

MARCH 5 2005

Dear Kerry:

The attached newsletter from a RR group based in Washington, D.C., includes a well documented account of one of their members who had purposely traveled from West Chester, PA, to Portola who had operated WP 608 and SP 2873 July 8, 2004. (See Pages 7-9.)

Although he described the experience in great personal detail, it points out that the RAL Engineers must continue with their efforts to make our visitors (and clients) pleasantly surprised with operating our equipment.

Also the free advertising of our activity could possibly generate more rentals.

It would be appreciated if you would kindly share the attached with the members of our Board of Directors.

Thank you.

Josh Palmer

The Timetable

New Expanded Chapter Calendar
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Alan Schneider's Transit Update: Boston
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What's more fun than a set of Lionel's?
Answer on page 4.

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EMD NW2u #608 operated by Mike Martin at the Portola Railroad Museum in Portola, CA on July 8th, 2004. Photo by: Mike Martin.

So You Want to Run a Locomotive!

By: Mike Martin

Tuesday, July 6, 2004 – 9:44 a.m.

We're airborne. I'm aboard Southwest Airlines (www.southwest.com) flight # 962, a 737-7H4 (N771SA), departing Midway Airport in Chicago. I'm on my way to live every railfan's dream – running a locomotive. (Ed. Note: Mike is continuing a trip that included new DOVER HARBOR mileage from Minneapolis to Chicago the previous day.)

Several museums around the country offer the chance to rent a locomotive and try your hand at the throttle. I'm headed for the Portola Railroad Museum in Portola, CA, where the Museum (www.wplives.org) operates a very successful "Rent-A-Locomotive" program. I have a reservation for two hours of "throttle time" on Thursday, July 8, 2004.

Flight # 962 is headed to Las Vegas. There, I'll change planes for the flight to Reno, NV, closest big city to Portola.

The load factor is good this morning, but I luck out and get an empty seat next to me for the 3:20 flight. Good deal. I had breakfast at Midway but say yes to the offered "snack" of crackers and cookies.

We touch down on Runway 19L at Las Vegas at 11:09 a.m. PDT and are parked at gate C5 by 11:15. I trundle over to gate C4 and get my boarding pass for flight #920 to Reno. Because Southwest doesn't give

priority to connecting passengers, I'm given a "C" boarding pass... a dreaded middle seat for sure (I understand that Southwest has since changed that policy and now gives connecting passengers boarding passes for both flights at initial check-in).

Flight # 920 is operating with a 737-3Y0 (N308SA) today. It's chock full and I end up in middle seat 8B as expected. We're off runway 7L at 12:50 p.m. on the one hour hop to Reno. The trip is smooth.

Our landing on Reno's runway 16R comes at 1:49 p.m. and we're parked at gate B3 by 1:54 p.m.

I have a rental car reserved at Hertz and am quickly on the way to the Sands Regency hotel (www.sandsregency.com). Not being familiar with Reno, I did some internet shopping for a place to stay. Room rates are dirt cheap in Reno.

As I'm in town for three nights, I wanted a place downtown and by the Union Pacific (www.up.com) tracks which bisect the business district. The Sands Regency filled the bill on both counts.

My eyes bugged out when I saw the nightly rate of \$49.00 plus tax. Wow, it's reasonable here. Having budgeted for a room based on east coast rates, I splurged and took the "junior suite" for \$69.00 (plus \$9.32 tax).

Rates at other properties were just as

low, of course, because Reno is a gambling mecca and the reasonably priced rooms attract gamblers.

I check in and am not disappointed. The room has a king-sized bed, sitting area and wet bar. Most importantly, I have a birds-eye view of the UP main line through town. Perfect! The place is kind of tired and worn, but will do nicely for my visit.

I grab the camera and head out for a walk. I find that construction is well under way on the project to relocate the UP main line in a cut through the center of town.

Reno has long wanted to relocate this line as the trains tie up traffic in big way when the many downtown grade crossings are occupied by trains. Temporary single-track has been laid on the south side of the old main and the work to lower the two-track line is well underway.

I'm in time to get a shot of Amtrak train # 6, the eastbound California Zephyr. The line relocation has caused Amtrak to move their Reno station to a temporary (trailer) facility just east of the old station. The need for a line relocation becomes apparent as the Zephyr makes a long station stop and crew change. Traffic in downtown Reno is tied up in knots.

