

Historic locomotive steams home on cross-country journey

Story by Justin Franz | October 20, 2009

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Hundreds of train enthusiasts, onlookers and locals lined the tracks between Havre and Whitefish Saturday to see one of America's largest operating steam locomotives chug by.

Southern Pacific Railroad No. 4449, nicknamed "The Daylight," was heading west to its home base of Portland, Ore., after journeying to Michigan for a summer train festival.

Built in 1941, just months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the engine spent two decades hauling passenger trains up and down the west coast. In an effort by railroads to make trains seem more modern and futuristic, the 4449 was outfitted with a streamlined exterior and an eye-catching orange, red and black paint scheme. In the late 1950s, when steam locomotives were being replaced by new diesels, the 4449 was donated to the city of Portland for display.

There it sat until 1974, when it was selected to haul the American Freedom Train, a rolling museum that ran across the country in conjunction with the Bicentennial.

Following that, the locomotive was returned to Portland and, since then, has powered special trains around the west.

The engine acts as a rolling ambassador for the city, which still retains ownership of the 4449 and two other locomotives, said Martin Hansen, a volunteer for the locomotives care giving group, Friends of SP 4449, Inc.

It was its function as ambassador that brought the engine east to Owasso, Mich., for Train Festival 2009, held in late July and billed as America's largest railroad celebration. Hosted by the Steam Railroading Institute, the four-day

event brought seven restored steam locomotives and more than 36,000 people to the nearly 16,000-person town.

One of those people drawn to the event was Josh Oparowski of Westborough, Mass., who went all the way to Owasso to see the 4449.

“It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so I took it,” he said.

Oparowski, who has been interested in trains all his life, first saw the 4449 in a video his parents purchased for him when he was 4 or 5 years old. When he found out that the engine was coming to Michigan, he quickly made plans to go.

“I was thrown back in amazement to see it in person,” he said.

While there, he was able to see the inside of the cab, where the engineer runs the train.

“That was just an incredible experience to see all the controls up close and personal, and you then understand what it takes to run a machine like that,” he said.

Andrew Morris of Fredericksburg, Va., also made the trip after finding out that the 4449 would be on hand.

“People were in awe of it,” he said. “It really stands out, and once they see its steam, it draws them in even more.”

It’s a reaction the locomotive crew has received across the country, Hansen said. Bars near Chicago put tables outside so patrons could watch the engine pass on a Saturday afternoon, and churches across the Midwest would empty out when they went by, he said.

The story was the same on Sunday morning as locals came down to the Whitefish Amtrak station to see, smell and listen to the locomotive. One of those locals was Ward Macintyre, who decided to swing by with his young daughter.

“It’s pretty cool to see that someone still has interest in maintaining something this old and classic,” he said.

The guy at the head of that restoration is Doyle McCormack, who serves as the locomotive's engineer and has been involved with its care for more than 35 years. There's a reason he's done the work for so long.

"Insanity," he said. "It's a disease, and once you catch it, you're done for."

McCormack is retired now but still has plenty of projects that keep him busy, mainly his 411-ton "toy" that has been a significant part of his life since the restoration started in 1974.

McCormack is one of only two people in the group who run the engine.

"If you put half your life in a car, you're not just going to let someone drive away with it," he said.

But he admits he won't be around forever.

"My mission now is to ensure that when I'm gone, it'll be cared for," he said.

Part of that mission is to find the engine a new home in Portland. Currently, it is stored in an old roundhouse along with two other steam engines, but the building's owner wants to tear it down. Now, work has begun to build a new shop building for all three engines near the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry.

But first, Doyle and the rest of the crew must make it home to Portland. Monday, the train headed for Spokane, and Tuesday, it will make the final leg along the Columbia River back home to the Rose City.

"If I'm still alive after that, we'll figure out what to do next," McCormack laughed.

More information about Southern Pacific 4449 is available at <http://www.sp4449.com>.