



Milepost 25: Central Texas' Excursion Railroad Marks a Quarter-Century of Service

July 25 of this year marks 25 years since the summer day in 1992 when the first *Hill Country Flyer* made its way from Cedar Park to Burnet, inaugurating an unbroken quarter-century of Austin & Texas Central excursion service through Austin and the Hill Country.

That initial *Flyer* was first of more than 2,500 trains over the years, carrying to date more than 862,000 passengers on their journeys into passenger railroading's golden age.

The inaugural train was the culmination of a three-year effort by the fledgling Austin Steam Train Association to restore a 1916 steam locomotive, Southern Pacific 786, to operating condition and to put her into excursion service over a former SP branch that had just been acquired by the City of Austin.

The train consisted of three privately owned streamlined lounge-sleepers and a string of Pennsylvania Railroad open-window steel coaches from the 1920s. Boarding behind what was then the Cedar Park City Hall were nearly 500 passengers, including the legendary Congressman Jake Pickle, who entertained with his harmonica along the way.

Since that day, diesel engines have supplanted 786 while the steam engine is undergoing a long but thorough rebuilding, the Pennsy coaches have been retired, and the train made into a fully climate-controlled consist of streamlined cars, but pas-

sengers still enjoy the weekend journeys throughout the year through the scenic Hill Country.

And as it was on that first weekend of service, volunteer railroaders still staff every train, both in operating and passenger-service jobs, an accomplishment practically unmatched in the excursion-railroading world.

Much else has changed and improved over the years. A year after the first run, the railroad moved into its home railyard in Cedar Park. In 2008, construction of a retail development on the railyard property included the building of today's spacious boarding facilities and relocation of the railroad's administrative and ticketing offices from downtown Austin to Cedar Park.

The Cedar-Park-to-Burnet *Hill Country Flyer* is still at the heart of the A&TC's operations, but the experiences available to the traveling public have been expanded to include regular shorter runs from Cedar Park to ASTA's restored 1912 depot in Bertram; a full array of special runs such as murder mysteries, beer and wine specials and special runs for children; and special events such as the annual Day Out With Thomas® festivities and the year-ending runs of the *North Pole Flyer*.

As ASTA and the railroad prepare for the next quarter-century, thanks are due to thousands of volunteers, staff, donors and passengers who have made possible Central Texas' unique venture of railroad preservation!



New Digital Public-Address System Makes Onboard Communication Quick, Easy and Clear

A new, state-of-the-art public-address system made its debut on ASTA's trains in May, clearly and efficiently transmitting information, entertainment and—if necessary—emergency messages throughout the cars.

The new digital system was planned and completed under the direction of ASTA Director Gregg Squires, assisted by Javier Prado and Bob Thiele. Gregg's long experience as a record producer gave him ample familiarity with sound systems!

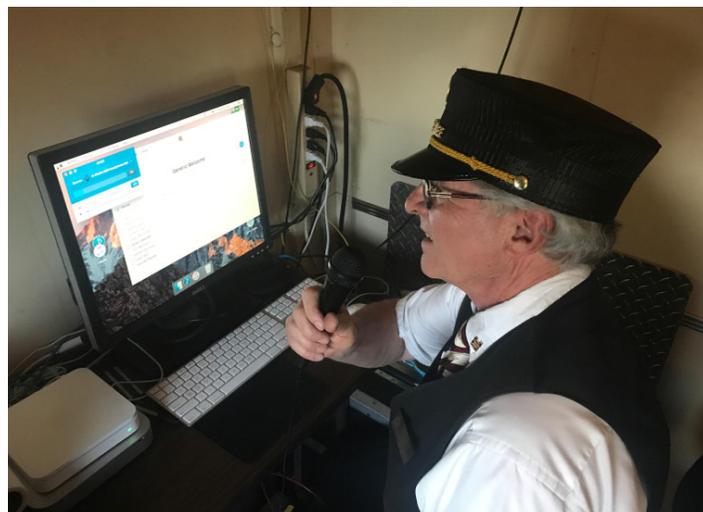
The system is a wireless Internet network that uses a computer to serve up music and announcements throughout the train. The control for the system is in the conductor's office aboard the lounge car *Maurice Beckham*, and

each car has its own receiver to receive and broadcast the digital data, eliminating the need for any physical connection between cars.

Under way, the system is managed by the onboard crew chiefs.

One chief, Dr. David Gracy, commended in an email the "very, very fine system" and said "beyond the clear, crisp sound that it delivers in every car, the delay between speaking into the microphone and hearing my words through the speakers in the *Beckham* is a real added value. I can judge whether I sound the way I want to sound in what I am saying."

Funding for the new PA system came primarily from donations from the ASTA board.



Veteran Crew Chief John Phalen reading passenger announcements via the new PA system. This terminal in the onboard conductor's office is the nerve center for both voice and recorded announcements and entertainment. (Ben Sargent photo.)

Thanks to our generous friends!

