

The Story of Two Wayward Tenders

Story by Jim Lethlean, Photographs by Don Drawer, as told by Sammy King

Regular *RyPN* readers may recall that my first online effort began with the words "Y2K went rather well for me". This is true, with the major exception that two of my closest friends died that year, Don Drawer and Jim Lethlean. This story is my tribute to these two hard-working, hard-core railroad preservationists, and is based on their efforts to save the famous [Sumpter Valley](#) articulateds and their tenders. Not only is it long overdue for these guys to receive credit, but the pictures have been sitting around for almost thirty years, and Jim's original article for nine. Besides that, those Sumpter Valley folks probably still don't know what I did with all their money.



For many years, extra steam locomotive tenders were used to increase the operating range of engines in Guatemala. These days tank cars are preferred, as this view of #204 and #205 taken at Puente de las Vacas shows. Two of the most famous examples of FEGUA water cars were brought back to the USA and reunited with their original locomotives by the Sumpter Valley in 1993.

At the time of this writing, the restoration of Sumpter Valley #19 is complete, and the locomotive has been in service for several successful seasons. Her debut appearance at the 100th anniversary of the Union Station in Portland in May of 1996 gained the museum national notice, while the project as conducted by the supreme steam restorationist, Doyle McCormack, is the subject of a fine video documentary program. However, railroad history as I know it consists of many stories within stories, and this project has its share. While I won't claim that this is quite the equal of my last *RyPN* feature, I again have to leave out some pretty juicy stuff. At least I can provide a little more perspective on the Guatemalan flying insect situation.

Jim began his tale in 1920, when the SVR placed an order with Schenectady for two new Mikado locomotives, which were to be the heaviest power on the road. They came numbered #101 and #102, but, for some unknown reason, the shops in South Baker quickly repainted and renumbered them, with #101 becoming #20, and the #102 becoming #19. For the next twenty years they hauled mostly freight, until the Sumpter Valley got the chance to buy some monstrous power from the recently abandoned Uintah Railway in Colorado and Utah. These were Baldwin built 2-6-6-2T simple articulateds, which arrived in Baker City sometime in June of 1940. In addition to converting the engines to burn oil, the shop crew removed the side mounted water tanks and fitted the new engines with tenders confiscated from engines #19 and #20. Engine #50 became #250, and received the tender from #20, while #51 became #251 and got #19's tender.

The two giant new engines rendered the mikes surplus, so they got two tenders from two smaller engines, and were sold to the White Pass & Yukon up in Alaska. They ran there until the early 60's, but were given their third set of tenders from two WP&Y 190 class engines. After being taken out of service, they sat on a siding in Skagway until being rescued by the Sumpter Valley Railroad Restoration, Inc. They came back to Oregon with their WP&Y tenders.



SVR #250 in service sometime in the 1940s. Photo courtesy of Sumpter Valley Railway.

But this story is about the tenders original to SVR #19 and #20. In 1947 the SVR closed it's business and discontinued all steam operations. The tracks were ripped up and most of the equipment sold. Engines #250 and #251, along with the two wayward tenders, became property of the International Railways of Central America, and were destined to finish out their careers in the sweltering jungles of Guatemala.

While the articulateds had been purchased for service on Palin Hill, just west of Guatemala City, initial tests soon revealed that they lacked sufficient adhesion to offer any operating advantage over the IRCA's fleet of modern, heavy 2-8-2s in this district. The problem was that the water in the boiler all ran to the rear when the engine started uphill, removing weight from the front set of drivers, allowing them to spin. In addition, the giants wouldn't fit any of the turntables or roundhouses. Eventually they were assigned to a drag freight turn between the division points of Mazatenango and Escuintla. Special sheds were built for them at these locations, and their foundations probably still remain. They were there in 1993, and there was still a dome cover from one of the SVR "*doble movimientos*" in the section laborer's compound by the Escuintla roundhouse. Inverted and filled with dirt, it held the flower garden of a railroader's wife. (And if anyone has seen it, or can help to arrange it's purchase or donation, please let me know c/o RyPN....)