In time, the train heads east and I walk back to the Sands in search of dinner. I settle on Mel's Diner, which is in the hotel and looks like a good place for some "comfort" food. I'm not disappointed.

I have the meat loaf special, which comes with two large slices of meat loaf, a mound of mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans and bread. I'm full to the brim and out the door for only \$8.65 plus tip. A good deal to be sure.

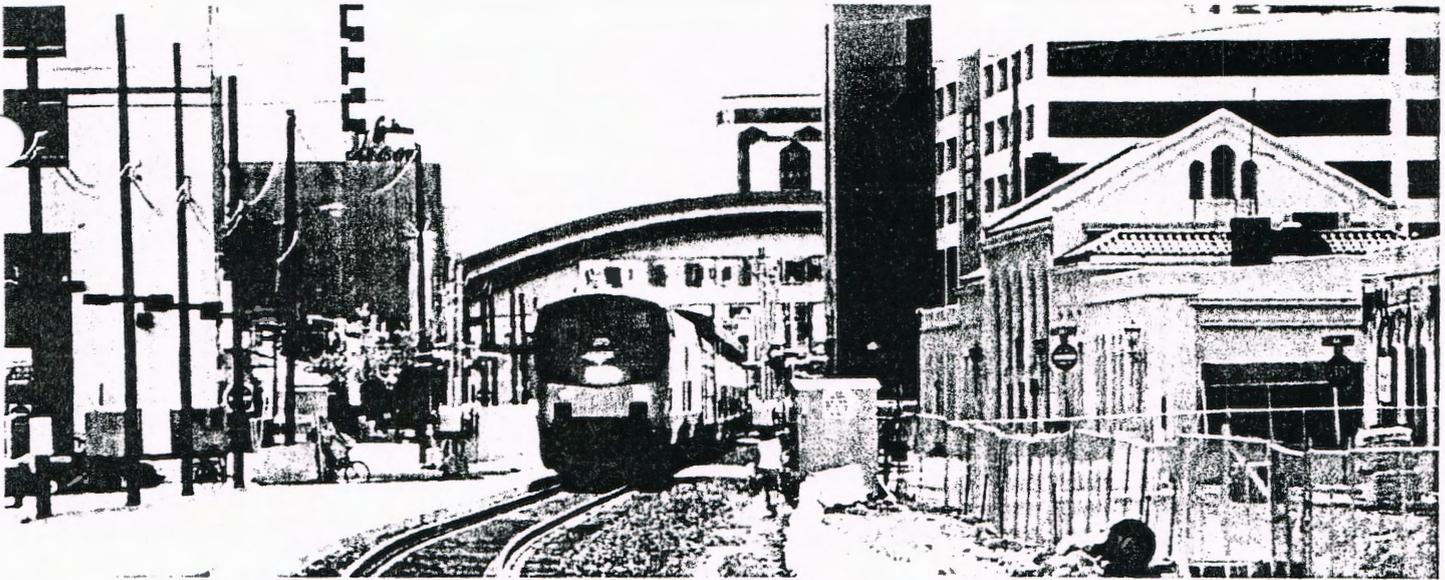
Not being much of a gambler I run a few dollars through a slot machine and spend the rest of the evening in my room with a new book.

Wednesday, July 7, 2004 – This is a day for

R&R, sightseeing and railfanning. I make the short drive west to Truckee, CA to watch the UP freights roll through town.

Truckee is the summer home of the UP's snow fighting equipment. It's located on the eastern slope of the Sierras and snowfall here is measured in feet, not inches. I find both a rotary plow and a Jordan spreader in the yard. It's a bit of a paradox to think about the conditions this equipment is designed to contend with as it

Truckee is the summer home of the UP's snow fighting equipment.



Amtrak train 36 the California Zephyr, approaches the temporary platform at Reno, NV on July 7th, 2004. The old station building is on the right. The tracks are being relocated in a cut at this point in downtown Reno. Photo by: Mike Martin.

sits here on a beautiful summer day.

I stroll through town and sit at the station platform for a while. During my two hour visit I see only one train, a westbound freight (with helper) heading through town.

