



Vol. 14, Issue 1

www.southernoregonlivesteamers.com

January 2014

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There are no minutes to report this month

Each year in December our monthly meeting always falls close to Christmas, therefore we do not schedule a meeting that month. This issue will have more news and photos.

POLAR EXPRESS (BABY, IT'S COLD OUTSIDE!) – As I start typing this newsletter I'll try to tell the complete story about our first ever event running trains at night at the Medford Railroad Park. This special event would have never occurred if the Medford Rogue Rotary hadn't approached our club with their dream of having a "Polar Express" event where families could enjoy the fun of train rides at night with the spirit of the Christmas season around them.

Once we gave our commitment to operate the trains, and the Rotary committed to handle and provide everything else, it was time to mobilize. From the beginning we knew it was going to be very cold, and perhaps we'd see a little snow. We saw snow!!!

During the evening of Dec.05 it began to snow, and it snowed all night. Small amounts of snow in the Rogue Valley is not unknown, but this time the 3 to 5 inches of snow fell at the beginning of a long stretch of temperatures in the teens and low twenties. It was not going to melt away in the usual one to three days.

My plan as Track Superintendent was to align our tracks where necessary during the week before the event, however not only was there a lot of snow to deal with, the rails and ties were frozen solid in the ground. I had to pray the track was as in good a shape as it was during our last run day in October.

I went to the Park on Dec. 07 to clear the snow off the mainline. I thought it would be fun to clear it with a heavy locomotive. It wasn't fun at all. Without a plow the snow simply piled up on the footboards, and the wheels slipped after only a few feet of travel. Time to go to Plan "B". Doing what I've done before I walked the tracks and pushed the snow away using a 18" wide push broom. The powder snow pushed away easily and it took only thirty minutes to complete.

Howard Wise, a good friend of mine at Pacific Locomotive Association, said to me, why don't you ask the Rotary Club to provide you a rotary plow. Then you'd have a Rotary rotary."

Two days before the event an advance party of Rotary volunteers arrived with portable generators, portable light towers, tables, and thirty inflatable Christmas displays that light up.

Rules of the Month

Rule 2-13: When visibility is limited, and after sunset, all trains shall have a lighted (white) headlight showing to the front of the engine and a marker on the last car showing red to the rear of the train.

Rule 2-15: Engine whistle signals may be used by the engineer whenever practical to give, ask for, or acknowledge information about train movement.

Rule 2-16: The Club does not recommend to double-heading locomotives while pulling the general public.

Rule-23" **All** night run operations are to cease at 10:00pm. (Operations are defined as any and all train operations, use of air compressors, engine blow downs, etc.)

NEXT SOLS MEETING

Our next meeting will be on Monday, January 27th at 7:15 P.M. inside the model railroad clubhouse. Come along and join your friends there.

This being the first time we'd be operating public trains at night, we tried to plan for every scenario. During a previous visit by event planners they mapped out the locations they wanted for the light displays. Around the mainline they planted seven portable generators to power the blow-up Christmas light displays. This was followed with two light towers: one to light the path between the front gate and our station; the other tower to provide more light for the parking lot and the park gazebo in front. Another crew unpacked the thirty light displays and tested them all during daylight. One had a leak, and one generator didn't provide enough air pressure. These were replaced the next day and successfully tested. Another crew began stringing LED lights all around the beanery and station.



Here is how part of our layout looked 24 hours after the snowstorm on Dec. 7, 2013.



While this was going on I suspected the weeks of cold weather could have drained much of the energy from our locomotive batteries. The day before I placed battery chargers on club locomotive No. 255 and my locomotive. The next day I put the chargers on club locomotive SP8192 and my golf cart, figuring we'd need the cart to move the portable generators, which we did. Club locomotive No. 256's batteries were fully charged from me using it to test the tracks for the seven days before the event.

The next day a crew responsible for selling coffee, hot chocolate and popcorn brought their equipment and supplies to our beanery. We tested their equipment against our limited power supply until we found the right combo that wouldn't overload and trip circuit breakers.

All seemed to be in order when I discovered the water to the beanery was shut off. Bowing to the wishes of the Rotary Club, the Parks Department agreed to turn the water back on for the event so the public restrooms would be available. However, one morning the overnight temperature dropped to zero and two pipes broke in the restroom, as well as a few inside the park. They had shut off everything, but didn't blow out the water in the pipe with air pressure. The standing water simply froze solid. In their rush to repair the damage they shut off the water to the beanery and our private restroom, which is on a separate system and not subject to freezing. Elvin called the Parks Department and they turned the water back on to our beanery and restroom. The Rotary now had water for beverages and cleanup.

