heating. These cabins had

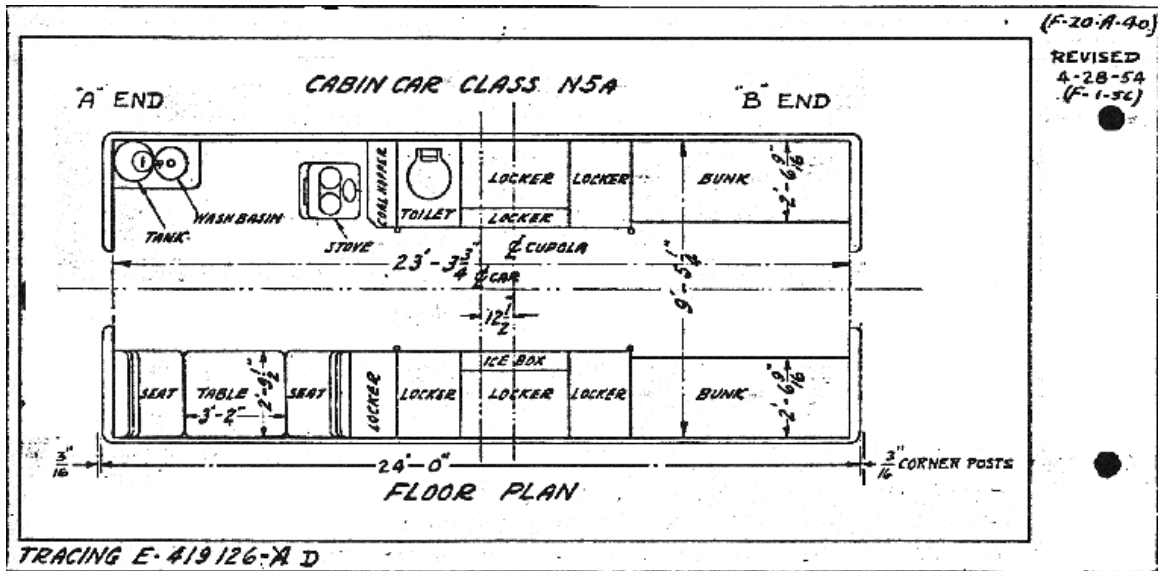
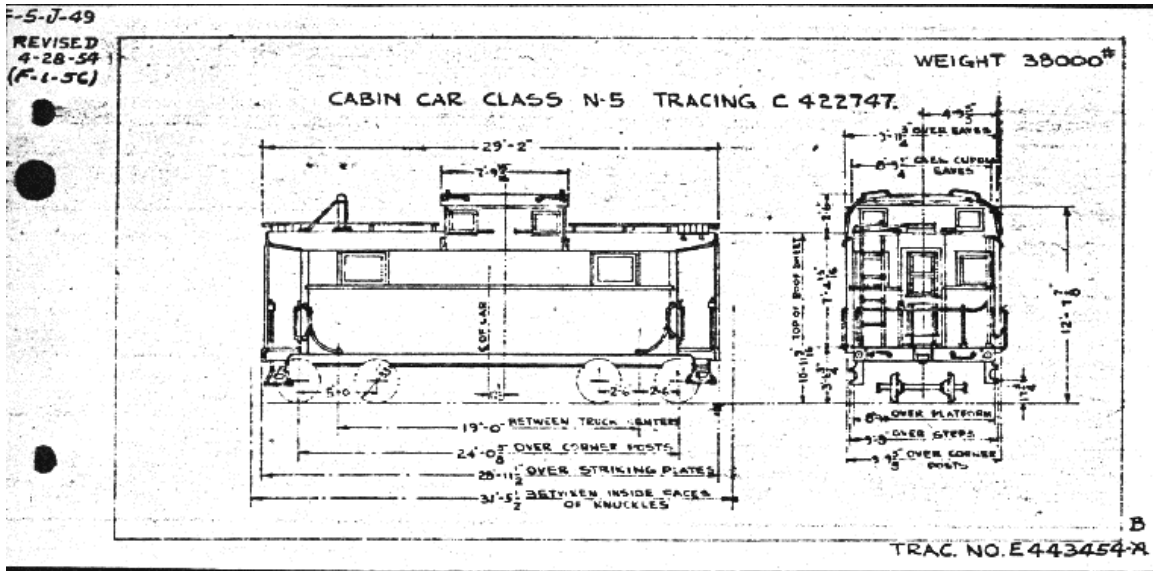
the bunks all aft, with the toilet closet, lockers and icebox in between under the cupola.