The IRCA planned on getting it's money's worth, so the slippery, clumsy, unpopular beasts worked through the fifties, running backwards much of the time. After a while, the #250 was the only one functioning, while #251 was slowly being stripped of parts. After the Guatemalan government took control of the railroad in December 1969, the new FEGUA management planned to repair both locomotives, and the job was to be divided in such a way that the five roundhouses could all get in some overtime. During his adventures in the early 70's, Don Drawer photographed the piles of parts at various locations, and told me that the tenders went to Mazatenango; boilerwork was to be done in Escuintla; gauges, safety valves, throttle valves, and air brake valves in Guatemala City; wheels and rods in Zacapa; and all other appliances and machine work in Puerto Barrios. He tried to raise the money and save these engines, but now all that is left to show for his efforts are these four old prints (**below**) showing one of the boilers sitting in Escuintla. The locomotives and parts gradually disappeared, but the tenders remained in service as water cars.



These are the last known pictures ever taken of the SVR mallets during their gradual dismantling and destruction in the mid 70's at Escuintla, Guatemala. Four photos by Don Drawer.



Steam was still in service on FEGUA, and the roundhouse in the background saw daily engine movements.



Possibly this boiler was being saved for stationary service, rather than scrap.



The second steam dome permitted an inspector to enter the boiler without removing the throttle valve.

In 1972 the Sumpter Valley had the chance to purchase these engines with tenders at a price of \$8,000 apiece. This was at a time when even \$100 was a lot of money to the organization, so the mighty locomotives were lost to the scrapper's torch. A little background might make this easier to understand.

To the best of my knowledge, the only railroad equipment to come out of Central America was an IRCA 4-4-0 acquired from the Guatemalan Division of the IRCA by the Smithsonian Institution; and three IRCA 2-8-0s, a business car, and caboose which were imported from the Salvadoran Division of the IRCA by Don Drawer and Lindsey Ashby. Two of these engines, #40 and #44, have become well known as the power on Colorado's [Georgetown Loop](#). A 2-6-0, #79 had been donated to the Colorado Railroad Museum, but even a man of Bob Richardson's amazing abilities was unable to complete this transaction after the railroad was nationalized, so this engine was scrapped. At various times since nationalization, the military has raised money by requiring the railroad to provide scrap metal on demand. I saw this myself in 1993 when a squad of soldiers armed with machine guns visited the roundhouse asking for more junk to sell. Naturally, the foreman accommodated them without delay.

In 1970, when it was opportune to preserve the SVR locomotives, an army colonel named Carlos Arana became president of Guatemala. He had been a leader of the anti-guerilla death squads in the 60's, which were also often a front for the systematic extermination of the Indian populations. Carlos Arana was a man so hated and feared that well over twenty years after his death, people were still afraid to paint over or remove his political graffiti. Probably this is the reason it still decorates boxcars and buildings. I was told by one of the former FEGUA officials of being invited to dinner at Arana's private camp in the jungle. Being unable to refuse the presidential invitation, he was instructed that the road to this location was marked by a human skull nailed to a pole. You would know for sure that this was the place because the skull still had teeth which were capped in gold! Carlos Arana was murdered in 1974, most likely by troops working for his intended successor. He is still celebrated as a kind of evil hero because he was so hard to kill. The folklore has it that he died firing a machine gun from each hip, killing 19 of his assassins.



I figured it still might not be a very good idea to mess with this graffiti, even though the picture was taken in January 2002.

I hope this will help to explain what the past leaders of the SVR were dealing with when the #250 and #251 were offered for sale. They have been most unfairly criticized because these engines were destroyed after being brought to the attention of their organization. Suffice it to say that nobody who has ever attempted to import railroad equipment from Latin America will pass judgment on them.

Civil war was to ravage Guatemala for at least ten more years, making any news of the SVR equipment impossible to obtain. Jim Lethlean describes his efforts during this period: "In 1978 I tried to obtain information about the mallets and their tenders by way of the US Embassy,

and received the reply that the engines and tenders had been scrapped. To me this was sad news, but yet I was not totally convinced. So in 1982 and 1986 I again tried to find out any information I could by writing the US Embassy. I tried to convince them that just contacting the railroad's head office would not bring out the full truth about this equipment, but once again the letters said that the locomotives and tenders had been scrapped. In 1989 I wrote to Congressman Bob Smith for his help in this matter. I explained the whole story and what was needed by our representatives at the Embassy to find out the whole truth as to the whereabouts of this equipment. Once again came the same old story."

