

Free Edition



Monte Holm's train heads home

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MOSES LAKE - After a decades long visit to Moses Lake, a steam engine once owned by local legend Monte Holm is headed back home.

Locomotive 557 moved slowly across West Broadway Avenue Thursday afternoon, the start of a long journey that ends in Anchorage, Alaska, where it will be restored.

Early next week the 160,000 pound engine will make it's way from private property in Moses Lake to Seattle, where it will be rolled onto a barge for the six day trip north to Whittier, Alaska. There it will be off-loaded to ride the rails 70 miles northwest to Anchorage.

The locomotive was built in 1944 and ended it's service in 1959 as Alaska's last operating steam engine. Like others of its ilk, the engine was destined for the scrap yard when Holm picked it up from an Everett steel dealer in the mid 1960s.

"There would be no homeward bound if he hadn't done that," says Steve Rimple, who joined other family members to watch what was his grandfather's engine roll away. "I know he's excited about this. If he were here today, he would be ecstatic about everything that's happening."

Rimple's 17-year-old son Jacob, who's middle name is Monrad after his great-grandfather, was able to take a short ride in the cab.

"It was really great," he says. "It's sad to see it go, but it's better it goes to Alaska to be restored and used than to rust out here."

Locomotive 557 was donated to the Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARC) by the Jansen family, which in 2008 bought the engine for a moderate sum, according to Vic Jansen, who was a close personal friend of Monte Holm for about 30 years.

The engine originally changed hands to facilitate its journey north, says Jansen, who is the director of Lynden Incorporated, a land, sea and air transport company, which for the past 12 years has moved as many as 50 rail cars every week to Alaska on 420-foot barges.

Locomotive 557 will be onboard the next delivery, and Jansen says he's proud to be a part of returning it to the place of its origin.

"If it was just going up there to sit as a static, I would just as soon see it stay where it is," he says. "The real story of this move is that it's going up there to be in operation again, to make people happy."

There are several prerequisites to gifting the engine to ARC, Jansen says, including that it must be restored and operating within eight years of delivery and that Holm's descendants get to ride it for free forever - stipulations both he and Holm's family agree are in keeping with his wishes.

"Monte made it real plain that his grandsons could do whatever they wanted with that engine, but he always got a gleam in his eye when he talked about seeing it operate up in Alaska again," Jansen says. "I think this is exactly what Monte would have wanted."

Rimple says when Monte was alive, the train was one of his grandfather's most prized possessions.

"While he was a hobo, he got kicked off of so many trains he always thought, 'One day I'm going to own my own so I can't get kicked off,'" says Rimple.

Holm rode the rails for about six years in his youth and railroads remained a big part of the man's life into his later years. After he began running a successful Moses Lake scrap yard in the 1950s, Holm had the means to procure a small assortment of railroad-related items, including a one-third scale Burlington Northern locomotive, freight car and caboose.

All were housed in and around his House of Poverty Museum, a vast collection of antiques gleaned from his scrap yard and on display for free to anyone who wanted a peek.

Rimple says the main attraction was always the man himself.

"He was always the coolest part of the museum," he says. "You could have all kinds of antiques in there but it didn't mean anything unless you had him there showing you through it. He was the museum."

Just outside the museum entrance, Holm built his own private railroad - a 210-foot piece of track he dubbed the "Mon-Road." About 60 people were on the railroad committee - all Holm's friends, each bearing a title - and each was listed on a Mon-Rail Railroad letterhead he had made up.

"He had a lot of fun with it," Rimple says. "He had a lot of fun with everything he did."

For years after Holm purchased the steam engine, he would sometimes run it through town, pulling scores of locals in a private rail car said to be a favorite of past Presidents Harry Truman and Woodrow Wilson. He brought it out to the Grant County Fair a few times in the 1960s and out to the Larson Air Force base dozens of times, Rimple says.

"A lot of people in town here, when they were kids they'd jump on the train and take off. He'd have a lot of fun with that," he says. "That's back when you could get away with it. Now you can't even get on that thing without having an inspection."

In the mid-1970s liability insurance became so expensive Holm couldn't afford to fire up the engine any longer, and from then on it remained parked on Holm's section of track.

Rimple says when he was about 3 years old he and his older brother, Larry, sat on their grandfather's lap for one of the engine's final chugs through Moses Lake, one of hundreds of fond memories he has of the man.

"I guess I always knew from a young age that my grandpa was something special," he says. "We'd go places and I remember everybody talking to him and wanting to talk to him. My grandfather was always public property and we could never get into the entrance to a store without two or three people coming up to him, waiting in line."

Today, Rimple carries with him the dime his grandfather had on him in 1938 when he walked into Everett with just a handful of possessions to his name. Rimple says he started carrying the memento as a sort of good luck piece, and as a way to remember his grandfather's legacy of building his own style of empire from such humble beginnings.

"He was the coolest guy alive and I miss him every day, every second," he says. "Growing up with him, it was incredible."

While Locomotive 557 never lost its luster for Holm, the times changed around it. Vandalism was always a concern - Holm erected a barb-topped fence around the engine in 1976 - but Rimple says it really became a problem after his death in 2006. Lately fresh damage is found every few weeks after people break in to the engine or the train cars trailing behind it, leaving behind everything from shattered windows to broken valves, he says.

Finding a safer place for his trophy possession is something Holm himself apparently had in mind a few days before he passed on. Rimple says his grandfather sat his family down and handed out orders for what was to be done. Holm saw other locomotives in other towns falling into slow disrepair through neglect and vandalism, including 557's twin, which has been tarnished beyond measure by more than 40 years in an Anchorage public park, Rimple says.

"I think he saw that and never wanted that to happen here," he says.

The cost of restoring the engine could reach as high as \$500,000 - mainly for cosmetic repairs - according to Tim Sullivan, the company's manager of external affairs, but he said the price tag is well worth bringing a piece of history back to the place of its origin.

After it's in running order, Sullivan says there are several options for what will be done with the Locomotive 557, including pulling a few cars between Anchorage and Portage during the tourism season.

"We think it presents an opportunity for folks who are interested in stepping back in time," he says. "It's great to have it coming home. It's a real legacy to be enjoyed by all Alaskans."

As a way to honor Holm's legacy, a plaque will be affixed to the engine, a tribute to the man who saved it from the salvage heap.

"You can preserve history by letting something sit forever and ever, but there wouldn't have been a story unless that train was going to be restored," Rimple says. "The fact that the Alaska Railroad Company is willing to restore this and let it live again is truly amazing, it's the preservation of history. This right there is what (Monte Holm) would want."

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