

June 5, 2012

WRITTEN BY [TIMOTHY MEINCH](#)

Riding the rails

A steam engine may not be the cheapest way to pull a train today, but it can still pull thousands of visitors to rural Iowa by way of novelty.

The Mitchellville Firefighters Association worked in conjunction with the Iowa Interstate Railroad to provide rides on an old-time steam-operated passenger train as a fundraiser Saturday. Leading up to the event, tickets for the first two rides sold so quickly that officials added a third ride, which had no shortage of riders Saturday evening.

“This is the biggest thing we’ve ever done as a fire department,” MFA President James McDaniel said Saturday morning, noting that passengers came from all over Iowa for the event. He even sent some tickets to people in Minnesota and Missouri.



More than 1,200 people boarded the eight-car train in Mitchellville between the three rides, which earned approximately \$8,000 for MFA. Each ride took passengers through rural Iowa landscapes and small towns on an 80-minute trip to Newton and back.

The old-fashion ride was a nostalgic trip for many, both young and old, who carried personal experiences and memories aboard steam-locomotive trains in the past.

“My first train ride was when I was drafted into the Army,” Mitchellville resident Carroll Jennings said while traveling between Mitchellville and Newton on Saturday afternoon. That ride took him from Des Moines to Fort Leavenworth, Kan., where he began his service during World War II more than 65 years ago.

“It was all steam back then,” said Jennings, 91, who traveled alone on Saturday with a new digital camera to capture the experience.

East Des Moines resident Misty Peckham participated in the Saturday afternoon ride with nine other family members, including her 8-year-old son, Cole Peckham. While aboard the train, Cole said he remembered his first train ride several years ago with his grandpa, Jim Hayes, who worked for Union Pacific as an engineer. “He went on his grandpa’s last train ride with Union Pacific,” Misty said.

During the Saturday rides, many families with young children pressed against the glass and waved or peeked through open windows to catch glimpses of deer, hawks or the South Skunk River, which the train crossed by bridge. People lined up beside the railroad tracks to wave at passengers and some even followed alongside the train with video cameras as it passed.

Mitchellville residents and businesses made a whole festival out of the train rides, which began at 10 a.m. and ran past 6 p.m., with vendors and food stands lining Center Avenue near the railroad crossing in Mitchellville.

A small technical issue before the second ride began allowed riders to watch train engineers and mechanics at work on the enormous steam locomotive.

“It takes at least 30 people to keep this one engine going,” said Iowa Interstate volunteer Dan Hetzel, who stayed busy shoveling loads of coal into the furnace while mechanics worked beneath the steam engine.

The short setback offered young train enthusiast Sebastian Gran an up-close-and-personal encounter with the train. The 4-year-old stood beside the massive locomotive in awe, then excitedly explained to his 2-year-old brother how the pistons work.

McDaniel said the day went very smoothly overall and exceeded his expectations.

“I want to thank the Iowa Interstate Railroad for selecting our department, the volunteers who came out to help us and everyone that came out to support our fire department,” McDaniel said.

The Iowa Interstate Railroad has helped facilitate several similar fundraising rides for fire departments across the state. Last year it partnered with the fire department in Kellogg for an event that also exceeded expectations in numbers and turnout.

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20120605/ALTOONA01/306050110/Riding-the-rails>

©2012 www.DesMoinesRegister.com