

State Fair Express makes historic run: Organizers hope to make the train trip an annual Fair event.

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Aug. 26--Like a scene from yesteryear, the Colorado State Fair Express rolled into town Saturday with its mighty horn and puffs of smoke.

With it came about 320 passengers -- state and local dignitaries, Northern Coloradans, train enthusiasts -- and an excitement not felt during the Fair in sometime.

"I think it's a great moment for the State Fair, for Southern Colorado and for Colorado," said Vince Vigil, chairman of the Fair's board of authority. "It's monumental. This train has created a buzz, a lot of buzz, in the city and state, and we'll take all the buzz we can get."

As the first train ride in modern times from Denver to Pueblo destined mainly for the Fair, the trip preparation took months of teamwork from Pueblo lawyers Joe and Jim Koncilja, and their sister Frances Koncilja, a Denver lawyer; U.S. Rep. John Salazar, D-Colo.; and Chieftain Publisher Robert H. Rawlings. All but Joe Koncilja were among the train's passengers.

"It was an awesome ride and the scenery from the railroad is definitely a lot better than from the highway," said Salazar, who wrote a letter to Union Pacific asking for support of the special train run.

"If we can do this every year, which we're going to try to do, it'll let the whole state know about the State Fair."

The response from crowds along the way was strong, too.

"There were literally hundreds of people waiting for us at different spots to pass along the line," said Frances Koncilja, who was the excursion's main organizer.

The Express left Denver's Union Station at 8 a.m. It was expected to arrive at Pueblo's Union Depot at 12:15 p.m., but the toot of the famous Steam Locomotive No. 844 at 11:45 a.m.

surprised the welcoming crowd and the Pride City Marching Band gathered at the Pueblo Union Depot.

The Express made good time because, "we had very important people on board that cleared the tracks" of commercial freight trains, Koncilja said.

Fair Commissioner Catherine Ross welcomed folks to Pueblo as they deboarded.

"I live in Winter Park where we have trains every weekend," she said. "This is a feat to get a train in early."

The 11 vintage Union Pacific passenger cars featured a dance hall, food and beverages, two bands, and a small army of volunteers, the majority of whom were from Pueblo. Train tickets ranged between \$385 and \$435; Koncilja said the overall cost of the train was about \$150,000, all of which was raised privately.

Ronnie Autry, a staff sergeant in the U.S. Air Force, rode the train with his wife of two years, Ginger, and children, Julia Ramos, 6, and 15-month-old son, Jackson Autry.

This was the Aurora family's first train ride and trip to the Fair, and they thought Saturday's event would make a good family outing. Autry said they would ride the Express again.

"It was a great experience," Autry said. "Great customer service, lots of room -- (Jackson) was running all over the place. And it was a smooth ride. You don't think about a smooth ride when you think about trains."

Passengers toured the Union Avenue District, were transported to the Fair and departed for Denver at 6 p.m.

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