

Erie's BY CURTIS SPRINGSTEAD top notch' engineer

In an era of
polish and pride,
Harvey Springstead
found fame
and honor



Curtis Springstead collection

The winter of 1917 was one of the coldest on record in New York City, and a December blizzard bogged down the metro area. On the morning of the 14th, a Friday, the snow had piled so high that transportation, whether by road or by rail, looked more and more unlikely: unsafe, or even impossible. A dispirited group of commuters huddled on the platform of a remote Erie Railroad station and wondered if they'd ever get through.

"And then Harvey Springstead's train came and his engine was going strong!" one of the commuters would later write. "The crowd revived; confidence returned."

The commuter's name was Edward Doorly, and he was in a position to tell the world what he experienced that blustery day. Doorly was an editor for *Women's Wear Daily*, and he described the events in a story published soon after.

Springstead's train was the first to make it through the drifts, and his commuter coaches were already full when he pulled to a stop in front of the "way-out station" along the Erie, according to Doorly's account. But Springstead was determined to pick up as many passengers as the cars could hold and his lone 4-6-0 Ten-Wheeler could pull.

"Every time he stopped — every additional hundred that squeezed on board — meant that the engine might be hopelessly stalled," Doorly wrote. "But Springstead knew just what he and his engine could do and they did it."

"Finally," Doorly recalled, "when every possible passenger had been taken on from each station, he coaxed the great engine forward once again with infinite skill of momentum and power — and the snows yielded. So Harvey Springstead got some three thousand commuters through with only reasonable loss of time and strength."

To Springstead's way of thinking, he was only doing his best at a job he loved. But he would find great acclaim during an





Karl E. Schlichter; John P. Locke collection

Harvey Springstead epitomized engineers of the Golden Era: proud, demanding, a master of his machine who kept the schedule and earned the admiration of his passengers and the public. He chats with passersby during an April 1918 stop in Paterson, N.J.

By this 1919 view with Springstead at the throttle, Erie had replaced No. 970's square, kerosene headlight and its valve gear. The mark of a "Red Spot" locomotive was the round number plate on the front, which was painted red.



Erie career that spanned most of his life, and his name would become a familiar sight to readers of dozens of magazines and newspapers.

Harvey Springstead was born July 12, 1856, in Jersey City, N.J., the first of four children for parents Peter and Emily. But as so often happened in those days, his brother Spencer died at 4 years old of meningitis, in the kind of tragedy Harvey would come to know all too well.

He attended Jersey City School No. 2 a few blocks from the family's small frame house, but dropped out at age 12 to find work. He held a variety of jobs at a jewelry factory and the Jersey City & Bergen Railroad streetcar line. (A youth in those days had many more opportunities for work than he would in the modern world.)

Springstead worked his way up to conductor on the Jersey City & Bergen by the time he was 17. During those years, he probably experienced those steam-powered streetcars that were replacing horse-drawn vehicles. The stream-driven cars were stronger and

faster, and they didn't spook like horses or deposit the same "pollution" on the streets. It's unclear if Springstead ever worked on one of the mechanical cars, but seeing them operate may have planted a seed that would blossom into a love of locomotives.

Certainly, railroad jobs were sought-after opportunities for the money they offered and their prestige. Whatever his reasons, Springstead left the Jersey City & Bergen in 1873 and signed on with the Erie as a fireman. It was the dawn of a 56-year career.

Springstead fired Erie steamers for 13 years, working the commuter run from Jersey City to Goshen, N.Y., with veteran hogger Ed Haggerty. It was probably on this run that Springstead met Mary Jackson, who worked at Erie's Port Jervis, N.Y., station. The train's regular schedule allowed Springstead and Jackson to begin a courtship, and they married in 1877. Their first child, Clarence, arrived late the next year, and their second son, Harry, was born in August 1880. Springstead earned his promotion to engineer after

Haggerty retired in 1886.