The cupola was every bit as interesting on the inside as one might imagine looking at it from the outside. You ascended onto the cupola from the main deck by means of some steps inset into the wall by the icebox, using grab irons on the sides and a handrail that ran overhead the length of the interior. This took at least a bit of athleticism. Once up on either side (conductor on the right, flagman on the left facing forward) there was a ledge about three feet above the main deck where you could stand. From there you could turn, face the middle and sit on a long cushion that lay flat on the upper deck of the cupola on your side, and swing your legs up to lay fairly flat if you liked. But the working riding position was at the rear end of the cushion where an upright loose soft cushion was leaning against an angled upright padded bolster. Sitting there, with legs stretched out, you could lean out the side window, which opened by means of a sliding glass pane, and you could also see out the front or rear windows of your side. The cupola featured a total of eight windows for an excellent view, with the slide-opening side windows being especially large. The forward and rear cupola windows were smaller with round corners. The emergency brake valve was up there, on the centerline at one end, with a short bronze handle.

Our PRR cabooses came in two models, the N-5 and N-5C. The N5s were designed and built in 1914-1917, the first all-steel railroad cabin car. There were 925 N5 cabooses on the PRR roster, with former PRR numbers from 476694 to 477619. Post merger on the Penn Central, they were redesignated with numbers in the 19000s.



