

Our Run-A-Locomotive Program

— Jack Palmer

This article was originally published in The Timetable, the newsletter of the District of Columbia Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society and has been reprinted with permission.

I am one of our Charter Members and volunteers who never had any railroad experience prior to formation of the Feather River Rail Society. Consequently, I had much to learn—from the ground up.

The Run A Locomotive Program is very special in many ways because you are acting on your own and it becomes necessary for you to draw upon all the knowledge and training you have acquired through operating our various equipment in accordance with our General Code of Operating Rules.

Our Run A Locomotive Engineers are now required to participate in our training program especially designed for this function and are officially certified upon completion.

Bear in mind that those who come to run a locomotive are visitors and must be given every courtesy and respect during their visit because YOU represent our organization.

AS SAFETY IS OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE, EVERYONE MUST BE CONCERNED.

This is like “show and tell” as your instructions to the one operating the engine should be given briefly and clearly. You say and receive “Clear my side” BEFORE and move and using the bell. Always be alert and watch for anything unusual on or near the tracks and again say and receive “Switch Lined” as you approach a switch if it is safe to proceed. If not, call out “Bad Iron” and stop.

In most cases after two round trips the visitor becomes confident. At that point I begin explaining the benefits of becoming a volunteer or member.

I would like to share with you one visitor’s official report to his rail-oriented organization describing in detail his experience as a Run A Locomotive Engineer July 8, 2004:

As an active volunteer of the FRRS for more than 20 years, it was a pleasure for me to also be a Run A Locomotive Engineer and very rewarding to see others enjoy operating an engine and, in some cases, become one of us.

As an instructor in the Run A Locomotive program it was my personal goal to provide every client the utmost enjoyment and satisfaction from the experience.

There were many times I had five (the limit) people in the cab at the same time and everyone received the same training in the duties which our own engine crews are required to routinely perform.

If the first rental was scheduled for 10:00am it would be easy because at 8:00am I would get my radio and go to the WP608 which would be spotted east of the crossing entrance to our museum. I would perform a complete inspection of the engine. If two engines were to be used (combo) I would locate the WP921 and do a preliminary inspection of it (we used a lot of combos).

Shortly before my client was due to arrive, I would start the WP608, complete my inspection report and then wait at the entrance to greet my client, which sometimes was more than one person. (In this case I will be working with a group.)

Following a customary greeting and exchange of introductions while approaching the WP608 I would tell them: “Always remember to face the locomotive when going up or down – the same as using a ladder”. Once everyone was in the cab I would present a short orientation along these lines:

“Again, My name is Jack. “SAFETY” is the magic word and our main concern. This is an operating railroad museum so you should always expect

the unexpected. Look in both directions before crossing tracks and do not step ON the rail- Always OVER. We encourage you to walk around and look at our equipment and even climb up onto the engines if you wish, but we respectfully request your cooperation that you do everything safely. We want you to enjoy your visit and ask any of our volunteers for any assistance you may require.”

Now we are going to run this engine the same way our regular crews do, so one of you can be the Fireman. My plan is for each of you to take a turn at both positions before we run the road engine. This engine is smaller and has much better visibility and therefore easier to learn the basics. We will be coming to a road crossing and several switches which you must “call” and reply to each other as we near them so we know that is it safe to proceed. (I will assist you with that shortly.) I will be standing beside our engineer most of the time, particularly during the starting and stopping, and constantly oversee that we do everything SAFELY. You will each receive a certificate after operating both engines.

Okay Engineer and Fireman, are you ready? Let’s go! I will make the first move. Fireman, are we clear on your side? The answer is Clear and I repeat it back, set up everything and move to the end of the fence of the Parking Lot, explaining the controls as we went, and stop.

Okay Engineer, (depending on which way the engine is facing) put the Reverser in our direction of travel. Turn on the Headlight the same way. Now, you and the fireman look down outside your windows to see that no one is near or in front of the engine. If the area is clear Engineer, you call “Clear my side” and fireman, if the area is clear you repeat “Clear my side” so you both know it is safe to proceed.

Engineer, turn the Bell on and give two toots with the horn if we are going forward, or three toots if we are going back. Release the Brake and put the throttle in Run 1. You both must continue to look ahead of the engine from now on to see that our track remains clear.

When you see the road crossing, look to see that there are no people or vehicles near our track. As before, you both must look before and if clear, call “Crossing Clear”. Engineer, turn the bell on and give two Long, a short, and another long with the horn as a warning, and turn the bell off after clearing the crossing.