Clarence died just before his sixth birthday, and the family moved from Jersey City to Waldwick, N.J., in 1891. The Erie had relocated its commuter-train yard from Paterson to Waldwick (known then as Orvil Township) two years earlier to escape a new water tax. Springstead believed the wooded suburb would offer a better environment to raise his surviving son than the crowded streets of Jersey City. He and Mary paid \$225 to the Waldwick Improvement Co. for two lots on the corner of the Franklin Turnpike and Lincoln Street, where they built a two-story home.

Springstead was a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Lodge No. 3, and he was elected financial secretary in 1893. He apparently wielded substantial influence in the union, and records show that several nephews and other relatives followed his career path at Erie. But Springstead's political participation extended beyond the Brotherhood. In 1895, he was elected to the township's governing committee and eventually served as



Transportation Collections, Smithsonian Institution

treasurer, special tax collector, and chairman before union regulations forced him out. To avoid conflicts of interest, the new rules forbade railroad men from holding political office. Springstead and Mary continued to be active members of the Episcopal church, and he was a member of the Royal Arcanum, a service organization.

Not long after Springstead moved to Waldwick, Erie assigned him to a daily commuter run to Jersey City. Also around that time, he began a 21-year partnership with locomotive No. 970, one of 25 Baldwin-built, class G-15 Ten-Wheelers delivered in 1903-04.

Springstead quickly developed a reputation for timeliness and reliability, but also for obsessing over the cleanliness and repair of his locomotive. A December 1945 story in Erie's employee magazine recalled that Springstead used to spend his layover in Jersey City "watching over and working on his engine." The article proclaimed that 970 was "the most spic and span power unit that this railroad or anybody's railroad ever knew."

All that cleanliness had a purpose beyond flashy good looks, of course: It helped Springstead spot trouble early and order repairs before problems grew severe. He ran the 970 more than two decades with only two failures, and

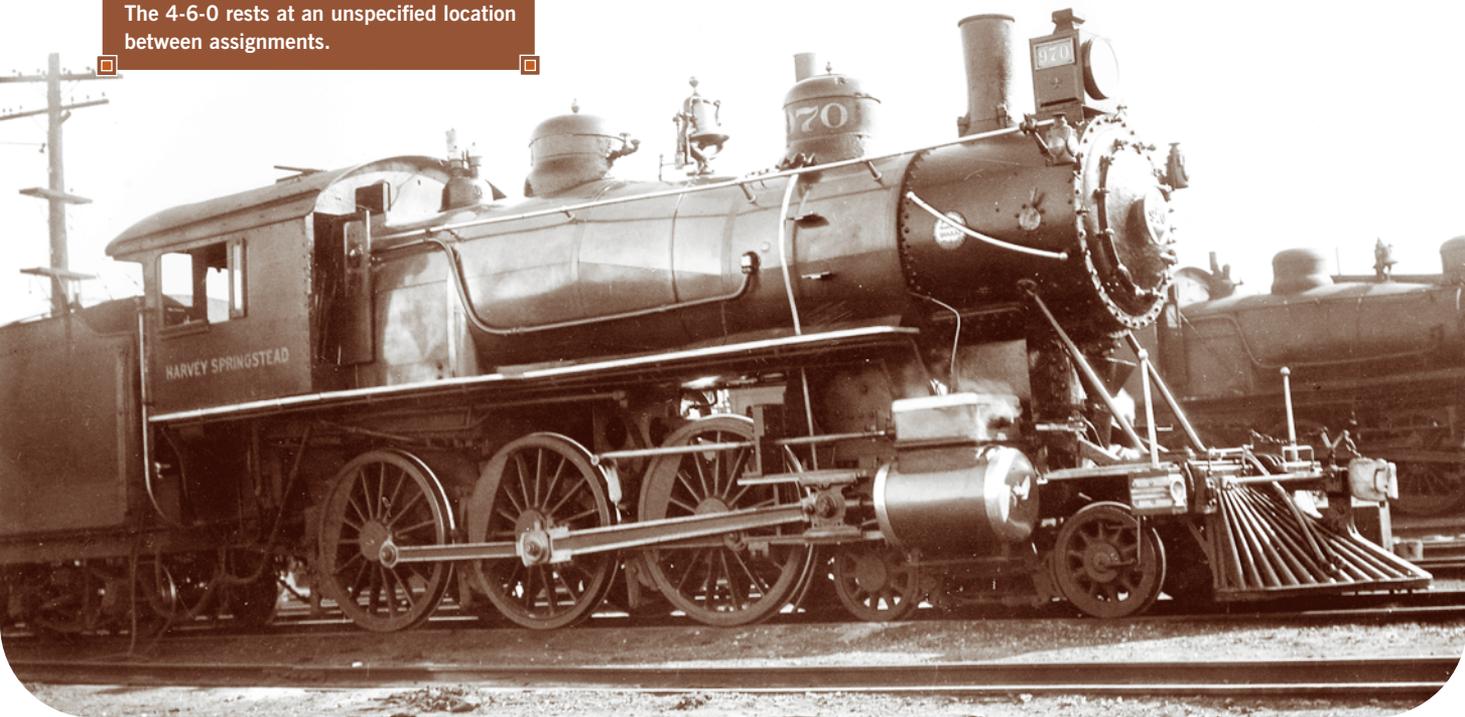
he was said to coax 45,000 hours out of the locomotive between overhauls. When Erie sent 970 to the Meadville, Pa., shops for a rebuild in 1915, Springstead accompanied his engine so he could make sure it handled right on the return trip east.