Former PRR Model N-5 Caboose, in Penn Central Livery



PRR Model N-5 Caboose Drawings

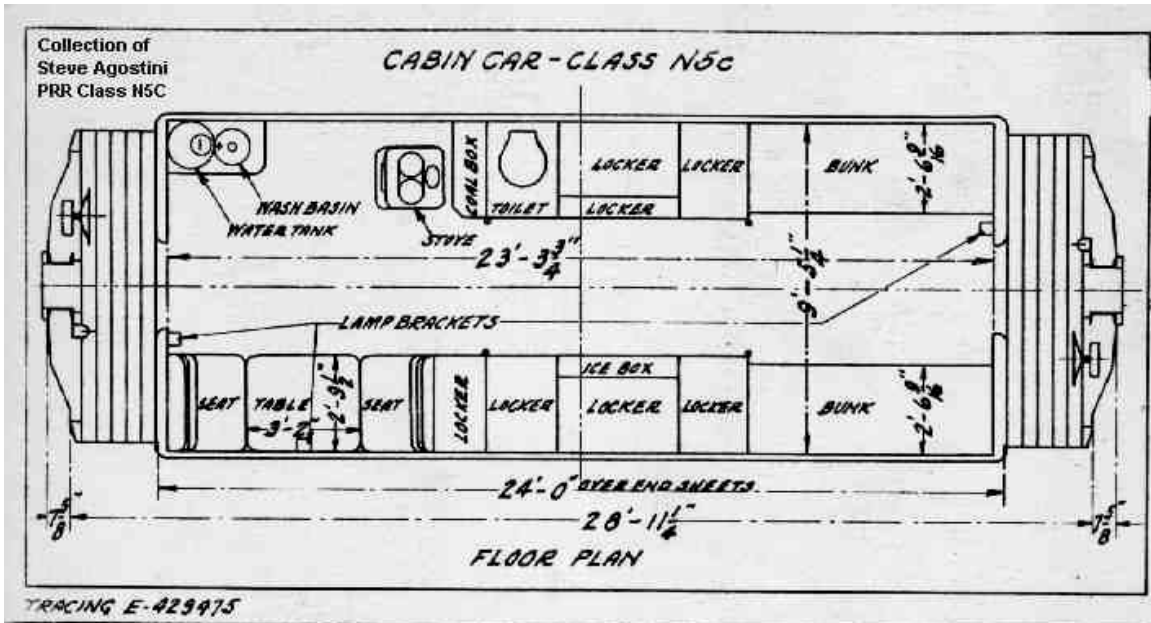
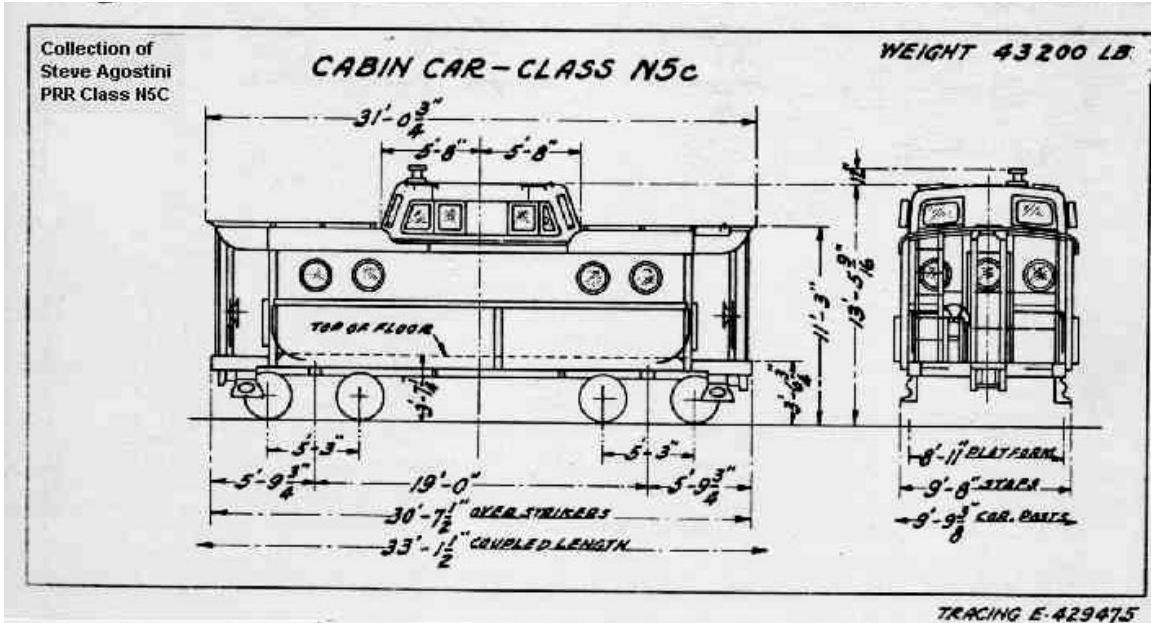
The PRR began building newer model N-5C cupola cabooses in 1942, eventually placing about 200 in service on their system. This was the famous "porthole" caboose that utilized round windows on the carbody exterior shell and most end doors, plus a larger streamlined cupola. Like its N-5 counterparts, the cupola featured eight square windows with rounded corners, with the outer side windowpanes sliding open. The forward and aft windows on the N-5Cs were bigger than those on the N-5s. The NYC crews told me the round windows were surplus marine portholes left over from World War II ships, and I think they believed that. But those who

actually served in the Navy pointed out this was not the case, as real ship portholes had very thick glass and bronze frames to seat in watertight seals.