Friday morning a large contingent of Rotary volunteers came to set up the area outside the gate. They set up the ticket tables, additional light displays, the area for Santa to sit and photo equipment to record the children sitting on his lap. Additional Christmas props were also added. At the same time Bruce Kelly and I spent about 90 minutes brushing snow banks away from where it was too close to our tracks. We didn't want people riding the trains to stick their feet out and kick the snow... especially in the dark.

One area our club also helped in was the parking situation. I told the organizers that if they intended to use the Fire District Training Center’s lot next door, they would first need to get written permission. Our club has permission to use the lot for our Sunday “Run Days”, but this was beyond our agreement. They soon reached an agreement with the Fire Department, but we knew the Rotary Club wouldn’t have a clue on how busy it quickly could get. Enter SOLS members E. Don Pettit and Elvin. On Friday afternoon the two men set up the orange parking cones and instructed the rotary parking volunteers on how we do it.

Around 3:00 pm some of our SOLS members began to arrive. They brought out the five longest trains, plus Art Turner and Jerry Hellinga brought over their two trains. As more members began to arrive Dale Butler began to figure how many people he had at his disposal. It was suggested that the Rotary would provide a person to collect the tickets as they came through of loading area, but that didn’t happen, causing us to collect the tickets.

As the time for opening the ticket gate approached we had enough engineers and conductors for the seven trains, but no extra people as relief crews. However, Dave Herzog was on hand to take photos and give train crews quick breaks. George Schroeder and Dale would man the loading gate, with each train crew assisting them in directing the public where to sit.

It was pretty cold out, with the temperature around 22 degrees. I am very proud of how well prepared our volunteers were. Each member had fully charged walkie-talkie radios and were dressed well for the cold weather. The Rotary Club had a big crock pot of hot chili, cornbread and coffee available for us at the beanery. I had coffee, hot chocolate and bread available in our Pump House. However, we were so busy that very few of us were able to enjoy the food and hot drinks.

THE FLOODGATES OPEN By the time the front gates opened at 5:00 pm, the lower parking lot was already full, and cars were flooding into the Fire District lot. Within twenty minutes the line of people waiting at the station to board our trains had backed up all the way the front gate. We simply could not move the trains fast enough. The ticket tables would allow ticket holders inside as the line slowly moved to the station. By 6:00 p.m. the line of people just waiting to reach the ticket tables and Santa Claus was backed up to Table Rock Road. People told us they waited over two hours just to reach the ticket tables, and then another 90 minutes to take the 12-minute train ride! We were very pleased that most people didn’t mind as they knew this was the first time for this special event. *[All of the following photos taken by Dave Herzog.]*

Table Rock Road just after the park opened.



From the upper parking lot (and beyond) to the gate.



An hour after opening the line of people waiting in line was backed up to Table Rock Road.



Once inside the gate, a second line begins for the 90 minute wait to ride one of our trains..



After a little over an hour the event organizer asked Dale if we could add more trains. Dale told him "This is it! We don't have any more people."

It was at this point that Dale decided it was time to try loading two trains at a time. For several years we've discussed loading more than one train at a time during extremely busy Run Days, but we never had the opportunity to try it. Well desperate times call for desperate measures.

Dale told George he would open the chain at the other end and load people from the middle gate in front of the beanery, while George loaded from our regular gate. After a few minutes of fumbling around the idea worked. The loading of two trains at a time reduced the usual loading of two trains by around 50 per cent. Even though we could not see an immediate reduction in the waiting lines, we knew train activity was faster and more efficient.



Loading the trains was one thing. Getting the passengers to cooperate was another. For many people this was their first visit to our park. Just as the Stationmasters announced "All Aboard", some passengers got off long enough just so they could take a few more pictures of family members sitting on the train. Others got off to zip up their jackets, put on gloves, or take out their cameras.

Another factor to consider is we were running the trains slower than usual on account of the weather and visibility after dark. What normally would take 8-9 minutes to ride our mainline, now took about 12 minutes. This would have been an excellent opportunity to add another train, if only we had the crew to do it.



The ticket tables closed at 8:15 pm and organizers said that almost everyone who wanted to ride the trains got to do so. I believe that every train crew going over the Rollie Wilburn trestle looked over at the parking lots to see if we were catching up. We were, but it was slow going. By around 8:30 we began to see empty parking spaces. The last train departed the station at 9:15 pm. Outside, the last child visiting Santa ended around 9:30 pm.

