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Dreams of steam

Locomotive from China evokes U.S. rail history

By Jim Warren

It's been roughly 50 years since a steam locomotive operated on the railroad tracks around Lexington.

But that's about to change.

The R.J. Corman Railroad Co. has taken delivery on a Chinese-built steam locomotive, which it plans to park on a siding just off Cox Street, both as a piece of historic preservation and for actual use on as-yet-unspecified "special occasions." Company owner Rick Corman says he expects to fire up the engine and try it out on the track within a few weeks, as soon as it's inspected and spruced up from its long trip from China.

That day can't come soon enough for local rail fans, several of whom braved 30-degree weather Wednesday morning for a rare glimpse of a real, working steam locomotive. They watched and snapped pictures for more than two hours, as work crews from the Corman company carefully unloaded the 140-ton steam engine from two railroad flatcars that brought it and its tender car to Lexington over the weekend.

"You know it can't be a cost-efficient project, but I'm just glad that there is someone who has the resources to preserve something like this," said Lexington's Way Thompson, one of those watching the unloading. "I've always loved trains and steam engines."

Corman actually bought the engine from Railroad Development Corp., a Pittsburgh firm that had acquired three of the Chinese locomotives. Corman's engine traveled to the U.S. by ship, arrived in New Orleans last month, and then was shipped to Lexington by rail. Though built in China, the engine is based on a U.S. design from the 1920s.

Why buy a Chinese locomotive rather than an American one?

The few steam locomotives seen in this country today typically are museum pieces rescued from the scrap heap.



R.J. Corman employees Greg Feasel, left, and Harley Dalton removed steel tie-down cables from the wheels of a steam locomotive from China that will be parked on a siding just off Cox Street in downtown Lexington. It was brought in by rail from New Orleans.

Photo by Charles Bertram | Associated Press



The 140-ton locomotive was lifted from the flatcar and set on the tracks by two divisions of the R.J. Corman Derailment Division.

Photo by Charles Bertram | Associated Press

But Corman's engine is no antique. It was built in 1986 and was in use on Chinese railroads as recently as 2005, hauling coal and passengers. According to Corman, Chinese railroads continued to rely on steam power until recently, and only now are replacing their outmoded steam engines with modern diesels. So, steam engines now available in China are only a few years old and require little restoration, compared with old U.S. engines that must be rebuilt.

American railroads abandoned steam for diesel power decades ago. But for many rail fans, no diesel ever built can match the romance and appeal of a smoking, snorting steam locomotive.

The Bluegrass Railroad Museum in Versailles at one time owned a steam engine, but sold it because of high operating costs. Steam excursion trains pass through Lexington occasionally. But there is no steam locomotive regularly operating in Central Kentucky today.

Which is why the prospect of having one in Lexington is such a thrill for fans like Way Thompson -- and for Matt Schwerin, 30, who didn't know much about steam engines until lately, but has had to learn a lot about them very quickly. Schwerin, who works for the Corman Railroad Co., will be the person mainly responsible for operating the locomotive.

"It started in June when Mr. Corman told me, 'I need you to go to China,'" Schwerin said.

He ultimately made two trips to Jinzhou, China, to see the locomotive, watch it being refurbished, and learn to operate it. Schwerin's regular job at the Corman company is as manager of operation practices. And while he's a certified railroad engineer, he had never before run a steam engine.

Indeed, until recently, Schwerin had never even seen a steam locomotive except in a museum. At age 30, he was born too late to experience the steam era on American railroads. Now, he's getting a second chance to learn what it was like.

"I sort of put myself through a crash course on steam once Mr. Corman told me I'd be involved in this project," Schwerin said. "Operating a steam locomotive is a totally different experience from a diesel. I think it's really exciting that a for-profit railroad company would make this kind of investment and commitment."

Rick Corman said he sees the engine as a door into history.

"How do you know where you're going if you don't know where you've been?" he said. "We're going to maintain it and operate it some two or three times a year, just for special occasions."

"Steam engines aren't very efficient, but they do have character and people love them. I think it will be a nice addition to our company."