In October 1989, Bernie Watts, now owner of Backshop Enterprises, and I spent two weeks in Guatemala in the employ of the Georgetown Loop. During this time, Bernie came to be known as Bernardo. Our visit was for the purpose of inspecting the narrow gauge steam power of FEGUA, and arranging for the purchase of an engine suitable for hauling tourists in Colorado. While our efforts were to be of no help at all to the good folks who paid for everything, the information gathered at this time was to prove invaluable to the SVR tender recovery project. When the time finally came, Lindsey Ashby couldn't have been nicer about the use that was finally made of our research. It was Bernardo who actually saw the tenders and identified them first—I was too busy taking videos to notice the significance of those old water cars until he pointed it out to me. We found the tender #251 abandoned

in Zacapa first, but did not find the other tank, numbered FEGUA #951 and still in active service as a water car, until we returned in 1991.

This railroad has changed a lot in the short time I've known it. In 1988 FEGUA used to have regular and extra passenger service; cabooses on all freight and mixed trains; telegraph dispatching; a busy blacksmith shop, foundry, and machine shop in the Guatemala City roundhouse; linemen patrolling the wires on rail bicycles; active connections with the plantation lines in Quirigua and Bananera; and steam on standby protecting the banana wharfs in Puerto Barrios. I had explored all these wonders unmolested because this was years before the killer bee invasion. Our visit in 1991 was our last time to go to all the old division points, visit with the first friends I made in Guatemala, see the remains of sugar cane steamers, and enjoy the amenities of old IRCA era Puerto Barrios. This means especially the Hotel del Norte, built by the IRCA for train crews, tourists, and businessmen. Taking fullest advantage of a Caribe restaurant featuring both ocean and river shrimp, and a classic bar situated overlooking the harbor, Bernardo and I enjoyed the good life there along with our guide from FEGUA, Miguel Contenti. In fact, we enjoyed the classic bar so much that it was with great difficulty that we made it back to our room in the less than classic modern addition of the hotel. Somebody opened the window, and I passed out in the bed nearest it. The other two were luckier than me, as usual.

The only way I know that I actually went to sleep is because I was so unpleasantly awakened by all the *Zancudos* in Puerto Barrios feeding on my sweat drenched body. Some of them might have flown in from Honduras or Belize, too, for all I know. *Zancudos* are ferocious dragon fly sized mosquitoes which live in most of the jungles of Latin America, and they seemed to be drinking my blood with particular enthusiasm on this occasion, although they didn't bother Bernardo or Miguel. Frantically I swatted them off me and shooed them out the window and squished as many of them as I could while my friends snored and snuffled undisturbed. Then I shut the window, and checked the time. It had been less than fifteen minutes since we were feeling so good, laughing and joking and drinking in the bar. Now I was so very miserable, completely covered with



Tender #251 behind the shops in Zacapa, where we first found it in 1989. The Zacapa roundhouse foreman stands next to it, I'm in the middle, and the gentleman on the right is the FEGUA Car Department Foreman, Sr. Manuel de Archila. Photo by Bernardo.



It's a different railroad now, but the IRCA identity will always be there. Even though two thirds of the trackage still in service is built along the Rio Motagua, this water is unsuitable for use in boilers because it contains not only mud and minerals, but lots of laundry soap. Only three water tanks still work today, requiring an extra water supply for virtually any steam assignment.

bleeding, festering, itching, swollen, sore *Zancudo* bites. The rest of the night I passed shivering and shaking under the shower with the cold water on full blast.

I was still there when the sun came up, and hadn't slept a wink. My friends eventually found my water logged carcass, and did what they could to save me. There used to be a little bar under a cabana right across the street from the roundhouse, so we had Gallo Beer for breakfast there. The barmaid was real good at applying Aloe Vera to my injuries, and breakfast continued until late that night. Before we went back to our room in the del Norte, Miguel bought a can of insect repellent. We sprayed it in our hair, clothes, and beds, and did not open the window ever again. Soon after that, we returned to Guatemala City, which has no *Zancudos*. I've often heard it said that the Guatemalans located their country's capital where they did for just this very reason...

We ended up chartering #200 with a short freight train just before Bernardo returned to the states. It was almost impossible to fire her up because of bad boiler tubes, but she took us to the Puente de Las Vacas and gave us several fine runbys before failing completely. She has not been repaired or operated since then, and her last trip is another tall tale I'm saving for another time. What I will tell you now is that we spotted the other SVR tender on a siding in Gerona as our extra train was being towed back to the yard in Guatemala City.



