

SANTA CLAUS TRAIN '92

By Gordon Wollesen

In past years, The Portola Railroad Museum has operated a Santa Claus Train on one Saturday afternoon in the month of December. These past Santa Claus Trains have been fairly successful. Unfortunately, some families could not come and ride on that particular day.

The FRRS Board of Directors decided at the January 1992 meeting to run on two Saturdays in December of 1992 instead of one. The dates of December 5 and 12 were set and operations were scheduled for the afternoon of both days. In late October, member Skip Englert began pressing an idea that he came up with in 1991, of decorating with lights, a five car caboose train and running at night. The idea was accepted by the Board and planning was started. It was found that the City Christmas Tree, located in the City Park, had died and there would be no community Christmas Tree Lighting event. Skip approached the City Council and asked for and obtained permission to have the Christmas Tree Lighting event at the Railroad Museum. He also got financial support and a Christmas Tree from the City. Several local service organizations and businesses were approached to provide cookies and goodies to be served at the museum. This was going to be a community event.

The plans were formulated, reviewed, and the work was started. The caboose train was made up and spotted on three rail along side of the house. Lights were purchased and attached to the cabooses. Portable generators were borrowed and placed on the MoPac caboose, which was located in the center of the train and which became the power car. WP 512 (ALCO S-1) was also decorated with lights. The engine house was set up by placing a 25 foot Christmas Tree on track 1 (hung from the air hoist) near the center of the building. The tree was decorated with lights and handmade ornaments. These handmade ornaments were made by local elementary school children. By 3:30 PM on Saturday December 5, 1992, all was ready. The Beanery was set up to serve the goodies along with hot cider, hot chocolate, hot coffee and freshly popped popcorn. The Beanery crew was ready to go. The train was lit and the crew in place. Here is a note of interest: This was the first FRRS night passenger train operation.

At 5:30 PM the festivities began. The young and the young at heart began to arrive and immediately comments were heard praising the decorated train. At 5:45 PM the first train left for its trip around the balloon track and back. Santa toured the train and gave candy canes to the young and the young at heart prior to the train's departure. Santa remained in the engine house during each train ride because he could not go from car to car while the train was moving. At 7:00 PM the Portola Junior High School Band, under the direction of John Larrieu, provided Christmas music for those assembled in the engine house. At 7:30 PM the house lights were turned off and the official lighting of the community Christmas Tree took place. When the tree lights came on, there were happy exclamations and then there was tremendous applause.

There were an estimated 500 to 600 people that attended the event. The train made five trips during the evening. On trips 1, 2 and 3, there were close to 80 passengers on board each trip. On trip 4 there were over 125 passengers. Each caboose was filled to capacity. On trip 5, only 10 passengers rode the train; the festivities were finished and most of the people had left. A few die-hards stayed to pho-

tograph the train's last run.

A decision was made by Norm Holmes to operate the Santa Claus Train on the next Saturday afternoon (December 12, 1992) from 1:00 PM to 3:00 PM to accommodate those who could not come at night. Saturday afternoon came and went. The train and crew were ready to go on the advertised. The kitchen crew was in place with an assortment of goodies. Santa Claus was on hand to greet everyone. A total of 20 people came to ride and see Santa that afternoon. Three train trips were made. Trip 1 had 6 passengers, trip 2 had 8 and trip 3 had 6. It appeared that our night operations were the big draw.

As time for the night operations approached, everyone involved in the night event began setting up. The Christmas Tree was lit, the Beanery crew set up the goodies, Santa gathered his candy canes and the train crew checked out the train. The train electrician set the portable generators in place and began starting them and connecting train lights. As could be expected, "Mr. Murphy" slipped in the back gate. One generator on the MoPac power car took a dump. NO GO! The other two generators worked fine. What to do? A quick decision by the Electrical Department was made to run a new power cord from the portable generator on the engine to feed the car that the Bad Order generator was supposed to feed. OK! A new cord was strung to accomplish the job. Well, "Mr. Murphy" was still hanging around. The



*Santa Claus (Skip Englert) poses in the engine house in front of the Community Christmas Tree and engine 707.
Photo by Norm Holmes. Focus?*

