

Holm's train restored

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WASILLA, ALASKA - Monte Holm's old steam whistle is about to blow again.

If the current owner of the engine, Engine 557 Restoration Company, has its way, that sound will be heard very soon.

The 557 has embarked on an extensive overhaul that will see it once again running under its own power to the delight of those in both Alaska and the Columbia Basin.

The story of the 557 goes back to World War II. The US Army Transportation Corp commissioned a total of 2,120 steam locomotives between 1942 and 1945, the biggest single class of steamers ever built in the United States.

Their main use was for operations overseas and, indeed, most saw service on every continent, save for Australia and Antarctica.

However, 12 were diverted to Alaska as military preparations for the war were being made, as there was an acute power shortage. USATC engine serial number 3523 became the Alaska Railroad 557 when she arrived in December of 1944. Various

modifications were made for service there, including a snow plow and provision for heating the cab.

All served their owner well, but the era of diesel locomotives was dawning, and operations in Alaska were not immune to the newfangled machines. As a result, the steam engines were stored at various places along the railroad, just in case there might be a surge in traffic that the new growlers could not completely handle. The 557 was stored in the Whittier engine house in August of 1957. Its last bit of service was hauling passengers at the 1960 Alaska State Fair in Palmer.

In June of 1962, the Tanana River flooded at Nenana and 557 was sent north to shuttle trains through water so high it was lapping at the fire box. The diesel road power would wait on high ground on both ends while 557 did the work. The diesels would short out their motors driving the wheels in an inch or two of water. Alas, once this service was complete, there was not much left for the 557 to do.

The 557 was sold for scrap in 1965 to an Everett scrap yard. Part of the process involved changing out its tender for one from a much larger steamer before heading south to Washington. Monte Holm, a Moses Lake business owner who passed away in 2006, intervened in the fate of the engine, after he acquired it from that scrap yard.

While Holm's story is well known in town, it bears repeating that he was once a hobo during the Great Depression. "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 Steve Rimple, of Moses Lake, Holm's grandson.

For years after the purchase, the steamer would be run through Moses Lake, pulling happy friends and family in Holm's private rail car. His clout with a major share holder of the Milwaukee Road helped secure him permission to run on the local rails.

After the mid-1970s, the 557 wasn't run anymore, though it became a Moses Lake icon. Holm's "House of Poverty" museum became a town institution with the man himself as the main attraction. The 557 was his pride and joy.

Holm had the fate of the 557 on his mind near the end of his life.

While he had previously been approached by the Alaska Railroad to purchase the engine, he left its fate in the hands of his grandsons.

That fate eventually saw it purchased by the Jansen family, longtime friends of Holm.

Purchase of the steam engine was completed in 2008, though the change in ownership was not well known. Also not well known was when it was to be moved. That day arrived in December 2011, when a small crew prepared the 557 for the trip by removing its driving rods and placing them on an Alaska Railroad flatcar that had made its way from the 49th state in time for the big event.

The 557's condition was in such good shape that John Rimmasch, charged with overseeing the move of the engine to Wheeler, jokingly said, "I would have fired the locomotive up and run it to Wheeler. It would have done fine!"

A few days later, that Alaska Railroad flatcar received the 557 as its load. Being a smaller steam engine, it would not have any clearance restrictions sitting so high up on the car. After being inspected to make sure the chains were fitted properly and everything was tight and fastened down, the journey to Seattle began.

The railfan community had become aware of the move, and various sightings were posted on Internet fan sites as its trip was followed across the state, all the way to the barge slip in Seattle. There the 557 was wrapped in a protective cocoon to keep the sea weather out; the trip to Alaska would take about a week.

2012 marked the return of the 557 to home rails for the first time in 45 years.

After the removal of the cocoon, a special train of only the loaded flatcar and two Alaska Railroad diesel locomotives made their way to Anchorage for a welcome-home party. The guests included Weaver Franklin, who was once a regular engineer on the 557 before it left the state.

The locomotive is in near-running condition, and represents an opportunity to showcase a signpost of the past.

The Alaska Railroad is interested in using the 557 to pull a few refurbished railcars between Anchorage and Portage during the summer visitor season, perhaps as an excursion or dinner-train operation. This would be about a 48 mile round-trip on relatively level track.

But first, the locomotive must be restored. The railroad is coordinating with several non-profit foundations and numerous volunteers to begin raising funds for the 557's refurbishment.

The goal is to re-establish its full, classic appearance as well as bring it into compliance with today's passenger-rail regulatory requirements. A preliminary cost estimate for restoration is about \$750,000.

The Engine 557 Restoration Company was established to lead the actual restoration.

Company president, Pat Durand, said that over 900 volunteer hours have been logged since Aug. 17 in preparing the 557 for restoration.

Also noted by Durand is that it will be a much more modern engine when the rebuild is done. Major appliances will be updated as needed or to meet current requirements.

Of note is the bell. For years, Holm would have kids ring the bell when the 557 was in

Moses Lake. The bell is not original to the locomotive. While an original bell is available, it sounds horrible compared to the bell Holm supplied, says Durand.

A tender was also needed for the 557: this is the car behind the engine that carries the fuel and water. The tender in Moses Lake did not make the move, as it was built for a far older locomotive. A tender from another one of those first 12 Army locomotives was located at the Museum of Alaska Transportation and Industry and donated to the restoration project. It too will be returned to like-new conditions.

A \$350,000 matching grant from the Rasmuson Foundation will contribute about half of the restoration costs if the other half can be raised. Durand said donations to help in the effort are still being collected to that end.

Visit <http://www.alaskacf.org/givingopportunities/ourfunds/tabid/284/default.aspx> and then enter "Engine 557" in the search field.

Regular progress reports are being posted to special website dedicated to the 557, at <http://www.alaskarails.org/pix/former-loco/557/index.html>

As the 557 rolled out of Moses Lake to Alaska for restoration, Rimple said of his grandfather, "I know he's excited about this. If he were here today, he would be ecstatic about everything that's happening."