This tender was still in service in 1993 as a water car, and is the one working behind SVR #19 today. The oil tank had been boiled out, and was used for water storage, too.

Pretty soon after I got back home, I received a letter from Jim Lethlean asking if I knew anything about the SVR #250, #251, or their tenders, and I answered with all the information I had. He then ordered a FEGUA video from me, and I edited on some extra footage showing that these really were indeed the two wayward tenders. His story within a story continues: "I wrote a letter to the Guatemalan Government and sent it to Congressman Smith, to send to the US Embassy, to give to the powers that be, asking that since the United States had given Guatemala \$165,000,000 in foreign aid the year before, would they donate these two tenders to our historical organization? Well, the answer was very short. In fact,

we as Americans would call it the old two word answer. And I will not write them."

After that, it was decided to let me try talking to the Guatemalans. Through my friends in the government railway administration, negotiations by telephone resulted in the offer to exchange the tenders for sufficient boiler tubes and flues to overhaul two of the #200 class mikes. We followed up on this, and found that the cost of the trade would be over \$23,000. This was more than SVR could afford to pay, and it was definitely way too much money for those old tanks.

Again in Jim's words, "Things got put on hold until fall of '92. With all the effort of raising the money to get the #19 restored back to her 1930's appearance, there came the need to fully alter the ex-WP&Y tender, which was going to run nearly \$15,000. With such a price tag, I felt why not put the money back into the original tender? Several phone calls were made. One tender was still in active service, but the other would need to be found. After much discussion by the board of directors, it was decided to negotiate the purchase and shipping of these two tenders. Sounds easy, but it wasn't."

I flew down to Guatemala City in January, 1993 expecting to take about twelve days to secure this deal. It was up to me to find, identify, purchase, and arrange to ship the two little darlings back to Oregon. We were in hopes that the price for them would not exceed \$6,000, and the price to barge them from Puerto Barrios to a Gulf Coast port would be under \$5,000.

Between what I can't remember and what I can't tell you, it's difficult to say what took so long. FEGUA was by this time barely breathing, and my arrival coincidentally fell the week before the annual Trains Unlimited charter. I thought this would be good luck for me, but it turned out not to be so good. Nobody really had time to attend to the SVR deal because the entire railroad was frantically occupied with preparations, which included adding the steam powered oil pump to #205's tender. Eight years later I was to become well acquainted with this contraption.

This was my fourth visit, and I had by this time been granted many favors and returned them as well. I'd made some solid friends and learned my way around, and I have always been treated very well by FEGUA management and workers alike. It took three or four days to set a price for the two tenders at \$5,000 in local currency, which was to be used for the purchase of locally reconditioned excitation panel cards for the FEGUA Bombardier MX-620 locomotives. I sent for the cash, and *Licenciado* Fernando A. Leal, *Interventor* of FEGUA, directed his legal staff to draft a sales contract. I reviewed it and asked for some revisions, which took another day, then we had to schedule another meeting. Jim sent me the cash by Western Union, and it arrived very quickly. Although several parties offered to keep it in a nice safe place, it was my responsibility and I carried it around with me for several days. This is a lot of money to be walking around with in downtown Guatemala City, and I was very relieved when we had our meeting. After signing the contract and exchanging courtesies in Spanish, the *Interventor* looks at me all insulted like and tells me in English to drop dead! I couldn't believe it, and I looked back at him dumbfounded. Then he says, "Aren't you going to pay me?" We had a good laugh over two very sizeable stacks of freshly minted *Quetzal* notes, and shook on our deal. Then *Lic. Leal* says, "You know, we haven't seen one of those tenders in quite some time. Maybe you better go find it."

The next day we got an early start, and drove to Zacapa, where the tender #251 was last seen and still listed on official inventory. Miguel and I looked around for a few minutes, but didn't see it. Every trip I made to Guatemala saw more of the old times fading away, and the general impression I had was that this part of the world was gradually going to Hell. About this time, one of my friends from a previous visit, Luis Chinchilla, walked up to us. He greeted us, and asked what we were doing. We told him, and he pointed to a pile of coaches and banana car bodies three or four high. "There it is." Then I asked for the trucks, and he pointed to a track crammed full of junky looking freight car trucks. One pair towered above the rest, and sure enough they were the ones we needed. Then we asked how in Hell we were going to get the tender out from under the junk pile, and he said, "No problem, if you can get me the crane."