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generator on the engine also took a dump. Now what to do! It was train time. We had about 40 passengers ready to board. A team of gasoline engine surgeons was frantically trying to revive the patient. No luck! A quick decision was made by the Train Supervisor to go without the first car and engine lights. The surgical team removed the ailing generator from the engine deck and took it into the "operating room" (shop) to perform emergency surgery. Just as Santa completed his tour of the train, our skilled surgeons came running out of the house carrying a running generator. "Hold the train!" The generator was put in position and the power cords were plugged in. Voila! Now we had a completely lighted Santa Claus Train. With lots of skill and luck, we beat "Old Man Murphy" and threw him off the property. Even though we got a late start, we made five trips. The same procedure that was used the previous Saturday night was used again. Trip 1 had about 40 passengers on board. Trips 2 and 3 had about 25 passengers. Trip 4 had about 10 passengers. Trip 5 had a massive 5 passengers. The main event was the previous Saturday night. This time we had an estimated 150 to 175 visitors. Not all rode the train, but everyone had a good time. Several passengers were "Second Timers" and several more came 50 or more miles over some very ICY roads to join the festivities.

After the train rides were done, the crew took the lighted train out to the Milward Switch area for a night photo session. Our ace photographers, Vic Neves, Wayne Monger, Norm Holmes and others, picked the best snow covered spot for their photos. After the photo session was finished, the train was returned to track 3 and everything was shut down and put to bed.

Was the whole evening a success? A definite yes! All those that came were smiling from ear to ear. The comments overheard and heard directly were all good. Even the

train crew and the Beanery gang had a good time.

It was hard and time consuming to put this event together. But it was well worth it. This was our only way of thanking the community for their support during the year. Here is another special note: Everything was free to everybody, including the goodies, warm drinks and train rides.

The "Thank You"

A very special "Thank You" goes to those individuals and organizations that provided financial assistance, decorations, goodies, music and physical assistance.

City of Portola: Financial assistance, lights and Christmas tree.

Portola Elementary School: Handmade tree ornaments.

Jim Beckwourth High School: Assistance with stringing lights on the train.

Portola Sr. High School: Assistance with stringing lights on the train and tree.

Portola Jr. High Band: Music.

Portola Rotary Club: Cookies.

Quick Stop: Cookies.

American Legion: Cookies.

Graeagle Lions Club: Cookies.

A local sorority group: Cookies.

Eastern Plumas Chamber of Commerce: Cookies.

Feather River Inn: Cream for coffee.

Jon Haman: Fresh popcorn.

A "Thank You" goes to the principals of all the schools involved for allowing the students to participate during school time.

And last but not least, a "Thank You" goes to the FRRS members who provided excellent help in putting this event together:

Skip Englert for the idea, getting the community support, obtaining the necessary supplies and helping to decorate the tree.

Norm Holmes for his overall help and support.

Thanks Norm!

Steve Habeck for ramrodding the caboose lights installation.

Gordon Wollesen for all of the necessary electrical work.

The Beanery crew: Sue Cooper, Edna Ede, Diane Wollesen, Linda Lippincott and Karena Wollesen.

The Gift Shop: Barbara Holmes.

Our Go-Fer and general overseer: Hap Manitt.

Tree decorators: Skip Englert, Rose Hersted, Sue Cooper, Hap Manitt and Bruce Cooper.

The train crew: Steve Habeck, Hank Stiles, Vic Neves, Ed Warren, Peter Langdon, Mardi Langdon, Vickie Krois, Clyde Lippincott, Rose Hersted, Will Wollesen, Karena Wollesen, Bob Lindley, Nick Tynan and Gordon Wollesen.

We thank Barbara Holmes for her hard and excellent work for making a new suit for Santa Claus.

And thanks go to the "Old Man of the North," Santa Claus himself. If anyone is omitted, sorry. A big thanks go to you, too.

Will we do it again in 1993? YOU BET! It might even be bigger and better. Tune in next December and find out!



Under a beautiful Portola sunset, the 1992 Santa Claus Train is shown ready to board passengers with all of the lights on. Photo by Norm Holmes.