The interiors of the several PRR caboose types did not differ notably. Also to my knowledge, at least from what I could see from the NYC side and a few runs on the former PRR in the late 1960s, PRR was not still using a separate terminal and switching cabin car model like the NYC did. You would see their little cupola models out on locals and switching jobs. However, from research and old photos, I have found the PRR was using very aged N1s and other earlier wooden-sided model cabooses right up until the time of the NYC merger.



The PRR Model N-5C Caboose



PRR Model N-5C Caboose Drawings

What Went on Back There

T&OC conductor and flagman duties were standard and never varied. You would report for work at the West Columbus yard office. The yard clerk gave the conductor a big brown envelop with a tie string on the flap with the train's bills of lading inside. For a northbound, the head brakeman drove the conductor's car over to the Grandview Tower end to meet the engine crew, who reported for work at the roundhouse. The brakeman would align switches to help them get

the engines out onto the roundhouse lead and up towards the tower, and then back down through one of the two north end yard leads into one of the numbered departure tracks onto the train. The conductor and flagman would get their orders at the yard office and, "grips" (suitcases) in hand, would walk from the yard office westward into the track where the train was waiting, and get aboard the caboose. Usually a yard car man would be there alongside checking the brakes and getting ready for the air test. For a southbound the whole train crew rode over to Grandview. The head brakeman would join the engine crew to get the engines out and run them south via the engine house lead to the yard office end to couple onto the train. The conductor and flagman would walk from the car parking area to the caboose.

Once underway and out of the yard, the conductor took the bills of lading out of the big envelope. He went through the bills and filled out the long paper train manifest, putting the car numbers and destinations in the rows of boxes on this form. There would be tablets of the forms in the rear flip-top desk on the NYC long cabooses and in the locker on the PRR cupola models. If there were "short" cars (those to be set off along the route before the end destinations at Stanley or Hobson), or any pick ups on the way, the conductor would have written down on paper all the car numbers and any "spotting" locations where they were to be positioned inside the shipper's property, and given this to the head brakeman. You had to spot the arriving boxcars at a specific point on a loading dock, or exactly right at a numbered loading door, and put covered hoppers exactly under a loading chute or over a discharge basin. With an inexperienced man like myself, apt to make a mess of spotting and take forever doing it, the conductor would usually come forward to supervise and teach a bit.

Once rolling, we mainly had to keep a close lookout for hot boxes, leaning way out of the caboose window on curves to scan the side of the train. Up forward the engine crew did the same, checking the front part of the train on every curve. Hotboxes occur when the fibrous wadding in the journal box of an old friction-bearing car, designed to keep the axle greased, loses most of its lubricant resulting in the steel-on-steel axle bearing overheating, causing the wadding and remaining grease to catch fire. These were seldom seen by the late 1960s as low friction roller bearings began to prevail. But when a hotbox happened it was a real mess. The axle in there could get so hot that if you put the fire out with a CO2 or powder chemical extinguisher it would just keep re-igniting as soon as you stopped spraying. Once a car had a hotbox, we had no means of repacking it on the road so we would set the car off at the next available switch points.

Other than maintaining watch and doing the paperwork, the only other routine job was picking up train orders at the block stations. Going north this would be Grandview (always), Mounds (virtually never), Scottslawn (sometimes) and Ridgeway (always). After Ridgeway, the Western Branch was TCS territory with automatic signaling, but you had to be ready for a hand signal or even possibly hand-on orders at the PRR Chicago main line crossing at Dunkirk. Southbound we picked up orders at Frankfort Street (rarely), Thurston (usually), Bremen (always, as we were switching onto the old PRR Cincinnati & Muskingum Valley "sheepshank" branch there) New Lexington (always, as we were switching back onto the T&OC there), Corning (always as we were going from the Western Branch onto the Southern Branch there) and occasionally at Grosvenor. Also if your train took siding, the flagman had to drop off, throw the switch back to the main alignment, relock it and run to jump back on before the train got too far up into the siding. A good engineer would know where the rear end was and would have slowed to 2-3 miles per hour for you, but it could be a scramble, especially at night or in rain or snow.

