

A Sentimental Journey on the BMT...

By LEE DEMBART

There will be a change at Jamaica, Queens, tomorrow night, and it involves trains, but not the Long Island Rail Road. Rather, the Transit Authority will end service over Jamaica Avenue, and the city will soon begin taking down the BMT elevated structure that has overshadowed that shopping thoroughfare for 60 years.

After 12:01 A.M. on Sunday, Jamaica trains from Manhattan will terminate at Queens Boulevard. Three stations and the mile of track to 168th Street will be torn down. To commemorate this event in the history of the rapid transit system and to give itself a reason for running a special train over a historic right of way, the Electric Railroaders' Association, a worldwide organization of 2,500 subway buffs, is offering an extra run during the day on Sunday—using vintage BMT A/B cars—to 168th Street and back. While there is no formal guided tour, a running commentary will be provided by members of the railroaders' association.

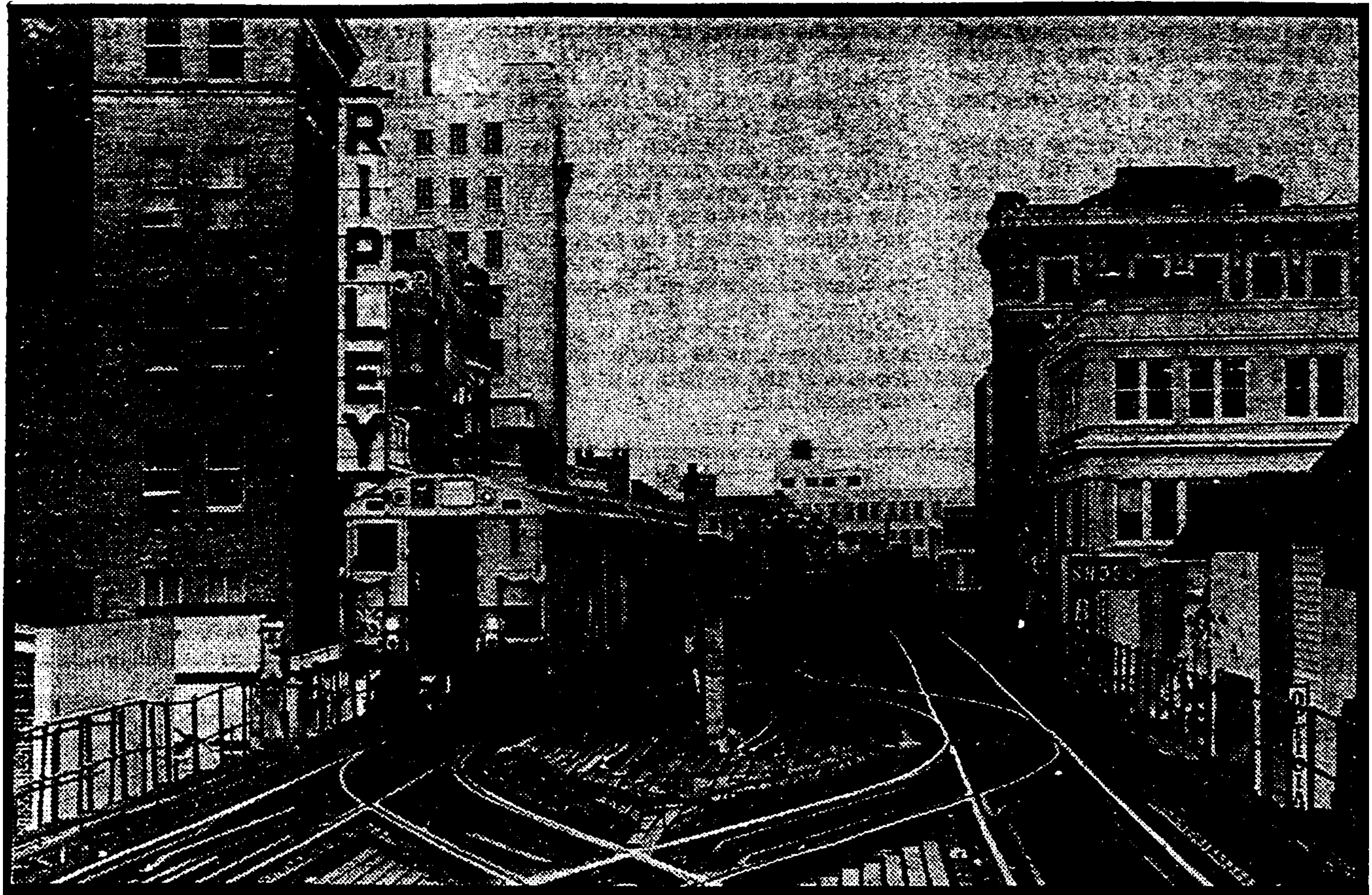
Ironically, the structure that will be removed is the newest part of the 12-mile Jamaica line, which snakes from downtown Manhattan across the Williamsburg Bridge over Broadway and Fulton Street in Brooklyn to Jamaica. The section over Jamaica Avenue was opened in 1918. But the part of the line in Brooklyn from Alabama Avenue to Crescent Street has been in continuous use since 1888. It is the oldest El structure in the city, and it has never been reconstructed.