Having finished our business so quickly allowed us plenty of time for a nice traditional Guatemalan lunch and plenty of cold *Cerveza* Gallo. FEGUA didn't get too excited about zero tolerance in those days. We made it back to *Lic. Leal's* office just before he went home, and he busted out laughing when he saw me. He said "I know already. No problem?" I said "No problem for me if no problem for you!" Then we shook hands and called it a day. The contract I negotiated with FEGUA could have been broken by them without recourse for the SVR, but they chose to honor it. I really think that anybody else would have told us to go to Hell.

I had some time to kill, so Miguel and I went to Puerto Barrios where I could video #204 with a Trains Unlimited charter freight train, and meet with the manager of the port stevedores. This time I made sure that the Zancudos didn't get me. On our way back, we stopped to check on the tender. The crane was there, but work was held up because there was no longer a switch engine stationed in Zacapa. The following day, #205 took care of the switching after bringing in another TUT charter from Guatemala City.

Meanwhile, the tank FEGUA #951 had been brought back to Guatemala City from it's last assignment as a cistern for the workers living at Mulua, and was waiting for an under tonnage eastbound to deliver it to Puerto Barrios. I began attempting to arrange the customs brokerage and shipping for our unusual cargo. I didn't find out until this was all over that I went about it all wrong. I should have had the tenders loaded onto a roll-on roll-off type of intermodal platform and used a nice container boat, but I instead had them secured to flat-racks and went with a tramp steamer. What I did right was go across the Gulf of México, rather than make a land crossing of México.

By this time my expense account had run out, but my job wasn't finished. The SVR authorized more funds, and one of my FEGUA friends graciously let me stay in his house for two weeks in order to stretch our budget further. Doyle McCormack had given me a wish list of steam fittings and appliances needed for #19, which I was able to fill. These items were then taken to Puerto Barrios and secured inside the water tanks. Then the hatches were welded shut, and everything made it back to the USA OK. This also helped to ease the monetary bite for the SVR.

A few more days passed with no word on tender #251, so we went back to Zacapa. The wrecking train was there, along



Engines #204 and #205, along with their water cars, get together on their train for the last few miles from Paraiso to Guatemala City.



#204 heads for home. Level hose connection between tender and tank car feeds water without a pump.



Without her water car now, #204 rides the Guatemala City table after another day's work. On one of the bullring tracks at right is an old style FEGUA water car.

with its sole inhabitant, an eccentric IRCA carman named "El Gato Flaco", meaning skinny cat. He lived in the last wooden coach from the IRCA, #193. As I was looking around, his voice called out from inside it asking in Spanish, "Who is the whore that wants to take this stupid tank home with them?" I quickly answered that I wasn't trying to make his life miserable, but we wanted to preserve the history of the old times. He explained to me that there was an engine sideways on the crossover in Puerto Barrios, a bridge shifted off its pilings near the Mexican border, six cars and another engine on the ground in Santa Maria Junction, and his crane had spun a crank journal, which would require a new bearing be made in Guatemala City, shipped to Zacapa, and then installed. If nothing else went wrong, he wouldn't see his wife for a month. Then he flashed me a big grin, shook my hand, and offered to buy me a beer.



#205 helped switch out the wreck train in Zacapa for the salvage job on tank #251.

I simply cannot recall whether or not anything else particularly interesting happened before I returned home after five weeks. I was sure that the railroad would treat us right and the stevedores would load our stuff right. Jim and I had already been through the wringer several times over, and I imagine that several other Sumpter Valley people had been stressed over this, too. Up to this point I had been paid well, and I felt that the SVR had spent enough to be entitled to some satisfaction. It had been such an interesting vacation for me, but I still had the unresolved worry that SVR wouldn't get what they paid for, and it would be blamed on me. So from this point on, I

worked for free. Little did I know how long a time that would be. It didn't help that I was living in the middle of nowhere, and had to drive twelve miles each way to use a phone or check my mail. Even using an 800 number cost me several trips to town a day.... We kept trying to arrange shipping by phone, and I drove everybody nuts, but finally we went with a low bid of \$6,400 from Nexus Lines.