Toward the end of the first decade of that century, Erie Superintendent R.S. Parsons had established a group known as the Order of the Red Spot. "Superintendent Parsons is the Chief Mogul and he alone knows the exact terms of admission to the Order," Erie's magazine said enigmatically in a January 1910 piece, remarking that "so much has been printed in some of the New York State papers" about the group that it had become a matter of "gossip and mystery."

What was clear was the Order was intended to recognize superior locomotive upkeep and handling. Engineers who met the demands earned a red spot painted on their locomotives' front number plates. Springstead was among the first four men to earn the distinction, and a Nov. 21, 1915, illustrated newspaper article in *The World* described him as the "top notch engineer of them all."

Erie had given Springstead the additional duties of a foreman on the New York Division in 1897, which pro-

The highest point in Springstead's 56-year career arrived in December 1910, when Erie named No. 970 in his honor. The 4-6-0 rests at an unspecified location between assignments.



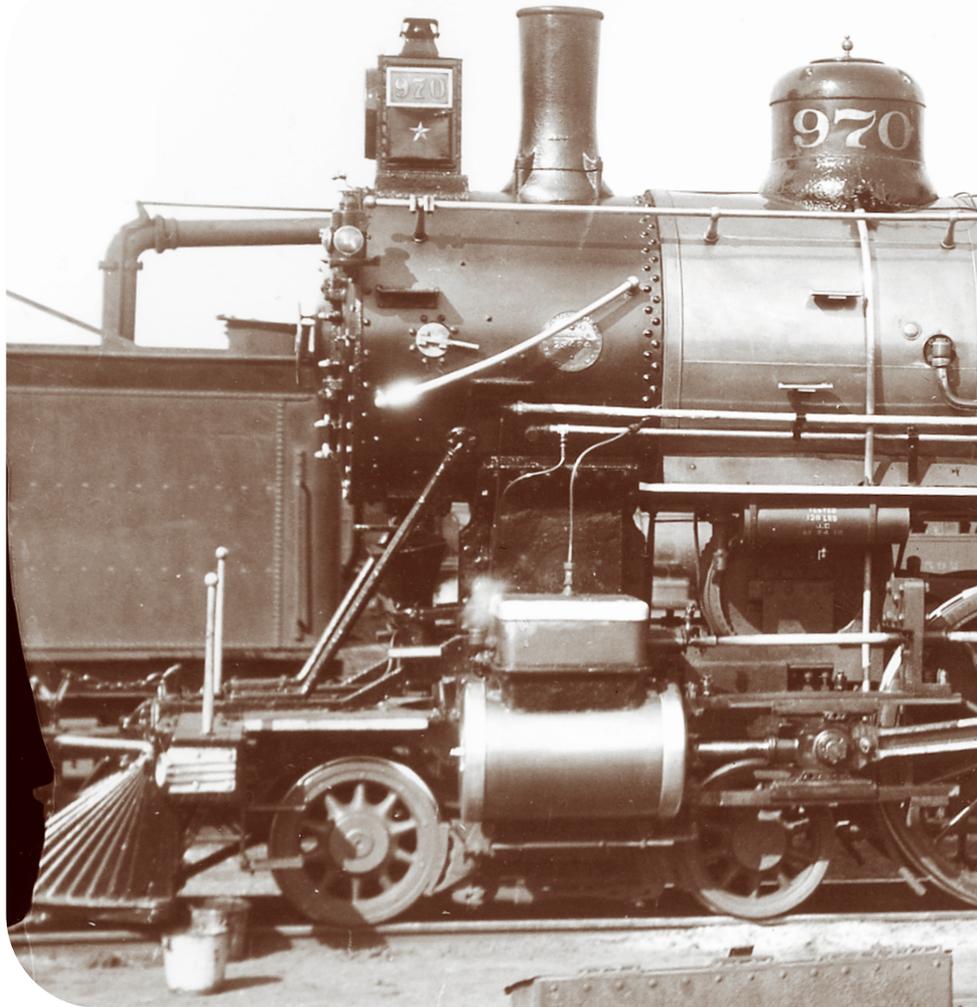
Transportation Collections, Smithsonian Institution

vided him something else to do during his Jersey City layovers than maintain and polish his locomotive. In the foreman's role, he certified new engineers, dealt with poor performers, and generally observed the work of the other engineers. It seems probable that few crew members were glad to see him approach on official business.