But a ride on the BMT Jamaica line is not just a ride through transit history, it is a ride through the city's history, showing what can occur and what has occurred in a mere six decades.

When the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company and its predecessors erected elevated structures across Brooklyn and into Queens, they built in open fields, preceding the city, which eagerly followed alongside the tracks. They made possible the growth of New York, and Jamaica Avenue prospered. Then the automobile allowed the suburbs to stretch beyond the subway and beyond the city. Neighborhoods declined. Jamaica Avenue became blighted.

Merchants blamed the elevated, and they yearned for the rebirth that Third and Sixth Avenues in Manhattan enjoyed once they were rid of their EIs. To replace the El on Jamaica Avenue, a new subway is being constructed a block south under Archer Avenue, and it will eventually hook up with the Queens IND line in Kew Gardens. Its opening is five years away. In the meantime, a bus will run along Jamaica Avenue with a free transfer to and from the Jamaica line at its new terminal at Queens Boulevard.

The other day in the tower of the 168th Street terminal, Fred Boyce was working the signals and switches that bring trains into the station and send them back out across a diamond switch toward Manhattan. Mr. Boyce, who



A BMT train entering the 168th Street terminal in Jamaica, Queens. It approaches the station on the 60-year-old elevated structure that will soon be taken down.

runs a 16-foot-by-16-foot electric train set at his home in Farmingdale, L.I., said wistfully, "Here I'm a towerman, but at home I'm a trainmaster."

He was not too sad about the impending closing of part of the Jamaica line, and neither was Hugh A. Dunne, an officer of the Electric Railroaders' Association. "For rail fans, this line was always one that you enjoyed coming on one way," Mr. Dunne said. "It's a very long ride."

But Mr. Dunne perked up at the sight of R-46 cars coasting into the station, and his ardor waxed with talk of the subways. "The BMT was the product of a very efficient street-car system going through bucolic neighborhoods," Mr. Dunne said.

As the train pulled out of the station, Mr. Dunne noted that the BMT never skimmed on construction. Unlike other elevated construction at the time, the platforms were made of concrete, not of wood, and the original platforms remain.

Along the hour's ride to Manhattan, Mr. Dunne and Walter Druck, 75 years old and a former employee of the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company, pointed to places on the elevated structure where reconstruction had occurred years ago. The steel A/B cars, first used in 1915, were 67 feet long and

required more room to turn than the wooden cars they replaced. Portions of the El were rebuilt to ease the curves, but the original steel was left standing and still can be seen. From a spot along Fulton Street, the steel girders of the El branch momentarily southward, where BMT trains once ran to the Long Island Rail Road Rockaway line, now part of the IND.

At Marcy Avenue, the last stop in Brooklyn, the tracks turn right and then head over the East River, as they have since the Williamsburg Bridge opened in 1908. Before that they continued straight to the foot of Broadway, where they met ferry service to Manhattan. After crossing the bridge, the train enters a tunnel, which is the first place the BMT ever went underground. A complete trolley terminal sits unused beside the Essex Street station.

Mr. Dunne smiled in wonder at the complexity of the system. He allowed that as a rider he thinks he has to wait too long for the subway, but as a subway buff he insisted, "Transit is one of the great engineering accomplishments of man."

And the last trip to 168th Street? "It's a historic thing," he said. "People like to be able to say they did something as a first or a last."