

“Holiday Express” evokes nostalgic sights and sounds of steam age

BY DAVID F. ASHTON

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The ground shakes as the Southern Pacific 4449 locomotive – owned by the City of Portland, and which drew the Bicentennial Train around the country in 1976 – powers up for a nighttime Holiday Express run along Oaks Bottom.

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Some folks come during the morning or afternoon to ride the Holiday Express train, pulled by a steam locomotive between OMSI and Oaks Amusement Park along the Willamette River. It's a scenic trip in daylight. But many of them come back to repeat the trip at night, as we did this year.

“There's something special about an evening ride from Oaks Park to OMSI,” said Ed Immel, V.P. of Oregon Rail Heritage Foundation, the organization operating the special holiday train, which only runs in the first two weekends of December each year.

When one notices the powerful and historic Southern Pacific 4449 locomotive, and the railcars behind it decked out in lights, hears the hissing as the steam rises, and sees the silhouettes of people standing near the train, it evokes a magical, sometimes nostalgic feeling.

“After dark, you can catch a glimpse of the Christmas Boats as they go around Ross Island, see downtown Portland light up at night, and feel the crisp night air,” Immel added. “Kids are always amazed when they see a working steam engine, but parents who have only seen steam locomotives in photos or movies are truly in awe of their size.”

The Holiday Express, now in its fourth season, is becoming an annual event for families, and to which people bring their friends.

“Santa comes aboard the train, and hands out candy canes,” noted Immel. “Last night it was just precious: A little girl came on the train with her family. She'd spent the entire week working on her list of wishes to give to Santa Claus. She came up to Santa very timidly and read from her list, item by item. Her little two-year-old sister followed, and confided, ‘Santa, I want a laptop computer’.”

The fares collected on the Holiday Express help the Oregon Rail Heritage Foundation fund their most pressing need — building a permanent rail museum to house the city-owned locomotives and the other rolling stock in their collection.

“For the past 15 years or so, we’ve been able to use the former Southern Pacific roundhouse in the Brooklyn Yard near Holgate,” explained Immel. “But the railroad needs to expand their inter-modal container trailer facilities into the area where the roundhouse is located. Southern Pacific has been very considerate, and given us until 2011 to find a new place to park the locomotives.”

Because of the environmental sensitivity of the Oaks Bottom area, the dream of a Portland Rail and Transportation Museum located next to Oaks Park is all but out of the question, in his view — although another railroading group is still pursuing that concept, earmarked for an area just south of the wildlife park, in a spot where once there was a garbage dump.

“We’re looking at property near the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry,” Immel continued. “We can have a really good home there.”

As the conductor called “All aboard!”, Immel asked us to thank Richard Samuels and the Oregon Pacific Railroad Company for letting them “run on their rails”, and for their continuing support of the organization.

For more information, see their Internet website at: www.orhf.org.