

Express train gives Fair 'head of steam': All aboard: Some hope the trip will generate more interest in a Front Range passenger rail line.

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Aug. 26--It hasn't been determined which of the carnival rides at this year's Colorado State Fair is the best, but there is no doubt the best ride to the Fair was the historic train that brought 320 passengers from Denver to Pueblo on Saturday.

The Colorado State Fair Express, powered by Steam Locomotive No. 844, arrived at the Pueblo Union Depot just before noon where hundreds of Puebloans and the Pride City Marching Band welcomed its arrival.

Even before the train arrived in Pueblo, U.S. Rep. John Salazar, D-Colo., one of the venture's strongest supporters, already was talking about next year.

"I'm hoping we can make this an annual event," Salazar said. "This is really, really neat," the congressman said as he rode in one of the train's four Vista Dome cars with his wife, Mary Lou.

"We need this train to run from Fort Collins to Pueblo," Salazar continued. He said Saturday's excursion was his first train ride from Denver to Pueblo, but implied that it might not be his last. He said he recently traveled across Taiwan on a high-speed train and would like to see a similar train connecting Colorado's Front Range cities.

"Rail is one of the most cost-effective ways to move goods and people," Salazar said.

John Esty, president of the Colorado Rail Passenger Association, also hopes the Colorado State Fair Express will fuel more discussion of a Front Range passenger rail system.

"I'm just really happy to see this happen today," Esty said. "It really shows people it's a possibility and that it can be done."

Esty said Union Pacific, the BNSF Railway and the Colorado Department of Transportation are in the second phase of a study to determine if a Front Range passenger rail system would be cost-effective.

"We'd have to get the coal trains off that track. CDOT is working on moving the coal trains to the Eastern Plains."

Frances Koncilja, who with the help of her brothers, Jim and Joe Koncilja, and other key players, coordinated the Express' run to the Fair, called Saturday's adventure a "fabulous success."

"We broke even and the Cheyenne train (Denver Post Cheyenne Frontier Express) always loses money," Frances Koncilja, a former State Fair commissioner, said. "That's what happens when you put a Democrat in charge of something."

Jim Koncilja credited Salazar with making the rail run to the State Fair possible.

"We had the idea two or three years ago, but I have to give credit to John's (Salazar) office. When he got appointed to the (House) transportation committee, it became a good idea for Union Pacific."

Bill Conway, a professor of history at the University of Colorado at Denver, put the Express excursion into perspective.

"We are making history today," he said. "This is only the second time since 1971 that a passenger train went from Denver to Pueblo. Passenger service to Pueblo ended in April 1971, and 2,000 people came to the station to see the train come in -- it was such an important part of the city's history."

Conway said the route between the two cities is part of one of the oldest migration corridors in North America. "For 10,000 years, people have moved along the same route we're on now."

The professor was not the only one talking about history aboard the Express. Dozens of rail history buffs, rail industry retirees and Union Pacific employees were scattered around the 11-passenger car train relating details and facts to other passengers during the four-hour ride to Pueblo.

Scott Turley, a full-time boilermaker/welder on No. 844, said the engine was built in 1944 -- the last steam locomotive built for Union Pacific.

"For the first year, it was coal-fired," Turley said. "In 1945, it was converted to oil because it was cleaner burning."

Turley credited "dumb luck" for getting the opportunity to work on the powerful engine. "I was called in as a welder and they liked me and I've been around ever since."

Dressed in oil-stained coveralls, Turley said he was along for the ride to do maintenance on the locomotive when it arrived in Pueblo. "We have to grease the side rods (connecting the wheels) every 100 miles."

Turley said the train uses 120 gallons of water and burns 12 gallons of fuel every mile.

Puebloan Keith Swerdfeger noted that No. 844 obviously has its own large following. "I can't believe how many people are lined up along the tracks waving as we go by," he said.

Ruben Pena, of the Transportation Technology Center Inc. east of Pueblo, said train fans are called "foamers."

"They foam at the mouth, they're so excited," Pena said with a laugh.

From his perspective at the test track, Pena said he thinks the U.S. is on the verge of a rail-passenger renaissance. While he doubts that rail travel will ever come back for long-distance travel, he expects to see more and more light-rail systems built between cities.

Art Gilmore, a retiree who started on the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad when he was 16, agrees that train travel could make a comeback. "I think it's going to happen -- energy is going to get more expensive, or prohibitive."

The Colorado State Fair Express is more than a passenger train -- it's more like a hotel on wheels. Each of the 11 passenger cars was distinctively different in atmosphere and function. There were several dining cars, three Vista Dome cars and even a car that was a rolling dance hall, complete with live music provided by the Hi-Beams, a five-piece band known for playing and singing train songs.

Another a capella group, the 17th Street All-Stars, roamed from car to car serenading passengers with such favorites as "Rockin' Robin" and "Up on the Roof."

The clicking of the wheels on the track and the sway of the cars seemed to stimulate memories in many of the passengers.

"I love trains," said Edward Roglinske, a retired Air Force master sergeant. "As a kid, we stole coal from the trains. It was during the Depression ... this is exciting just to ride a train."

Will the Colorado State Fair Express successfully lure more Denverites to Pueblo in the future? Steve Weil, a Denver native whose family business (Rockmount Ranch Wear) makes custom Western shirts, thinks that it might.

"This is my first time going to the State Fair," Weil said. "Nobody invited me to ride a train to the State Fair before; that's why I came. This train is a start to linking Pueblo and Denver."

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