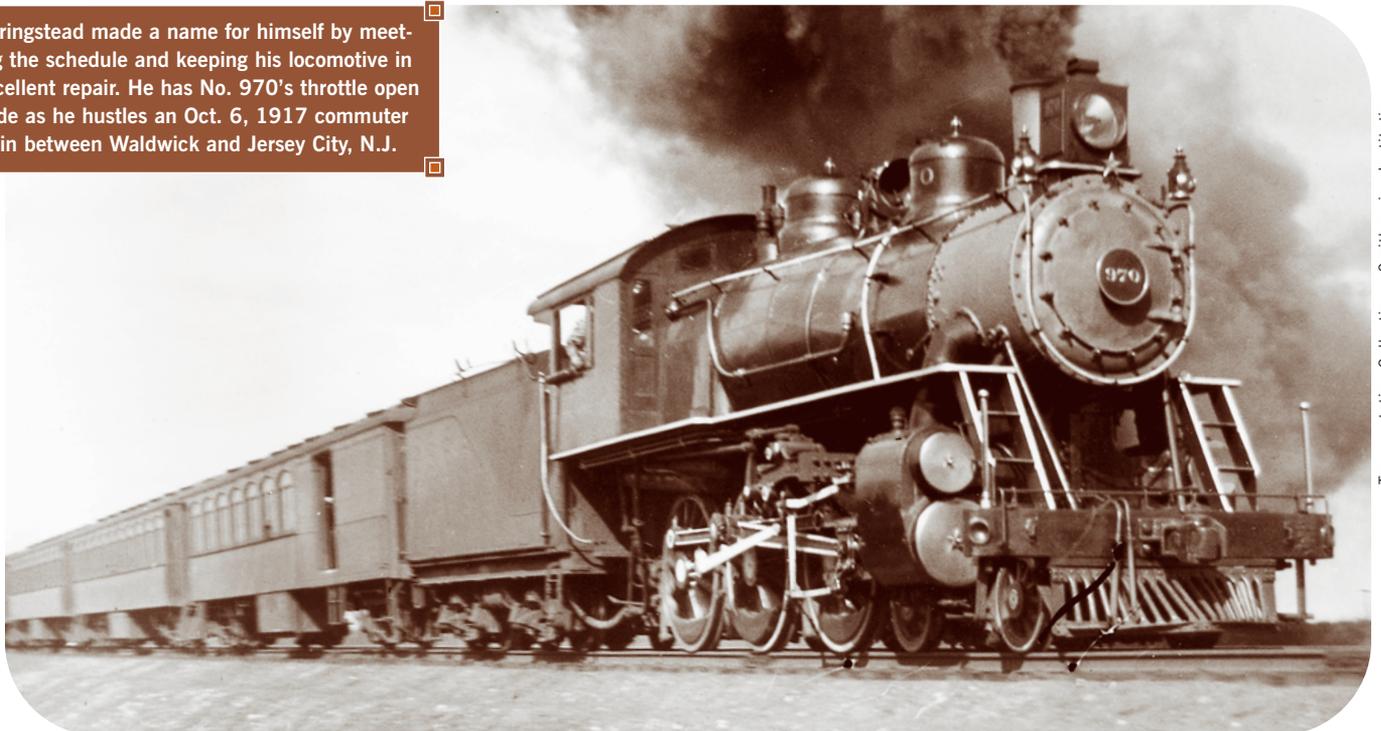
One old yarn recalled that Springstead would put a poorly performing fireman off at the next station and fire the engine himself the rest of the trip. Whether that's quite accurate is an open question, but it appears most firemen couldn't live up to Springstead's standards. Over a 15-year period, almost every monthly entry in his Red Spot membership records contains the name of a different fireman.

Then there was the issue of the "Mosquito Fleet." The name referred to local passenger locomotives Erie would employ on Sundays for freight service. Often, the idle passenger engines would be coupled in pairs with freight locomotives to get the chores done. Nevertheless, Springstead had issued strict orders that 970 was never to be used as part of the Mosquito Fleet, no matter the circumstances.

