

# Whistle blows 1 last time

By Kathy Parrish  
staff writer

CONDUCTOR Elden (Lloyd) Cuneaz plugged away for 17 years before landing a job on the commuter train.

Assigned to freight, he would work the commuter for a while after someone retired. Then a conductor with more seniority would grab the preferred slot and bump him back to boxes.

"I was on and off maybe 100 times," recalled Cuneaz, 62, who expected to hold the position until he retired from Grand Trunk Western Railroad next year. "But there were just so many jobs on the commuter and you had to wait your turn."

NOW AFTER 20 years punching tickets and waking up commuters, the West Bloomfield resident is working freight again. But this time, there's no commuter train to bump back onto.

Facing a \$16-million deficit, the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) eliminated the Pontiac to Detroit commuter rail Oct. 17.

A last-minute lawsuit by the Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers delayed the action for one day, but Oakland County Circuit Court Judge

Robert Templin allowed the service to end Tuesday.

So Monday, Cuneaz collected cash fares on the southbound 924 and northbound 993 for the last time. It was a "real blue day" for the conductor, whose transition from the fast-moving aisles of a passenger car to the caboose of a freight train won't be easy.

THE HARDEST part was saying goodbye — not once, but twice — to all the passengers he chatted with while strolling down the aisle.

Not to mention those he held trains for, woke up just before their stops, and trusted for fares — which always were repaid.

"He held the train while I scrambled up a snow bank," testified rider Jamie Stuart of Troy, who dreads the thought of "scrambling around for a bus. I've seen bus drivers wait 'til you get there and then take off."

Cuneaz's lakeside home became a regular lost and found for items left behind by commuters. Umbrellas, coats, briefcases, purses and even one man's false teeth turned up there.

"He came right that night because he couldn't eat without them. So he ate with us," recalled Cuneaz.

who also occasionally drove passengers back to train stops missed while sleeping.

"Oh, the people. You just can't beat the people on the trains."

A ROYAL OAK native, Cuneaz was hired 37 years ago by Grand Trunk and Western Railroad in Connecticut where he was in submarine school. When work got slack, he was laid off there and hired here by the company.

After three years as a brakeman — a title his son Lawrence now holds — he became a freight conductor in 1959.

In the mid-1960s, Cuneaz forsook boxcars for a permanent job on the passenger train. He worked two three-and-a-half-hour shifts daily, collecting cash fares and tickets and making sure the vehicles were on schedule.

Occasionally, he had to talk with a "lippy" rider who parted too much on the way home, or intervene between a brakeman and an impolite customer.

"There are always a few folks who get up on the wrong side of the bed," explained Cuneaz, who believes when dealing with people "you've got to take a little guff."

"But some brakemen want to sass them back. So I'd get in the middle of that."

IN NEARLY four decades with Grand Trunk, Cuneaz has seen the commuter rail change. When he first worked it, there were 3,000 daily riders, two conductors and 14 cars on each of the three trains.

Last week four cars carried passengers on each train. And SEMTA put ridership at only 450 daily.

"After 1-75 opened, it just tapered off," explained Cuneaz, who lost many friends because of the decline in ridership. He even introduced couples who married and invited him to their weddings.

"I got to know them all. It was like one big family. But they're all gone now."

While he'd hoped to hold his job until he retires next March, Cuneaz wasn't surprised to see the commuter rail close down.

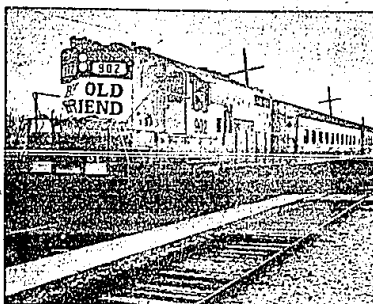
When SEMTA took over the train from Grand Trunk, it made what he saw as positive changes: fewer delays, better working conditions and reinstated special runs like trips downtown to the July 4 fireworks.

BUT HE ALSO believes the transportation authority erred in building a "luxury" maintenance facility in Pontiac, buying more coaches than needed and landscaping train lots.

"But it was just a losing proposition; it was losing money years before SEMTA took it over," said Cuneaz. "There just was no more funding."

Still, walking the aisles of the coaches decorated with crepe paper by unhappy passengers, the conductor couldn't help but hope for a reprieve from the state Legislature. Only the Legislature can authorize SEMTA to conduct a public vote on a tax to subsidize transit operations.

"There's still a chance," said Cuneaz, adjusting his navy blazer and hat. "They may keep us out of the snow bank anyway."



Brakeman Ken Hudson of Waterford engages in some horseplay with Cuneaz, whose conductor's hat was "stolen" only to be returned at a farewell party held Saturday.



Conductor Elden "Lloyd" Cuneaz of West Bloomfield reads the obituary of the train he's served for 20 years. Officially, he punched tickets and collected fares. Unofficially, he held the train for tardy passengers, woke them for

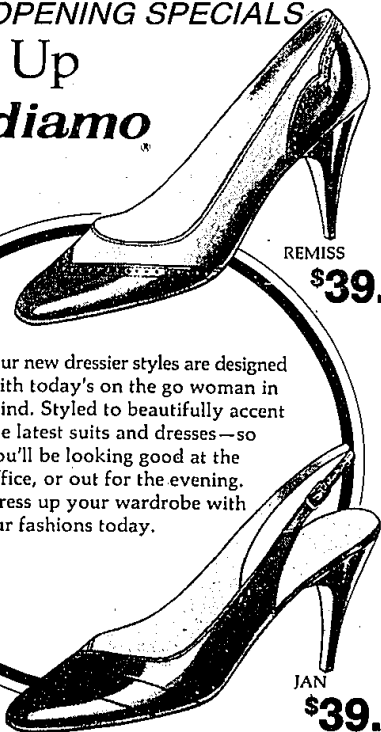
their stops and even introduced some to their future spouses. The crepe paper was hung by unhappy commuters to mark the end of the line for the train.

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