I take a drive back through Reno and out east, hoping to see some freight action, but there's not much doing today. I did get some photos of a 4 hour late Amtrak # 5 and the 1:30 late # 6.

Thursday, July 8, 2004 – 6:20 a.m. Well, today's the big day. The alarm was set for 8:00 a.m. but I'm up already. A quick check outside reveals a beautiful day in the works with no sign of rain.

It's about an hour's drive to Portola and I don't want to be late. I stop at Mel's Diner for a big breakfast and I'm on the way to Portola at 8:00 a.m. I make quick work of the 49 mile drive and I'm in Portola at a

trackside park by 9:00 a.m.

Portola is a sleepy little one-stoplight town in the Feather River canyon. It was once a large maintenance base for the Western Pacific Railroad. The shops have become the Portola Railroad Museum but the large Union Pacific freight yard is still quite active.

The Museum offers several versions of their "Rent-A-Locomotive" program. I chose the option of an hour in a switcher and an hour in a road engine (\$195.00). The Museum has a large collection of locomotives and offers you your choice, where possible, of the unit you would like to run.

At 10:00 a.m. sharp I pull up to the

Throttle, locomotive
brake, train brake,
reverser, headlight,
bell, whistle... that's
all I need to know.

Museum gate and am met by my instructor, Jack Palmer. Jack tells me where to park and says he has the switcher all fired up and ready to go. Jack is a retired US Postal Service Public Relations Officer who lives in San Francisco and volunteers at the Museum for about six weeks each summer.

Anxious to get started, I swung up onto WP 608, an EMD NW2u. WP 608 is a beautifully restored unit painted brilliant WP Orange. It's a 12 cylinder.

1200 horsepower unit built in 1940. It entered switching service as UP 1001. Operating weight is 248,000 lbs.

Jack sits me down in the engineer's seat and explains the controls. Throttle, locomotive brake, train brake, reverser, headlight, bell, whistle... that's all I need to know.

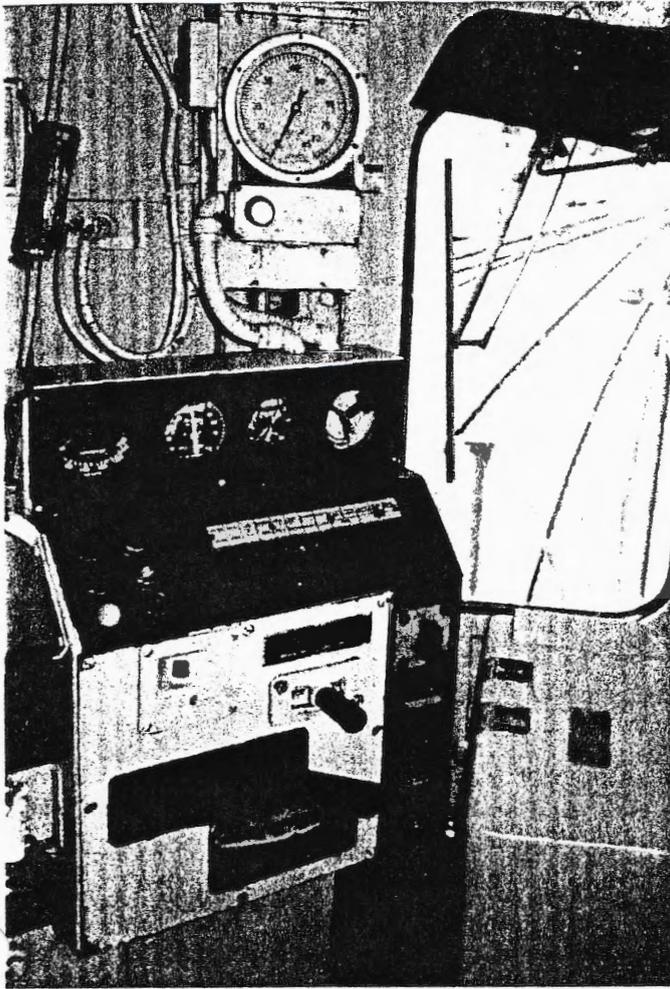
I move the reverser handle to "forward." "Let's go," says Jack. "How about the rest of my lesson?" "I'll show you as we go along" was Jack's reply.