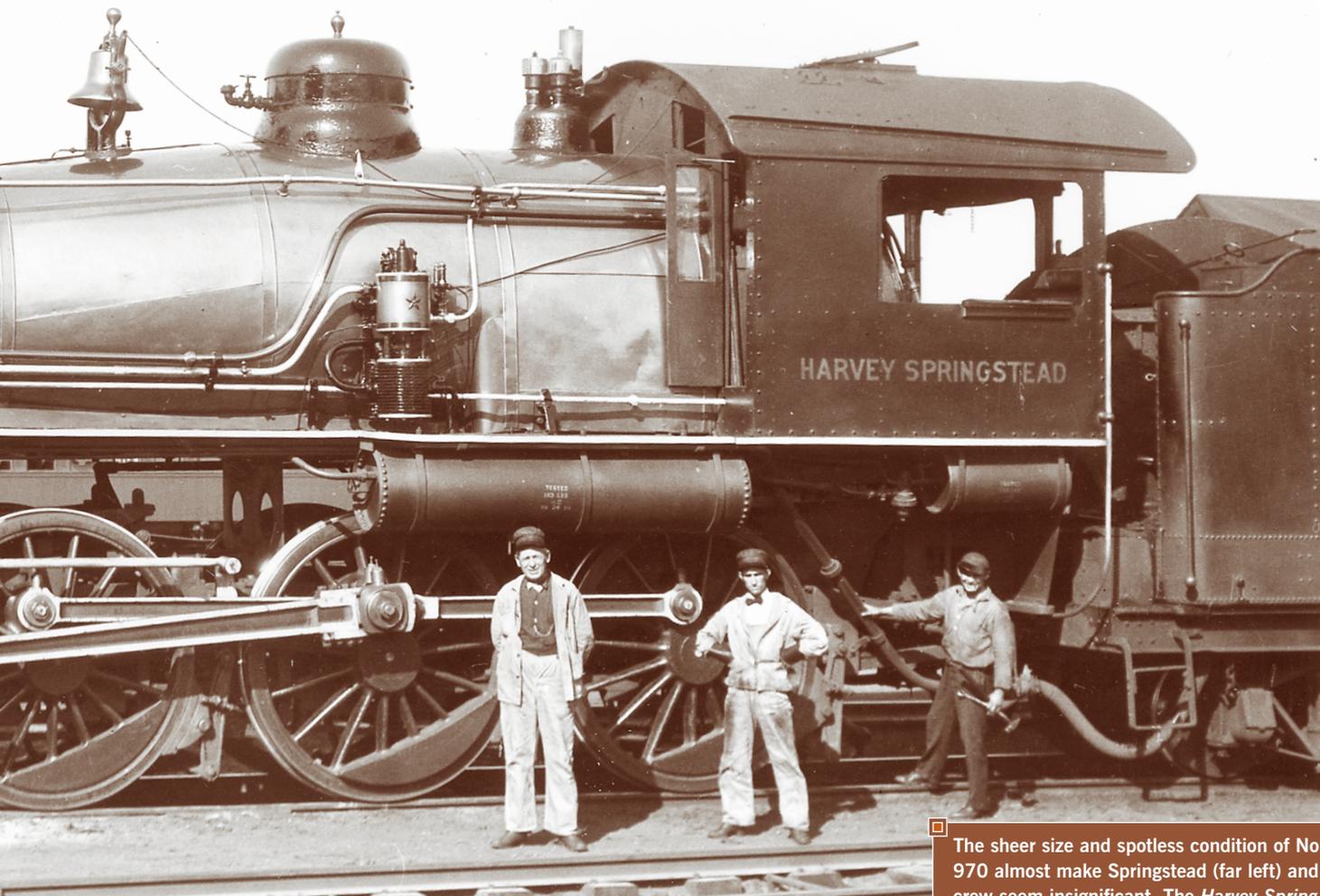
But during a period of heavy freight traffic, when the Mosquito Fleet was trying to move and sort a crush of cars, one of the engines broke down. The failure occurred at Waldwick where, naturally, 970 sat steaming with noth-



Springstead made a name for himself by meeting the schedule and keeping his locomotive in excellent repair. He has No. 970's throttle open wide as he hustles an Oct. 6, 1917 commuter train between Waldwick and Jersey City, N.J.



Transportation Collections, Smithsonian Institution



Transportation Collections, Smithsonian Institution

The sheer size and spotless condition of No. 970 almost make Springstead (far left) and his crew seem insignificant. The *Harvey Springstead* lettering on the Baldwin Ten-Wheeler's cab is clear in this undated scene.

ing to do. It was tempting. Moreover, the need to move the freight outweighed Springstead's orders to leave 970 alone — at least, it did that one and only time.

So 970 was pressed into action pulling a freight train to Port Jervis. With that work done, a crew turned the locomotive and ran it back to Waldwick where it was waiting for Springstead when he reported Monday morning. He might have been willing to overlook an error in judgment during an emergency situation, but 970 was grimy, greasy, and, to him, unfit for use. He demanded explanations.

Springstead also imposed a solution. From then on, 970 was parked on a wye track that dead-ended at Franklin Turnpike, a block or so from his house. That location afforded Springstead an easy view of his locomotive from his front porch so the engine didn't easily move without his knowledge. Apparently, he often sat outside keeping an eye on 970.

Springstead's achievements on the railroad were offset by tragedies in his personal life. His second son, Harry, died of tuberculosis in 1919, and Springstead found himself face-to-face with every parent's least imaginable horror: He had outlived his children. He opened his home in Waldwick, though, and became a surrogate father to Harry's children: Ralph, who was 12 at the time, and his 14-year-old brother, Clarence. Springstead welcomed his daughter-in-law, Bessie, too, and she lived with him and her sons for the next four years.