So there was less to do on the rear end than on the locomotives. But it could be big if your train stopped in flag territory, such as the Eastern Branch north of Berwick, where the flagman had to run back and protect the rear end by flag and lantern signals, or by lighting a fusee at night if he saw a train approach. This was a bit awkward. Theoretically any train coming up behind you would be on a yellow "approach" signal, meaning they knew your train was ahead in the block so they had to be prepared to stop, and probably would go no more than 10-15 miles per hour. But you had to be back far enough to wave a red flag or a fusee to be sure you got the attention of the approaching engineer. On straight track you could just do it from the rear platform or on the ground next to the cabin, so if the train started up you had no trouble getting back on. On curving track you had to walk back a ways, and had to rely on your engineer to give the two-blast horn signal and wait long enough for you to run back to the cabin before he started. However, if your conductor was not paying much attention, you could get left behind. This happened to my friend Gene once while flagging over on the Eastern.

Sometimes the caboose work, or lack thereof, could get tedious. Once you went into a siding, the oncoming train you would meet might come in five minutes or five hours. T&OC conductors were notoriously silent. Especially riding NT-7 on a hot humid buggy night, sitting in the Dunkirk siding at 3 AM, having no idea where the oncoming train was, you could go stir crazy. But away from the engine noise, you could hear the countryside come alive - dogs barking and cows mooing far away, chickens or pigs close by, off in the dark. You could always hear cold wind approaching, which made you want to jump back inside the cabin by the stove. You could hear snowflakes striking brittle dry leaves on the ground. On a warm early summer day you could walk off and pick black raspberries growing prodigiously along the Western Branch right-of-way cuts and embankments. Just don't get left behind.

If you were riding the rear end when a helper was needed, that got exciting. You had to dismount and go up and ride in the helper locomotive cab. Riding a caboose with a helper locomotive behind was illegal in Ohio, possibly a law occasioned by a bad accident on the T&OC near Arnold Hill in the 1930s or 40s.

Every long caboose trip had its own special character, usually with much to like. Of the over-the-road freights and unit trains, NT-5 was a hotshot cleared through with few delays, so riding the cabin was almost like being aboard a passenger express, minus the diner. Conversely, NT-7 or TC-2, where the flagman usually had to go forward to help with the short cars in several places, promised you a night of sweaty mosquito bites or frozen wet knuckles out on the ground switching out maybe 30-45 cars worth of pickups and drops. Of the locals, the St Mary's Local was my favorite, drifting along across Logan and Auglaize counties and back at 15 miles per hour, although the old switching caboose assigned to that run was especially horrid and dusty. In spite of being a lot of work, the East Columbus Local was also a favorite ride, but through urban industrial landscapes circling through three-quarters of the original Columbus city limits via West Columbus, South Columbus, Bannon, Truro, across the B&O and Panhandle at East Columbus and up to the edge of the N&W Joyce Avenue Yard at Woodlawn Avenue.

Riding along on the caboose on any train at any speed could be rough. A skillful engineer would produce a somewhat less unnerving jolt on start up, accelerating more patiently and slowly over a longer stretch. The motion in the cabin was also less pronounced if you were starting up on level ground or moving downhill. At speed, the shorter PRR cupola cabin cars with a higher

center of gravity rode rougher than the long, low and heavier NYC cabooses,

Use of the emergency brake from the front end, while rarely needed, might not produce an especially nasty slack run-in. I am not sure why that is the case, but assumed it had to do with the method by which the brake worked. When the engineer "put her in the big hole" (quickly opened the brake application valve causing air to rush out at the maximum rate) this triggered a further reaction on each car in succession moving back from the engine causing the air in the brake reservoir on that car to be dumped out via a local valve there instead of exiting forward through the open brake line. This seemed to make each car's brakes apply a bit before the slack run in got there. The biggest slam would occur if an air hose halfway through the train burst or if somehow the train became uncoupled when running at higher speed, a very rare event.

