

MAY 18, 2009 F.A.H.P. NEWS

“Old 98” of the Wilmington & Western Rail Road: Yesterday, when the Wilmington & Western R.R. celebrated the 100th Birthday of its flagship locomotive #98, I was asked to say a few words about its history and how it came to Delaware. Several said they would like a copy of my remarks, but there was no text, so I will try to set down here what I think I said.

The Mississippi Central R.R. was an east-west line 149 miles long across southern Mississippi from Hattiesburg on the main line of the Southern Railway to Natchez on the Mississippi River. There were 2 passenger trains daily in each direction with 35 station stops on the six-hour trip.

In 1908 the railroad ordered two high-drivered 4-4-0 “American-type” locomotives from the American Locomotive Company in Schenectady, NY. They were delivered in the first months of 1909, and, with their 69-inch driving wheels, were undoubtedly the fastest engines on the line. They were numbered 98 and 99, and it is assumed that each would normally make one round-trip, or about 300 miles, per day. It appears there were four stretches where the distance between stations was 7 miles, and the fast-stepping “Americans” would likely clock this off in as many minutes. #99 was scrapped, probably in the 1930’s, but W & W #98 has now passed its 100th birthday and is still going strong.

In the latter half of the 19th century, about 2/3 of the locomotives on American railroads were 4-4-0’s, and the original Wilmington & Western (later the Landenberg Branch of the B & O R.R.) was no exception. In 1900 the two locomotives in service on the Branch were #622 and #638, similar to but somewhat smaller than #98. When the concept of reviving passenger service with steam locomotives was dreamed up by the Marshalls in the late 1950’s, it seemed imperative that a 4-4-0 be located to serve the line through the Red Clay Valley. Although the first locomotive saved from the scrap heap was a 2-6-0 “Mogul-type” purchased from Canadian National Railways at London, Ontario, in 1959 (it arrived at Yorklyn in early November that year), the dream of finding a 4-4-0 had not vanished. By year’s end one had been found, and for sale, on the private railroad of Paulsen Spence which he called the Louisiana Eastern, near Hammond, LA. I visited Spence’s place and rode in the cab of #98 in early January, 1960, and soon thereafter my father and I bought the locomotive for scrap price. For an additional fee, Spence agreed to perform some needed repairs and prepare boiler specification papers so it could be used again on a common-carrier railroad.

A final lease from the B & O allowing the Wilmington & Western to operate on weekends on its Landenberg Branch was not consummated until late in 1965, and since it seemed desirable to use #98 sooner, the Strasburg R.R., then in its second year of revived operation, agreed to accept it on the Strasburg with a cooperative arrangement with W & W volunteers. With a rider aboard the cab, it was towed on its own wheels from Louisiana to Strasburg, arriving in the spring of 1961. When the Federal boiler inspector representing the Interstate Commerce Commission took a look at the boiler and the papers supplied by Mr. Spence, he shook his head and said it would never run on the Strasburg. The rumor spread that it would never run again, but the W & W volunteers would not give up.

In 1964 the locomotive was towed to Wilmington, again on its own wheels, and was stored in one of the old American Car and Foundry buildings in east Wilmington, until the new W & W engine house at Marshallton on the Landenberg Branch could house it in 1966. A retired duPont Company engineer named Wesstrom made new calculations and fabricated new boiler drawings that were approved by the ICC, the boiler was re-tubed, new gusset braces were attached to the front head, and #98 finally entered service on the W & W in 1973. Removed twice from service for extended periods, it was completely rebuilt by volunteers and by outside contract from 1998 to 2004, when it re-entered service literally “better than new”. Today, it is believed to be the only standard-gauge American-type (4-4-0) steam locomotive still operating in the United States.

Rain again dampened our off-site activities this past weekend. The trip to Bellevue State Park with our Models H-5 and 735 was cancelled, as was the annual trek to Linvilla Orchards for the HCCP Spring Meet. The “Museums are Free” event from 1:00 to 3:00 on Saturday at our Museum was quite satisfactory, with about 6 groups and perhaps 18 to 20 people attending, and having a one-on-one museum tour with Chuck Erikson, Art Sybell or myself. Everyone said they would be back for one of our “Steamin’ Sundays”. The Wilmington & Western R.R.’s 100th birthday celebration for its Locomotive #98 on Sunday was attended by at least 10 F.A.H.P. members, and most rode the train pulled by two steam locomotives on the trip to the Mount Cuba Picnic Grove. Our next big event will be participation in Kennett Square’s Memorial Day parade on Monday, May 25, for which we are supposed to line up about 9 A.M. To my knowledge, 4 qualified operators plan to take Stanley cars at this time, but Anne Cleary will accept more if any of you, deprived at earlier events by bad weather, want to go. Her phone and E-mail were in last week’s “News”.

Tuesday afternoon I took the Model 71 to Hagley for a “photo shoot” to promote their September 20 car show. It, along with our Stick Seat Runabout and our Mountain Wagon, will be feature cars this year. The Events Committee met last Tuesday, the Collections Committee on Wednesday, and the Railroad sub-committee on Thursday for a refresher operating course and history of the Auburn Valley R.R. Thanks are due Bill Schwoebel and Jonathan Rickerman for putting together a very good program. Jerry Novak reports that there should be some action on the turntable project this week. Jim Personti, having completely rebuilt the water tank from the Model 78, installed it on the car last Thursday with the help of several volunteers. It has been lined with a plastic coating which we think will hold up very well. This ’13 roadster should be back in service within a week. Ron Adler and his assistant “Peter” from Baltimore visited the Museum on Thursday and will send us a proposal on how they would work with us, if selected, for a major museum upgrade. Steve Bryce, Catherine Coin, and I were favorably impressed. Members of another firm plan to visit this week.

On Thursday, May 21, at 7:00 P.M. the quarterly Board of Directors Meeting of FAHP will take place in the office. Among items to be approved is the Code of Ethics, as worked on long and hard by the Collections Committee under the leadership of Greg Landrey. Our treasurer Bob Reilly will be on hand to give us an on-site financial report, and the acceptance of gifts, where approval by the Board is required, will be discussed.

Tom