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## Dinner and a train ride

By Stephen Elliott, [selliott@qconline.com](mailto:selliott@qconline.com)

ROCK ISLAND — First there's the whistle, distinctive mainly because of its decibel level.

Second is the black smoke puffing into the air, accompanied by a loud hiss.

They're sounds that would be familiar to past generations, when steam engines came through big cities and small towns alike on a regular basis.

Today, though, steam engines and even passenger trains look odd in most train yards. The Rock Island Lines, for example, dropped passenger services more than 25 years ago. Amtrak still offers passenger service throughout the Midwest, but the nearest place to hop one of its trains is Galesburg.

Maybe that's what brought hundreds of folks out to Thursday's RiverWay 2006 Opening and Train Send-Off Ceremony outside Modern Woodmen of America. This event was not only for the passengers riding the observation cars like the "Cedar Rapids," but also for the regular buffs who always seem to follow a train.

RiverWay 2006 marks the 150th anniversary of the original linking of the eastern and western United States by rail and the Quad-Cities' place in history as the site of the first railroad bridge over the Mississippi River.

Thursday evening's excursion from Rock Island to Walcott was powered at first by the Milwaukee Road steam locomotive No. 261. Then two Chinese steam engines took over. The train seemed to weave on the tracks at times, rolling along slowly as it passed by thousands of people.

It was the first of four planned RiverWay excursions, running through Sunday, using the Friends of 261 vintage passenger cars.



**Photo: Gary Krambeck**

Joe Taylor, President and CEO of the Quad Cities Convention and Visitors Bureau and his wife Kathy enjoy the view of the Mississippi River with Rock Island and Davenport skylines and the Centennial Bridge in the distance with the train stopped on the Government Bridge, as they dine in the Montana Club Car while they ride on the Steam Train Excursion RiverWay 2006 Opening Train Send Off Thursday evening.

Some observers followed from track to track out from the cities into the country. These train buffs are regulars at such events.

"They're called chasers," said Bettendorf resident and Friends of 261 volunteer Rick Naylor.

Some stood alongside cornfields taking pictures and videos; others sat on their car hoods with their children and waved. Children on bicycles waved at railroad crossings on the west side of Davenport.

Most likely hadn't seen a steam engine or passenger cars like this.

Passengers on the Thursday excursion were fed by chef George Weeks. A retired air traffic controller from Minneapolis, Mr. Weeks was serving stir fry, rice, meatballs, and fortune cookies among other things.

"We've been prepping to feed 120 people since we got here on Tuesday," Mr. Weeks said. "This is therapy for me."

The passengers, like Carl and Margie Becker, of Rock Island, and Tom and Sue Ervin of LeClaire, enjoyed their time on the "Cedar Rapids." With the sun setting between passing trees and smoke hanging in the air behind them, they talked of how trains were a part of their lives growing up.

"It has been so many years since I smelled coal smoke," Mrs. Ervin said. "It brings back memories."

Mr. Irvin said he remembers as a child growing up in Perry, Iowa, his grandfather taking him out to where the locomotives were.

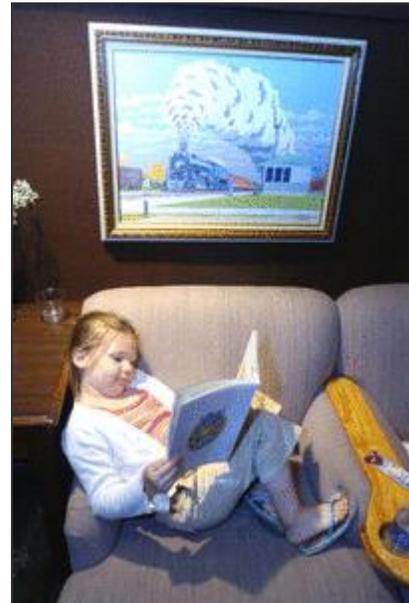
"It seems like half of the Quad-Cities is out waving or taking pictures," Mrs. Becker said.

Henry Posner III, chairman of Iowa Interstate Railroad and proud owner of the two Chinese steam engines, worked briefly for the Rock Island Lines in the summer of 1976. The Princeton University graduate, who lives in Pittsburgh, Pa., said the events here this weekend remind people there are still railroads.

It also reinforces the love people have for the railroads.

"Not everything comes through the Internet or a plug in the wall," Mr. Posner said. "A lot of people here are young enough that they don't remember (steam engines). It's a real life connection for them."

Tian Deyou, of the Chinese Consulate General in Chicago, said the Chinese steam engines mean more than just a train ride for people.



**Photo: Gary Krambeck**

Maggie Johnston 5 of Davenport relaxes on a chair with a good book as she rides on the Steam Train Excursion RiverWay 2006 opening train send off Thursday evening.

"Entering the 21st century, globalization makes us closer," Mr. Deyou said. "In China, we have John Deere tractors, Caterpillar loaders, Motorola cell phones, McDonald's fast food.

"To my mind, I think the best way for people to understand each other is to come and see, to meet, and to talk."

### **If you go**

Information about the first railroad bridge over the Mississippi River and the RiverWay 2006 events can be found on the RiverWay section of [www.visitquadcities.com](http://www.visitquadcities.com).

Tickets for train excursions can be bought online at [www.visitquadcities.com](http://www.visitquadcities.com), by phone at (800) 747-7800 or in person at any of the following Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau offices:

Davenport: Union Station, 102 S. Harrison St.

Moline: The Moline Depot, 2021 River Drive.

LeClaire: Mississippi Valley Welcome Center, 900 Eagle Ridge Road.