There were some things that were beyond our control that affected the crowds. The City had hoped to repair the public restroom plumbing before the first evening. They told the Rotary they couldn't, but they would order six portapottys for in time delivery. Unfortunately there was miscommunications and only two portapottys arrived. The lack of adequate public restrooms was the biggest complaint.



The good news is The City was able to repair the broken pipes in time to open the public restrooms for the Saturday night run.

THE SECOND DAY Excited by the large turnout the night before, we needed to rethink how we might make the second day better than the first. The Rotary organizer asked Dale if they could open the ticket gate at 4:00 pm and if we could start running trains right away. Dale politely informed them that this would be longer than we agreed upon, and it could rub our volunteers the wrong way. We did tell them they could open the gate around 4:30 and let ticket holders assemble at our station, thereby moving the line outside early, but we would not start running trains until we were ready. We ran the first train around 4:50 p.m.

Dale told us that as a result of loading two trains simultaneously the night before, we would do the same again, but start doing it from the beginning. It was a good decision. Although the lines backed up again, they did not reach the lengths of the previous night. Additionally, the parking crew situation improved a lot. Even though Elvin and E. Don told them how we control the parking, the people in charge the night before did it their way... and it didn't work. After more consultation by us again, the second night went very smoothly.



Here are a few final thoughts about the Polar Express event. The turnout was overwhelming. For years people of asked why we don't run trains at night during the Christmas season. The interest was there. The turnout was phenomenal. Although I don't have the exact numbers at this time, the two groups agree it was over 5,000 riders for the two evenings.

The concession sales for the Rotary blew them away. They couldn't make popcorn fast enough with their machine so they used our machine too. Coffee and hot chocolate was made by the gallon with four large coffee makers. A lot of drinks and popcorn were consumed while waiting in line to ride the trains. Taking pictures with Santa was a bigger success than they thought.

As for the Live Steamers, even though it was very cold, we all had a great time. I think most of us got cold toes, but the rest of us stayed warm. After all it wasn't supposed to snow so hard and be so cold at this time of year. Our only complaint was we could have used two or three more volunteers to run another train and give breaks.

My concern for the tracks proved unfounded. There were a few minor derailments, but nothing that held up train movements for more than a few minutes. There were a few places where the rails were tilted a bit from the frozen ballast, but not enough to affect operations.

I should mention a couple of incidents that occurred near the end of the second night. It was colder than the night before. Around 7:30 in the evening the fog dropped lower and the colder temperatures turned the fog into frozen ice. I think my train was the first to feel the slippery rails going up the long grade towards Bear Hollow. My wheels slipped so much that I doubt I was going over one mph when I reached the summit. Over the radio I warned following trains of the track conditions.

When I was ready for my next passenger load I instructed George to put one less person per car on my train in an attempt to make the train lighter for the run up the hill. As George was ready to load I ran over to get a gas can to top off my fuel tank after my next trip. When I got back to my train the man sitting on the seat behind me in my riding car weighed at least 275 pounds, with his little boy sitting on the bottom of my car in front of him. Three out of the four people on the next car were three ladies each weighing 300+ pounds! Yipe! George loaded few fewer people on my train, but I had just as much tonnage. My trip up the hill was just as eventful as the first. Luckily for me my next load had a lot of little children.

Another unfortunate turn of events for me is I wasn't following right behind a train in front of me, while everyone else was. People like Art Turner was benefiting from following a train ahead of them that had cleared the ice off the rails. I lucked out on my next trip as I followed Jerry's train around the layout. Let his train slip for a change. After about thirty minutes the fog lifted and the slippery rail problem disappeared.

On what turned out to be the next-to-last run for Jerry's train, his locomotive derailed after running over some debris on the pedestrian crossing. I was the next train behind him and soon the other trains stopped until Jerry's train was re-railed. While that was going on we allowed the long line of pedestrians to safely walk around the rear of Jerry's train to get to the other side. Fortunately for us there were only about 100 more people waiting at the station to take their train rides.

When Jerry arrived at the station I expected him to take his train out of service. After all, three of the six other trains could easily carry the remaining passengers, but Jerry pulled in for another load. I followed Jerry out of the station until his locomotive ran out of fuel next to the motorcar-handcar station near the garden railroad. He called out for a gas can, to which Loren Snyder got one and immediately walked over to my train thinking it was me who ran out of fuel, which I often do. I smiled and pointed to Jerry's train and said "Not me this time, you smuck!" Ah, it felt good not to be the problem this time. As it was the last train finished its run around 9:25 pm. The activities outside the gate still had a few minutes to go before they quit.