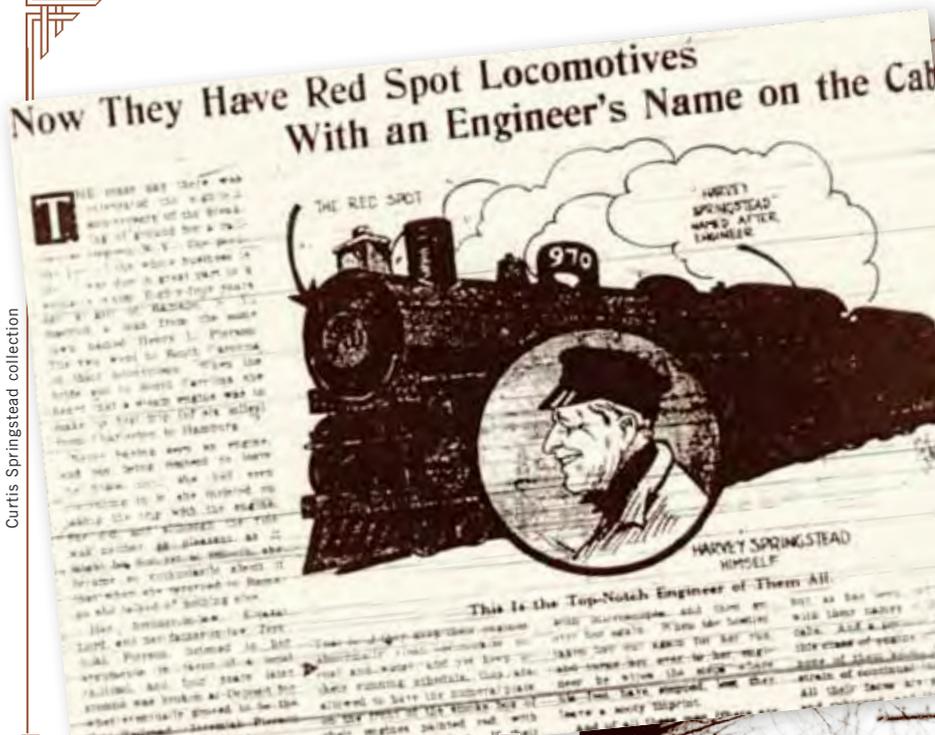
Black fate struck again in 1923, when Mary, Springstead's wife of 45 years, died at 66 of heart failure. He found new companionship with Hazel Clark, who lived a few blocks to the south and had been widowed since her husband died young of a stroke. She was likely a member of the Episcopal Church Springstead and Mary had attended for so long, but she was a

musician, too, and it may be that Springstead saw her perform. She was a spry 32 years old and the mother of a 12-year-old girl and a 4-year-old boy when she married 66-year-old Springstead in early May 1923.

Springstead's marriage to Hazel testifies that he wasn't all spit and polish. E. Jay Quinby, a conductor on the North Jersey Rapid Transit trolley line, would have agreed.

The rapid transit line extended from Paterson to Waldwick, where it then paralleled Erie's tracks to Suffern, N.Y., the end of the line. In his story of the North Jersey Rapid Transit, *Interurban Interlude*, Quinby described a competition he shared with Springstead.

Quinby often would arrive for his scheduled stop at Waldwick just as Springstead was pulling the evening



An illustrated newspaper, *The World*, ran this caricature of Springstead with a 1915 story describing the Order of the Red Spot. Springstead was one of the original inductees to the Order, which recognized superior performance.

train from Jersey City into the station. The passengers on both lines had got into the habit of cheering or jeering if their train or trolley was ahead of, or behind, the other.