Applying the emergency brake from the cabin, while seldom done, produced a nice smooth stop. The caboose brakes set immediately and the rest of the brakes set in emergency mode from rear to front, stretching the train out nicely for a gentle slack-free stop.

As unsettling as the starts and stops could be, riding along at a nice moderate speed was one of the most serene and soothing experiences I can imagine. The gentle rocking motion side to side coupled with the rhythm of the wheels clacking over the rail joints was hypnotic in the extreme. The wheels striking the rail joints spaced 39 feet apart produced a steady drone of "ca-chunk-ca-chunk.....ca-chunk-ca-chunk.....ca-chunk-ca-chunk" (The legendary "clickety-clack" sound only occurred at higher speeds seldom reached by freight trains). On top of this were slight rattles of loose interior locker and lavatory doors (which seldom had rubber gasket seals) and equipment and tools in lockers, and the steady grinding "whrrrrsh-whrrrrsh-whrrrrsh" of the belt-driven alternator under the starboard bunk, propelled by a geared-up belt drive connecting to one of the spinning axles below. Especially at night, against the dark surroundings of the cozy little cabin with only the glow of the soft green light on the control panel indicating the electrical system was energized, the whirring alternator drive seemed like a rail lullaby or meditative chant, saying all was right with the world for a few moments. Add the sprinkling of tiny firefly flashes alongside on a warm summer night, or the snow softly pelting the side of the cabin while you ride safe and warm inside, and it freed the soul temporarily of all troubles (at least until the next moment when the slack blasted in again).

At higher speed, say over 40 mph, it all got to be a little less comforting. The PRR cabins with their short wheelbase and higher center of gravity wobbled around a lot. Being up in the cupola where this motion was exaggerated added to the sense of anxiety. But I never heard of one of them leaving the rails while on the job. You would not want to have to walk around inside a caboose when riding at T&OC maximum track speed up around 50 mph. However you had to do that when a block station approached because the flagman needed to be out back on the bottom step to grab the train orders from the lower hoop opposite the operator's tower. Not to worry - all cabooses had an overhead hand-grab pipe running the length of the car, plus a number of other grab irons on the inside and outside at strategic places where a person losing his balance had a chance to catch on.

Sounds of Starting Up

When the train is about to start up from a dead stop position, the first sensation in the caboose is the sound of the air brakes being pumped off. The air pressure rises with a "sssssss" and the

brake shoes on the eight wheels relax and drop free, their linkages to the single brake piston slung beneath the floor releasing their enormous tension. This starts with a series of low-pitched groans and screeches, followed by higher tone knocks, klunking and scrapes, a bit like the sounds of the radiators in an old building as the hot water begins to rise through them. Once all that settles down, which takes about 15 seconds, silence returns followed by a faint little hiss from the air continuing to flow through the brake lines into the reservoirs.

Next, depending on the length of the train, location and the weather, you might hear the two short bursts on the air horn of the locomotive, the ancient railroad "highball" signal to the crew to get clear or hang on. At that point up on the head end the engines would be throttling up to apply tractive power, but it is not likely you would hear that at the cabin car so far away. The next sound you heard, about 15 seconds after the engine began to pull, would be the roar and rolling thunder of the slack running out, first approaching in a distant rumble from way ahead but incredibly rapidly coming at the caboose and overwhelming you in seconds.

As the slack between the last car and the caboose yanked out, the 25-ton cabin car would lurch forward with a surprisingly violent motion, and usually would bounce off the draft gear springs of the immediately forward car a couple times. If you were not seated or at least holding on to something you would go flying and fall down. Especially dangerous was a slack run-in just as you were climbing up or down from the cupola on a PRR caboose. As a teenager I was nimble enough to avoid injury, but a couple of our older guys got broken arms from this. But usually when a train man heard the slack coming at him he instinctively would grab on and get into a fore and aft straddle with bent knees, ready to absorb the forward snap that is sure to follow in a half second.

