



## Fred Frailey

### Looking inside the master bedroom of hell

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Many of you have ridden in the cab of steam locomotives. Those who have may cease reading this and return to what you were doing. The rest of you may enjoy this brief account of my adventure yesterday riding the Red Rooster, Iowa Interstate's 24-year-old, made-in-China 2-10-2 steam locomotive.

It begins when a taxi drops me at the railroad's Newton, Iowa, enginehouse (top photo), where the star of the show, Class QJ 7081, had been brought out of sleep by a crew of volunteers for the first time since last summer. Behind it are a tank car serving as an auxiliary tender, a tool car, dining car Abraham Lincoln, and business car Hawkeye. Both passenger cars wear their former Kansas City Southern livery. The train is headed for Council Bluffs, Iowa, where it will be on display during ceremonies marking the 50th anniversary of Union Pacific's steam program.



As the train is about to leave Newton, I'm drinking a cup of coffee in the business car when Jeff Johnson, Interstate's director of operating rules, asks if I'd like a cab ride for a few miles. Sure, I say, wishing I hadn't worn a clean pair of khaki pants. But I'll gladly sacrifice the pants for the experience I'm about to have. A "few miles" turns into 35 miles and close to 90 minutes, until the train reaches Iowa's capital city of Des Moines to pick up guests of the railroad. What follows are some of my impressions.



I doubt you'll ever see UP's chief executive, Jim Young, operating either of the two huge steam locomotives his railroad proudly sends around its far-flung system. I guess Jim would say that's not what he does best. But here is unabashed railfan and fireman-in-training Henry Posner III, chairman of Iowa Interstate and its parent company, Railroad Development Corp., wearing safety glasses and overalls and carrying a long-handled shovel onto whose handle has been carved "HP3." He and Tom Ambrose, a retired Delta Airlines employee, will feed coal to the iron monster to supplement what the mechanical stoker delivers.

So we're off. Iowa Interstate now has a very good track structure, the majority of it on welded rail. If I didn't tell you that, you would misinterpret what I am about to say: Engine 7081 is not built for comfort. In fact, imagine riding in a passenger car that has derailed and is bouncing down the right of way on top of the ties. That's what it feels like inside the 7081 at 40 mph.

The next thing you should know is that, like other steam locomotives, this one is not built for good forward visibility. At very low speed, escaping steam can totally obliterate what lies ahead. The "windshield" of this and other steam locomotives are small vertical windows in front of the engineer and fireman that give you little more than a suggestion of the path you're headed down. Now you know why steam locomotive engineers are always sticking their heads out the side windows.

Steam locomotive cabs (at least this one) are amazingly spacious. There are seven of us on 7081: engineer Robert Franzen, fireman-stoker operator Ed Selinsky, pilot-conductor Danny Bass, rules examiner Johnson, shovelers Ambrose and Posner, and me. Despite the crowd, it was easy to clear a path for Ambrose or Posner to perform shoveling. Ambrose, who's had a lot of experience at this, has a smooth, easy delivery of coal into the firebox, tossing it expertly to areas with a thin covering. For a student fireman, Henry is not bad at all; I'd grade him B+ (that's the chairman himself in the photo, wielding his shovel).

And that firebox: I've never seen anything like it. When Selinsky opens the doors to inspect the fire, I peer over his shoulder. What a scary sight, the devil's master bedroom, something like 80 square feet of raging inferno. No kidding, what comes instantly to mind is eternal damnation, a roaring, intense conflagration that may as well serve as hell until the real thing comes along. I need to go to church more often.

My final thought is to send a salute to the generations of strong men who ran steam locomotives. There are seven of us (okay six, leaving me out of the count) doing what two men did 70 years ago without thinking twice about it. How did they ever get it all done, and done safely? Beats heck out of me. — **Fred W. Frailey**

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