"Put the throttle in Run 1 and watch the ground to make sure we're moving," Jack says. I do as instructed, and sure enough the prime mover spools up and we are moving. "Notch it out to Run 2," is the next instruction. We pick up a little speed and are gliding down the track. "Look Ma, I'm running a locomotive!"

Speed limit on the Museum grounds is 10 mph. While the WP 608 has no speedometer, Jack shows me how to judge



Two Jordan Spreaders (left) and a Rotary Snow Plow spend the summer in storage in Truckee, CA. Winter will find this equipment fighting snow on Donner Pass. Photo by: Mike Martin



View from the engineer's seat on Southern Pacific GP-9#2873 at the Portola Railroad Museum on July 8th, 2004. Photo by: Mike Martin

our speed. We run past the switch to the main line called "Malfunction Junction" and head around the balloon track. Our speed is more or less 10 mph and I'm having the time of my life.

We approach the dirt grade crossing which allows access to the yard and Jack shows me how to turn on the bell. We don't get to whistle for the crossing because of complaints from the neighbors (but I do get to practice my hand at two longs, a short and a long before the morning is over). Jack calls "clear on my side". I do the same.

Now for the hard part, stopping. I gingerly move the independent brake handle and can feel us slowing down. "Release it now, you don't want it to set up," says Jack.

Huh? He's telling me that if I apply the brakes and let the handle stay in one position, the air brake system will bring us

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throttle between Run 1, Run 2 and Idle, as necessary. You begin to get the feel of the brakes after a few tries.

On my third run, Jack tells me to stop with the front end even with a traffic cone that's set beside the track. No problem – I stop us with the front end right at the cone. The trickiest part is braking, but soon I'm making smooth stops.

In no time I'm running in the "classic" engineers pose... right arm on the window sill, left hand on the throttle and leaning out to watch our progress. Jack has a laugh and asks if I'm having fun.

"The time of my life", is my reply and it's true. I've had some great railroad experiences; been behind a few closed doors, had a couple of cab rides, but nothing tops this. The hiss of air as the brake is released, the throbbing of the diesel as it spools up, the breeze through the cab window – this is the best!

to an abrupt halt. The correct technique is a smooth movement of the brake handle on and off until we are stopped. We do come to a more or less smooth stop.

We have covered about three quarters of a mile around the Museum's balloon track. I'm thrilled with my accomplishment. Now for lesson # 2, reverse.

Nothing to it...all you have to do is the opposite of everything you did to get here. Reverser handle in "reverse" position. Rear headlight on "bright," front headlight on "dim." Release the brake. Notch out the throttle. Here we go.

And so we traveled around a fishhook shaped section of track for the rest of the hour. As you get the feel of running, it's actually not that hard.

The locomotive responds crisply on level track with no cars in trail. Speed is relatively easy to control by moving the

We made about 8 runs and it was time to park the NW2 back on the ready track and move on to a road switcher for my second hour of instruction. I do so and we step down off the switcher.

While the Museum will honor requests to run specific locomotives, I had not made one and Jack had the Museum's GP9 lined up next for me. It's numbered SP 2873 (ex SP 3798) and painted in the Kodachrome scheme which was designed for the never-accomplished Santa Fe-Southern Pacific merger.

The Geep has been parked for the night and needs to be started, so Jack gives me the basic course in starting a road switcher. Jack throws a few switches on the back cab wall. We then head out onto the catwalk and open the engine cabinet. He shows me how to flip the "prime" switch, then the "start" switch. The 16 cylinder, 1750 hp prime mover fires up and comes to life. The oil pressure comes up. We close the cabinet doors and head back into the cab to wait for the air gauge to come up to 90 lbs., which will take about five minutes.

While that's going on, Jack gives me an orientation on the controls. The concept is identical to switcher. There are just a few more gizmos on this locomotive and the location of a few of the controls is slightly different.

The GP9 is a "high short hood" unit, so the forward visibility is not much better than it was on the switcher. The cab is roomier, though and there are more gauges and switches on the panel and control stand.

The air gauge reads 90 lbs and we are ready to go. I give the whistle two toots (signal for proceeding forward) and notch off on the throttle.