Some five decades later, when I hear something that sounds like a slack run-in, like someone dropping a heavy metal object in the distance, I still sometimes spread my feet apart a bit and lean toward the forward jerk that does not come.

The view from the bay window of an NYC caboose was good but not excellent. These models were safer and rode better than the PRR cupola alternative, but you sacrificed some visibility forward. Being lower down, brush along the right of way tended to obscure anything more than 15-20 cars ahead on curves. The Pennsylvania models afforded a far better look forward. Being above the brush line, you could often see all the way up to the "hawk" (the lead locomotive). Especially at night you could spot the headlight sweeping the track ahead as the engine curved toward your side, eating up the miles.

End of the Line for Cabooes

The Penn Central, by then mostly part of Conrail, phased out road cabooses during the 1970s and 80s. Ohio and other Midwestern States eventually repealed their full drew laws (Indiana had required six men, and we used to have to stop and pick up an extra brakeman at the border.) Firemen, always arguably not needed on the diesel engines, were dropped. A road train crew not anticipating any switching would carry just an engineer, conductor and one brakeman. Cabooses rapidly all went to the scrapyard, although many towns and parks purchased them to be set up as historical attractions.

Replacing the safety features of having two men on the rear watching, with an emergency air

brake valve at hand, was the End of Train Device (or "EOTD"). This was positioned on the rearmost drawbar, and had an air hose coupled onto the car's aft air hose. The EOTD could sense the pressure level of air in the brake line and relay that to the engine by radio. The engineer could also activate the emergency brakes at the rear by a signal from the cab. The EOTD had a blinking light and reflectors.

What else did you need out on the road? With cars now having 100 percent roller bearings there are no hotboxes any more. With better equipment all around, and welded rail in most locations, there is just less to go wrong, and little need for watch keeping.

Local switching runs still require more men out on the ground and a place for them to ride other than on the engine, so the little terminal and switching cabooses still thrive there. The T&OC was a bit of an anomaly in its day having road crews doing a lot of pickups and switching. Most railroads now cover all local shipper points with local trains, and those local pick up locations are increasingly rare and limited to bulk commodity shipments, as the railroad prefers to receive freight in containers trucked to loading terminals.

Progress and technology are wonderful. But now I am getting old, and represent the last generation of those who got to live the caboose experience. So I will cling to my warm memories of riding along on those hundred-mile T&OC journeys. I still fantasize about getting a retired caboose, wheels, trucks and all, delivered out to my place and set up, so I can sit in there on cold days with the stove glowing, reading, writing and thinking. But today it would also probably mean getting it Wi-Fi enabled so I could make calls, text, check ball game scores and look at What's New on Columbus Railroads. Maybe that could be a good combination of the past and present.

[Written from memory from the late 1960s - comments and corrections welcome.]

Resources:

NYC System Historical Society Caboose Research - This site has voluminous historical data about the NYC's and affiliated lines' cabooses from 1900-1960s, including many Ohio Big Four photos. This site also describes the bygone era when each train crew had its own dedicated caboose. Crews could decorate their assigned caboose in idiosyncratic ways. After a union agreement change in the early 1960s, all cabooses were pooled, and the practice of assigning a specific car to a crew ended. At this point, needing far fewer cabooses, the NYC phased out its ancient wooden "gun turret cupola" models, as well as odd war-built cabins adapted from boxcars, leaving only the bay-window road models and long-platform switching and terminal versions: <https://nycschs.org/nycs-research-information/>

NYC cabooses on the Penn Central, many photos including Columbus Union Station and Buckeye Yard: <http://www.hebners.net/pc/>

PRR caboose roster, with photos: <http://www.rpicturearchives.net/rsList.aspx?id=PRR&cid=1>