Although we tried to plan for everything, we suspected the frozen and wet ballast would mess up our signals and crossing gates, which they did to varying degrees. Skip Foley and Dennis Brigante made a temporary hookup so one of the Rotary Club's volunteers could push a button to lower the gate and turn the lights and bells on. It actually was a blessing in disguise as having a person on each side protecting the crossing, prevented people waiting in line from standing on the tracks. All our train crews were instructed to sound their horns freely and pass the crossing slower than normal. It went without a hitch.

On Sunday, the 15th the Rotary Club came back to pick up everything. They did an outstanding job of cleaning up the park. We enjoyed working with them. Now that we've done this once, the next time will be a whole lot easier... and just as much fun.



We now know what not to do, such as turning off the water without emptying the lines first. We will bring in more lighting for the darker areas of our layout. We will run at least one more train and have enough people for giving breaks.

What an experience! It really was a lot of fun!



HOT HOLLY'S PARTY A HIT! An annual tradition is having our Christmas Potluck Dinner at Holly & Nadine Snyder's home in Medford. Originally scheduled to be held Dec 14th, it was pushed back a week on account of the Polar Express event. The change was a blessing as the snow and ice would have made getting to Holly's difficult.

This year Holly and Nadine asked if the party could begin at 5:30 pm, a little earlier than before. We agreed and it worked out better, again on account of the winter weather conditions. It was still so cold that Holly's pool was frozen over enough for a person to walk on it.

I would guess there were 30-35 people in attendance. Each person or couple was asked to bring a food item to share, and bring them they did. There was so much good food that a separate dessert table had to be set up in another room. Among the traditional dishes on hand were Art Turner's "homemade" chili. This year Art toned it down from "five alarm" to "three alarm" chili. Art's "five alarm" can be used to keep ice from forming on airport runways. Laura Turner made homemade pumpkin bread and cookies.



A few of us sampled a few new items of which we did not know what they were. Our answers were the same "I don't know what it was, but it was good." A favorite for many of us is Laura Turner's deviled eggs. She made about five dozen of them.

When Rocky showed up we couldn't help but notice the bodacious green tie he was wearing. He said his wife Billie put it on him and then he didn't move for over thirty minutes because he thought she had tied him to a hitching post.

Billie and Rocky... and his green tie.



[From left] Dale, Pat, Marjorie, and Lee.



All during the evening Holly's computer and television was showing the hundred or so photos Dave Herzog took during the Polar Express event held a week earlier. Many of those photos are in this newsletter. I wish I had more space to show them all.



The party is just beginning. Above the fireplace Dave Herzog's photos are being shown. Meanwhile John and Marcia Polacek are enjoying hearing all the Polar Express "war stories" being told that evening.

A new feature this year was playing "Train Bingo". Holly set up a loop of track with a locomotive pulling enough cars to where it nearly touched the front of the locomotive. Each car had a bingo letter and number on it. Each player had a bingo card. When Holly stopped the train at random, whatever car was in front of you was the number you looked to see if it was on your card. When you got a bingo, Holly gave the winner a prize. Loren Snyder showed his "Scrooge" personality when he accused his brother of rigging the game against him. Bah! Humbug!!!

We want to thank Holly and Nadine for again offering to host our annual dinner at their lovely home. It was a great way to enjoy fellowship with friends and enjoy the spirit of Christmas.



[From left] Jerry Cooper, Elvin Sinfield, Mike Butler, Marcia Polacek, and John Polacek.



This is Holly's "Train Bingo" game played on the dining room table. It's a fun game, except to Loren.

GET WELL CARDS Two of our members have run into a bit of bad luck lately. Rick Colclasure suffered a mild heart attack in November, so he was sent for rehab at the V.A. Domiciliary in White City. Rick quickly healed and was looking forward to being part of the train crews for the Polar Express event. When I called Rick to tell him I was on my way to pick him up he told me he had recently slipped on sidewalk ice at the Dom and broke his upper right arm. [I visited Rick at the V.A. infirmary on Dec. 22 and handed him a gift and the Christmas card all of us signed the night before at Holly's party. It boosted his spirits knowing his SOLS friends have not forgotten him.

Charlie Nix also was going to be part of the Polar Express train crews until he had to bow out the day before. His energy had been low for a long time, and he thought his throat was getting an infection. He went to the V.A. Dom and learned he has a little cancer inside his mouth. A further examination up in Portland confirmed the findings. Fortunately it is a very small cancerous area that should be successfully treated. Please keep these boys in your prayers. They've always been there for the club. If you have a card or gift for either Rick or Charlie, you can get it to me (Tony Johnson) and I'll make sure they get it.