This unit makes a wonderful sound as its prime mover winds up. We do have a speedometer on this locomotive, so I back off on the throttle as we approach 10 mph.

It's easy to feel the extra horsepower that this unit has. The independent brake operates more smoothly. It's about like driving a truck then moving to a luxury car. Same principle, but everything's more comfortable. Jack tells me that each locomotive has its own personality and quirks.

I have the hang of it now and up and back we go on the balloon track. Jack has the talent to know when a student needs coaching and when he is comfortable at the controls. I'm comfortable. In fact, I'm



Does this man look happy, or what?!?! The author at the throttle of Southern Pacific GP-9 #2873, Portola, CA, July 8th, 2004. Photo by: Jack Palmer

flattered when Jack sits back on the fireman's seat and puts his feet up. He trusts me. He has confidence in my newly minted running skills.

I'm still having the time of my life. After a few runs in the GP9, I get a bit bold and briefly notch out to run # 3 when starting just to hear the EMD 567 prime mover spool up. What a sound, and MY hand is on the throttle.

Jack can sense that I'm pushing the speed limit just a wee bit and he brings me back to earth with the comment "If you put it on the ground, you have to re-rail it." Got the picture, Jack. I throttle back.

All too soon my second hour is over. We head back toward the yard and Jack gets off to throw a switch by hand. I then back the engine slowly toward our starting point. Jack then tells me to stop five feet short of another locomotive parked on the yard track. FIVE FEET???

Jack says "Go ahead, you can do it". And so I did. What a thrill. These last two hours will get entered in my log of "life's most memorable moments."

We head to the gift shop and I settle up for the rental. Jack presents me with a certificate which witnesses the fact that I ran both locomotives. He heads off to find his next "student" and I head off to lunch.

I take Jack's recommendation and head for the Station Café. It's a short drive from the Museum and filled with locals. With no tables immediately available, I'm invited by a local gent to join him at his table for two. Gee, they're friendly here.

We have a nice chat about the area and come away with the knowledge that the town's one stop light was installed just two weeks ago.

After lunch I drive back to the Museum to tour the grounds. The Museum is owned and operated by the Feather River Rail Society. The Society was formed in 1983 to preserve the history of the Western Pacific. A donation of equipment and the Locomotive Facility by the Union Pacific got things started.

Today, the collection includes more than 30 locomotives and 80 plus pieces of rolling stock. Much of the equipment is operational and a few of the locomotives have been repainted and are in like-new exterior condition.

This is a "hands on" facility and visitors are encouraged to climb in, on and about the equipment. I'll have to admit it's a lot of fun to poke around in locomotive cabs, catwalks and engine rooms.

I spend a couple of hours touring the Museum's equipment. At mid-afternoon, I decide to call it a day and head back to Reno.

Friday, July 9, 2004
- 7:15 a.m. Today is a long day of travel home. I'm booked on Southwest flight # 2000, a two-stop, direct flight back to BWI this afternoon. I go down to Mel's Diner for a big breakfast. After catching the TV news, I check out and head for the airport.

I'm way early for the flight and get an "A" boarding pass when I check in. I stock up on newspapers and snacks for the long flight and head out to the gate.

Flight 2000 is operating with a 737-3A4 today (N676SW). As I'm

in for a long trip, I stand at the front of the "A" boarding line to snatch a prime seat. My strategy works, and I'm first to board. I grab an aisle seat in the exit row. All set for the 6 plus hours I'll spend on board. On two of the three legs, the seat next to me will be empty.

We push back a couple of minutes late at 1:28 p.m. and are quickly airborne and headed east. After stops in Salt Lake City and St. Louis, we touch down on BWI's runway 33L at 11:07 p.m. and are parked at the gate by 11:11 p.m., ending a great trip.

The Portola Railroad Museum is a top-notch facility and a great place to visit. The Run-A-Locomotive program is offered from mid-March through mid-November. Reservations (530-832-4532) are not required but are highly recommended to avoid disappointment.

Museum grounds are open from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The Museum is closed during the winter months. Reno is the closest big city and offers a wide selection of accommodations, many with casinos. TT



Western Pacific F-7 #921, built by EMD, now resides at the Portola Railroad Museum - July 8th, 2004. Photo by: Mike Martin.