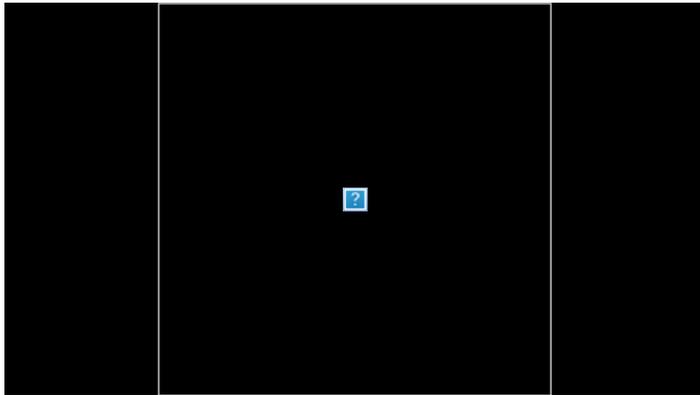


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Workers Rebuild WWII-Era Steam Locomotive

Fundraising effort underway to complete project



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By Photojournalist John Thain
 Story Created: May 15, 2013 at 8:52 AM AKDT
 (Story Updated: May 15, 2013 at 3:51 PM AKDT)

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ANCHORAGE - Jeff DeBroeck pulled the air filter out of the engine of the large spreader sitting atop of the rail. "It provides hydraulic power to the spreader." Jeff explained. "Without it, it don't work."

DeBroeck has been working on trains and train equipment since he was just a boy. "I had started modeling the Alaska Railroad when I was a kid," he said as he unscrewed an oil filter. "Built models of their equipment."

He's worked on every piece of rail equipment imaginable. "Learned how to fire my first steam engine at age 16," he said. It's a passion that never left him, which is why twice a week, when his shift ends here, you'll soon find him at a shop in Wasilla,

leading a crew of volunteers working to restore an Alaskan locomotive from a bygone era.

"I work on the railroad for a living, I work on this for the fun." DeBroeck said from underneath the locomotive. "This is a piece of history."

The World War II-era steam locomotive worked the rails here in Alaska until 1960. It had been rusting away in Washington until last year, when it was donated to the Alaska Railroad, then put in the care of the 557 Engine Restoration Company. For board president Pat Durand, seeing it take shape is a dream come true.

"I'm the same age as the locomotive is: 70." Pat said. "I'm gonna live long enough to see it in steam, that's my goal. Without Jeff and the crew, we'd be standing here flat footed."

For them, it's a goal worth getting dirty for.

"Kids growing up today, they don't know what a steam engine is until they experience it," DeBroeck said. "Steam locomotives, when they are sitting cold like this, they are just a hunk of iron, but when they got a

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fire in them and steam, they are a totally different animal it's like they have a life of their own."

But cracks in the steel are keeping the engine cold. The boiler will need to be rebuilt, and that will cost money. So a [massive fundraising effort](#) is underway.

DeBroeck was distracted for a moment when a freight train drove by just yards from the shop. He walked outside to watch it rumble along the rail. "It's been 13 years now since I've been in the cab of a steam engine, and I'm anxious to get back behind the firing valve." He says. "It'll be fun -- I'll be complete."

The group is on an "aggressive" schedule with hopes of completing the train by 2015.

The plan is to run steam-powered passenger service from Anchorage to Portage and Girdwood during the summer. But one step at a time -- right now Durand says they need about \$75,000 in donations to rebuild that boiler. Ultimately, the entire project could cost a million dollars. The Rasmuson Foundation has pledged \$350,000 to match private donations of \$25 or more.

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old 557 said on Thursday, May 16 at 6:47 AM

rusting away? the 557 was sold for scrap by the alaska railroad. the old junk man in Washington state saved it so it could be restored today.

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Bob Bean said on Wednesday, May 15 at 3:29 PM

Only wish I could be in Alaska to help with the 557. Now retired from CSX Railroad and loved every moment of my RR career. Know your having the time of your life!

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