During this whole affair, we railroaders enjoyed the SVR's generosity when it came to food and drink, but we didn't abuse it, either. Nobody ever expected or received any kind of bribe or payoff or took a cut. But I was beginning to wonder if I'd failed to do something like that because the tenders missed four barges from Guatemala in seven weeks, and still they sat on the dock. About this time my good friend, FEGUA Master Mechanic Sergio Rivas, called and asked what the matter was. I didn't know, but I shared my suspicions with him. Something must have been said, because it didn't take too much longer before I got a call informing me that the tenders were sailing towards Greensport Terminal, near Houston. The UP was to provide the local portage railroad with cars for loading the tanks, and then ship them to Oregon. I figured that my problems were over, and I was very glad for it.

Before I say another word, it should be mentioned that UP donated the shipping to SVR, and they deserve our thanks for it. This turned out to be a big nuisance for them, not to mention Jim and me. It also turned out to take longer to get the tenders from Texas to Oregon than the entire recovery operation had taken up to that point. Still driving back and forth to town for every phone call, I was foaming at the mouth, barking at the moon, and chasing cars. First, I would get a number from UP for two cars, and follow their progress toward Houston. Then, suddenly the numbers would be back in the empty pool, and they would be leaving Houston. I'd requisition two more cars and the same thing kept happening. This was when computerized car tracking was relatively new, and after a month or two of this, the Port Terminal Railroad superintendent helped me finally to figure out that the cars were being interchanged to him without a destination code on their paperwork. Since they had no way of knowing where they were supposed to go, they were given back to UP empty, and then they would go wherever. So we got that straightened out, but then the UP carmen wouldn't accept the lading on the general purpose ITTX cars that were delivered, so they were released and "well cars" ordered. These are meant to hold the carbodies and trucks of cars damaged in derailments, which sounded like just what we needed. The only problem was that a big derailment in Arkansas used all available cars of this type resulting in a five week wait. Then, one of the cars left Houston empty, and made it up to Pocatello, Idaho before being sent for the second time to Houston, where it and the first car were finally spotted for loading. But the tenders are narrow gauge, while the UP well cars are meant to fit standard gauge equipment, which we found out after the cars arrived dockside.

Somehow the UP made it work, but the tenders again got separated, heading west on two different trains. None the less, it was truly a happy day when those tenders left Houston. It left an enormous void in my life, and not a minute too soon for me. Thank God I'll never go through that again.



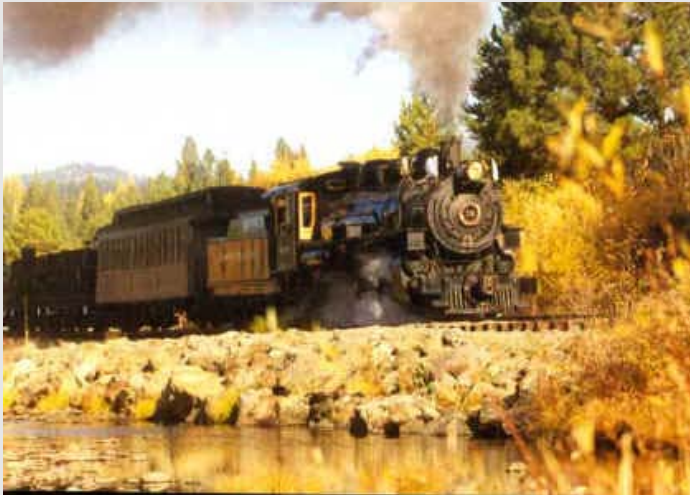
Seeing these tenders on the dock in the good old USA, I thought my troubles were over. In case anybody who worked on this project was wondering, I was the one who drew all the cartoons and clever sayings with colored chalk...



Tender #951 back home in Oregon. Jim Lethlean photo. The oil tank has been removed, and the water section still shows the extended sides which were added by the IRCA.



Tender #251, rescued from imminent scrapping, waits it's turn for rebuilding. It actually looks pretty good considering where it was when I found it (after the SVR had already paid for it). I'm told that the original SVR lettering showed through what's left of the paint as this car was unloaded in the late afternoon light, silencing skeptics at last. Jim Lethlean photo.



SVR #19 in service with tender #951. Photo courtesy of Sumpter Valley Railway.

Jim and I gradually recovered and got back to normal. We figured that long after the aggravation had ended those tenders would still be with their original locomotives. To me it is a miracle that the loss of the SVR articulateds could be turned to the good in this way. And even though I've never been to Oregon or laid eyes on the Sumpter Valley or engine #19, I sure am glad that Jim Lethlean got to see her running with one of the two wayward tenders.

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