



Railroad Development Corp. Chinese 2-10-2 Nos. 6988 and 7081 triplehead with Milwaukee Road 4-8-4 No. 261 on a Rock Island-Bureau, Ill., excursion Sept. 16, 2006.

## Chinese steam: a Heartland fantasy

Railroad Development Corp.'s pair of 2-10-2s debuts in rare style

“Is this heaven?” one fan, knowing what the answer would be, asked another during a runby at Atalissa, Iowa, as a pair of Chinese 2-10-2s charged down the former Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific main line through the cornfields. “No,” said the other on cue, reciting lines from the 1989 baseball fantasy movie *Field of Dreams*. “It’s Iowa.”

This was no joke, but it was an incredible fantasy come to life as Railroad Development Corp. of Pittsburgh, owner of the Iowa Interstate Railroad, fulfilled plans to bring a pair of the QJ-type 2-10-2s made famous on the grades of China’s JingPeng Pass to the American heartland.

The locomotives, 6988 and 7081, were overhauled to Federal Railroad Administration specifications in China, moved by ship to Houston, hauled by BNSF on flatcars to Iowa, and set up just in time for four scheduled Sept. 14-17 trips out of Rock Island, Ill. About 450 passengers each day rode the 13-car passenger train on excursions to Homestead, Iowa, Sept. 15; to Bureau, Ill., Sept. 16; and to Muscatine, Iowa, Sept. 17. A local dinner train Sept. 14 kicked off the series.

The Sept. 16 trip became a most improbable sight in the form of a tripleheader with Minneapolis-based Milwaukee Road 4-8-4 261, whose operating personnel and passenger-car consist were used for the excursions. Instead of deadheading the consist with a leased diesel, the 261 group used its 1944 vin-

tage Alco, which contrasted with the much smaller and more rugged 1985- and 1986-built Santa Fe types.

For the trips, RDC consultant Dennis Daugherty did not alter the appearance of the Chinese engines (save for minor touches, such as the addition of a bell discreetly tucked under the running boards) from their look in China, including engine 6988’s front-end medallion for exemplary service by her crew.

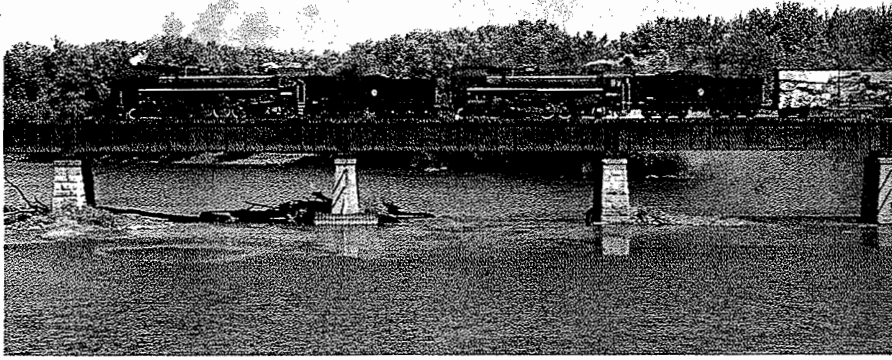
FRA rules allow the engines to operate at 195 lbs. of steam pressure, down from 215 in China. Except for inoperable stokers, which necessitated hand-firing, the locomotives faced no major mechanical difficulties during the event. “About six-tenths of the 261,” was one crew member’s estimate of the QJ’s power in relationship to the 4-8-4.

On Sept. 18, the QJs doubleheaded a 35-car, 2,182-ton revenue freight from Rock Island to Iowa City, operating, as RDC Chairman Henry Posner III called it, “the first doubleheaded steam revenue freight train in the Americas in the 21st century.”

One QJ was winterized and the other stored in Newton, Iowa, where a pole barn will be erected to shelter the engines. As planned, both are up for sale, as are three others still in China that RDC holds an option on. The trips out of Rock Island and the freight were meant to showcase the engines for potential buyers, and they certainly did just that.

— Jim Wrinn

Two photos, TRAINS: Jim Wrinn



The QJs doublehead westbound on Iowa Interstate freight RINT across the Cedar River at Moscow, Iowa, on Sept. 18, 2006. They took 10 loads and 25 empties, 2,182 tons.



Leaving Rock Island under threatening skies, the pair of QJs climbs the approach to the Mississippi River bridge on the Sept. 17, 2006, trip to Muscatine, Iowa.