One day, Quinby “fell victim to the temptation offered by certain enthusiastic passengers” who enjoyed the impromptu “races.” On that June evening, Springstead had his train well ahead of the trolley as they passed between Ramsey and Mahwah, N.J. Caught up in the enthusiasm of his passengers, Quinby took advantage of a descending grade that enabled him to get the car up to nearly 60 mph as it approached the Spring Street flag stop in Ramsey.

The passengers were yelling back and forth as they sped down the parallel lines, making wagers and taunting each other. At the last minute, an elderly woman appeared flagging down Quinby’s trolley. With no easy way to stop in time and the cheering encouragement of the passengers, Quinby blew past the woman, engulfing her in a cloud of dust. He won the race to Suffern that night but lost his job the next morning when the startled “Spring Street spinster” called Quinby’s boss to complain.

All of Springstead’s passengers reportedly knew him by name, and stories of his exploits in the New York-area papers were only adding to the recognition he received from the public and his employer. Springstead’s promotion to foreman was a significant achievement, and his membership in the Order of the Red Spot was even more impressive. But the culmination of his success would occur on another cold December day, this time in 1910.

A larger crowd than normal huddled against the wind as Springstead eased his train to a stop in Jersey City. Some of the people standing on the platform that morning were routine passengers, but others included Erie employees and even a reporter for the *Saturday Evening Post*.

It had been that way the length of the run from Waldwick. Passengers hollered greetings as they passed below

970’s cab, while colleagues, from tower operators to conductors, waved or called congratulations. Springstead sat tall at the controls, made sure his bow tie was straight, and beamed in reply. For Erie had intensified the identity between the man and the locomotive through the levy of a rare honor: It had named 970 the *Harvey Springstead*.

Erie hadn’t named a locomotive after an individual since 1900 when it prepared a special engine, the *Daniel Willard*, for the Chicago Exposition. Erie’s magazine described the decision to do so for Springstead as “quite a sensation,” with the man of honor “showing his teeth in a smile that would make Teddy Roosevelt envious.”

Springstead finessed and cajoled the locomotive that bore his name for another 15 years before change set in again. Erie assigned him a K-1 Pacific





Springstead spent his final years at Erie behind the controls of Pacific No. 2531. Handed down from mainline service, the worn-out 4-6-2 was no match for Springstead's beloved No. 970. Here 2531 makes time at Ramsey, N.J., in May 1932, about 3 years after Springstead retired.

Karl E. Schlachter; John P. Locke collection

that dated from the early 1900s and had just been handed down from long-haul passenger service. The 4-6-2 bore the number 2531, but it must have seemed anonymous after the *Harvey Springstead*. (No. 970 was leased to the New York, Susquehanna & Western until Erie retired it in 1945.)

The Pacific probably dissatisfied him, too. In all likelihood, the engine bore the marks of long, hard use, for Springstead's name disappeared from the Order of the Red Spot records in fall 1925 and didn't reappear until the next May. What a frustrating six months those must have been for an engineer whose pride and reputation were based on such high standards of good repair.

But Springstead didn't have to mind the old Pacific for long because, at the age of 73 and after more than 50 years on the Erie, he retired in March 1929.

He moved to Corry, Pa., to live near family, although Hazel found the small town too isolated and chose to live in Cleveland; Springstead traveled there often to visit her.

The last trip he took, using his railroad pass to ride the Erie, was to Jersey City for the funeral of his younger brother, Charles. Afterward, Springstead fell ill, and he died at 77 at home in Corry on Dec. 10, 1933. 1

CURTIS SPRINGSTEAD is the great-great grandson of Harvey Springstead. He is working with the Waldwick (N.J.) Historical Society to restore WC, the 1890 signal tower in that town. The finished tower will be named in honor of Harvey and be a museum to the railroad workers of the area. Curt is blending his interest in the Erie and genealogy to compile stories about other Erie employees of note.



Erie Railroad Magazine ran this photo of Springstead in January 1934, shortly after the iconic engineer died at age 77.

Curtis Springstead collection