

Corman rolls out a red QJ

Steamer breaks in on Central Kentucky Lines sand freight



R.J. Corman's "Sand Special" shows off the railroad's Chinese-built QJ steam locomotive, six new gondolas carrying sand, and a special caboose on May 24, 2008. *Thomas Bookout*

Two-year-old Isabelle Cecil's parents

helped her climb aboard the red R.J. Corman caboose and sat her with reporters and invited guests near the bay window. She giggled wildly, and that said it all.

Her glee verified railroad CEO Rick Corman's success in achieving his main purpose for the May 24 inaugural run of his Chinese-built QJ 2-10-2, formerly 7040 and now numbered 2008: to begin reacquainting the public with the railroad industry.

Corman's Central Kentucky Lines operated the renovated 22-year-old QJ on its "Sand Special," carrying six loads of sand from Louisville's Nugent Sand Co. to Lexington for the region's housing and highway construction markets. Corman hauled the sand in cars that are part of an order for 62 new 110-ton-capacity mill gondolas, painted in automotive-finish Corman red with white lettering, of course. The order replaces a fleet of worn-and-torn used freight cars.

Corman's every-other-day sand trains have been taking hundreds of trucks off Kentucky highways for three years. The American Short Line & Regional Railroad Association recognized the move with a marketing award at its convention this year.

The steamer performed admirably under the expert hands of Matt Schwerin, Corman's manager of operating practices; Robert Franzen, president of Steam Services of America; and California steam consultant Dennis Daugherty, drawing scores of pacers and whole small-town populations to the

ex-Louisville & Nashville right-of-way. Dubbed "Old Smokey," the engine waited for two CSX hotshots just outside of Louisville, but once the special reached home rails at HK Tower in Anchorage, it sprinted into the woods at a respectable 40 mph.

The train registered an on-time arrival in Lexington after just under 7 hours, including three stops for public viewing. Its stack barked as it climbed the 1.6-percent grades of Jett Hill south of Frankfort. The exhaust and rod action attracted smiling, waving spectators as diesels never could.

"It's in your face," said Iowa Interstate Chairman Henry Posner III, who sold the engine to Corman, on board the caboose. "You can see it, feel it, breathe it."

Crowds included young parents with their toddlers, many of whom had never seen a working steam locomotive.

"'Thomas the Tank Engine' and 'The Polar Express' movie have really helped," Posner opined. "There is a lot of stuff out there that has created the interest. These people now know there is a railroad and it hauls freight."

Among those who learned that lesson is 64-year-old Boyd Phillips. "They need to bring back the trains," he said.

Of course, the trains have always been there, but they trundle under most peoples' radars until a hazardous materials spill or a blocked crossing. Phillips' misconception is what the QJ helped erase in the rolling Bluegrass hills on that sunny Saturday. — *Bob Withers*