I then tell everyone that this is called a Balloon Track, which was used for turning engines around and that we soon approach a number of switches that would normally be locked in the proper position for continuous running. Nevertheless, we are required to call “Switch Lined” to each other to confirm it is safe to continue. (If there is silence I would say “I can’t hear you” and remind them to do so.) If the switch is not safe to proceed then you must say “Bad Iron” and stop. When they first see our sign “Malfunction Junction” THAT gets their attention and lots of laughs. If necessary I remind them to call the switches. I then tell them to look ahead for the switch with the number three and to come to a complete stop short of the switch. This is the end of our trip and to set up all the controls to go back to the place we started.

After the first complete round trip I suggest that two others run the engine, and so on, so that everyone has run the engine. While running I also inject the explanation for differences in our speed due to dips in the rail and to put the Throttle in Run 2 and back to Run 1 to compensate for the differences. Also, that we judge our speed by looking directly below the window to see how fast we are passing over the ground. Further, that we have a speed limit of 10mph on the property and that if they set the engine on the ground, they are required to set it back on the rails. (They all like that one.)

At the end of the hour we spot the engine where it was east of the crossing and walk to the WP921. If we are lucky, someone in our crew had it ready for us, so we all climb up and walk to the cab. I promptly tell them that NOW they can understand why they learned the basics before running a road engine.

I tell the Engineer, Okay, check out the controls

and we can go whenever you are ready. Fireman, watch your side and both of you call everything the same as you did with WP608. When you are ready I will release the handbrake. In this engine I find it much easier to stand behind the engineer so I can also see my side of the engine as necessary and monitoring the Fireman that he is alert and watching his side of the engine too. I watch to see that we are lined out and that they called the switch. If we were not lined out I would tell the Engineer to stop short of the switch and I would throw the switch so we could proceed and in that case would remove the Reverser, line us out, return the Reverser to the control stand, continue our same routine which now requires a minimum of instructions.

At the end of our second hour we return the WP921 to its original location and shut it down.

I then lead our group into the Gift Shop and prepare a certificate for each individual while our client settles his account. I again express my thanks for their cooperation and excuse myself and go to meet our next client. Some days we were fully scheduled with back-to-back rentals all day, including walk-ins.

On Operating weekends, we operated much the same way without interfering with the Caboose Train schedule which began at 11:00am until 4:00pm each half hour.

Within 5 minutes of departure time of the Caboose Train, the Conductor would call and ask me for our location and advise me of their departure. I would reply and tell him where we were and that we would be clear of the mainline. At that point we continued running until we reached and went through the 4 Rail switch and stopped in the pocket, clear of the mainline. (This last part of the move was easy when you had one of our members there to line the switch over to the mainline for you, after you were in the clear in the hole.)

I would then remove the Reverser, go down and back to the switch, throw the switch and call and tell the Conductor we were in the clear in the hole and the switch was lined for the mainline, and then I waited for the Caboose Train to go by and cleared the switch before I lined us out. Then I would return to the cab, put the Reverser in the control stand and tell our crew that it's now safe to run whenever you are ready.

That is the way most of us worked with out rentals for a number of years until we now have established our official training procedures for which out RAL Engineers must be certified.

As a footnote I wish to add that of all the people that ran the RAL with me as their instructor, I had but ONE elderly woman of a group at that time who REFUSED TO RUN THE ENGINE. SHE BROKE MY RECORD! (Yes she got her certificate.)

Ask the Editor

Q: I visited Portola briefly on July 16, and was intrigued with the many stored UP locomotives north and northeast of the museum. How about a list of them in Train Sheet (in numerical and/or "geographic" order), plus perhaps some of the following background:

- How long have they been there?
- Does the collection fluctuate over time? And, if so, how has it fluctuated?
- Any semi-official UP guess as to whether the units would remain in Portola during mid-winter '16-'17?

Submitted by Steve VanDenburgh

A: They started arriving for storage in April 2015, and we had two on display inside the museum for some time. The size of the collection (once at 28 units) has remained fairly stable, but has been slowly shrinking lately. Some of the GE's sitting in storage have already been retired and sold to Larry's Truck Electric back east for scrapping, and their numbers have been reused on newer GE's. Nobody is quite sure how long they will be sitting in Portola. I have not been able to come up with a comprehensive list of units in storage at Portola, or their order.