(Donations from January through June 2017. If we have left anyone off, please accept our apologies and contact us at director@austinsteamtrain.org so we can make sure we recognize you in our next edition.)

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New Yard Mechanic Chris Hoff Will Be “Keeping ‘Em Rolling”

Christopher Hoff, an experienced rail-car repairman and carman from Wyoming, will begin working Aug. 1 as the primary mechanic in the A&TC’s Cedar Park Yard.

The job—known officially in railroad jargon as the “qualified mechanical person”—will entail regular inspection, maintenance and repair of the railroad’s locomotives and cars, which in the A&TC’s case also involves taking care of the passenger equipment’s electrical, climate-control and plumbing systems.

Chris will be replacing carman Bob Thiele, who is retiring at the end of July. Bob, a Navy veteran and retired swimming coach, served in the yard for three years as a volunteer and two years on paid staff.

Chris is coming to the A&TC

from six years of employment with Savage Services Corporation, managing car and locomotive maintenance within the Laramie River Station, a large coal-fired power facility in Wheatland, Wyo.

Prior to that, he had worked as a switchman in the railyards of the Western Sugar Co. in Scottsbluff, Neb.

In addition to his experience with cars and engines, Chris has extensive welding skills, has been a working cowboy and, we are told, is a good hand with a guitar, as well.

He is a native of Nebraska and attended Western Nebraska Community College in Scottsbluff. Chris and his wife Erin have a four-year-old daughter, Charley.



Leased Locomotive Steps Up to the Plate

While the A&TC’s workhorse diesel, No. 442, undergoes a thorough overhaul, train service is continuing behind No. 3134, leased from Horizon Rail of Cleveland, Ohio.

The bright blue 123-ton GP 40-3 arrived in Cedar Park in March, accompanied by her owner John Jaros, who came along to show A&TC engineers some of the particular operating

characteristics of the engine.

3134 has been powering the trains ever since, and those engineers report great satisfaction with her performance.

The engine was built by General Motors’ EMD Division in 1968 for the long-gone Penn Central, and she has had a varied career since, serving the Conrail system, the Rio Grande and Southwestern Railroad in south-

Departures: Two of ASTA’s Best Friends

Mary C. Boone

Mary Cunningham Boone, wife of ASTA’s founder Arthur Boone and always a strong supporter of ASTA and its mission, died April 28 at age 94.

Mrs. Boone, a San Antonio native, met Arthur when both were students at Baylor University, and they were married in 1944. Mr. Boone returned from World War II service to found a successful frozen-food business, Frostex Foods.

The Boones owned a private railcar, *Boonesborough*, on which they traveled more than 60,000 miles around the nation, and that interest led to Arthur’s involvement in the founding of ASTA in 1989.

Mary—“GrandMary” to her family—was also deeply involved in philanthropy, bridge, tennis and especially the work of Hyde Park Baptist Church, where the Boones were faithful members for more than 40 years.

Mrs. Boone is survived by her sons Bill (still a much-appreciated, stalwart supporter of ASTA’s mission) and Jim Boone, a brother, four grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Her class, generosity, ready wit and unflinching optimism will certainly be missed.

Clarence Tjossem

Clarence E. Tjossem, renowned as one of the A&TC’s most cheerful and personable onboard-service crew members, died Jan. 25 at age 87.

Clarence had charmed, entertained and cared for A&TC passengers as a car attendant for 17 years.

He spent much of his career in the Air Force, enlisting in 1954, serving in combat duty in Vietnam and retiring from his last posting at Bergstrom Air Force Base in 1977.

After his discharge, Clarence remained close to the Air Force, working in civil engineering at Bergstrom and in the commissary at Lackland AFB in San Antonio.

Clarence and Marlys, his wife of 65 years, lived in Creedmoor in southeastern Travis County, and Clarence served on the community’s City Council for 34 years.

They also cared for 17 foster children in their Creedmoor home.

Clarence was born in the farming community of Primghar, Iowa, where he farmed, then worked for a trucking company before enlisting in the Air Force.

Clarence’s ready smile and always cheerful disposition will be missed.

For the fun, or for the satisfaction of a job well done.

Become an ASTA Volunteer!

Call Rachel Naron at 512-477-8468 ext. 1, email volunteers@austin-steamtrain.org or come by our office, 401 E. Whitestone, Suite C-100, Cedar Park.

ern New Mexico before being acquired and rebuilt by Horizon.

Leased by ASTA on a three-year contract, 3134 hauls with 3,000 horsepower and is equipped with dynamic brakes.

The A&TC’s 442 was pulled from service in late 2016 for some necessary heavy-duty improvements which will include new turbochargers and an overhaul of electrical components.

2017 Amplify Austin Campaign Brings in Welcome Help for Concession-Car Project

For the fourth year in a row, ASTA participated in early March in Amplify Austin, the one-day fundraising push that annually raises millions for local non-profits, and pulled in just under \$13,000 earmarked for completion of its new, climate-controlled concession car.

ASTA's donations came from 65 generous contributors.

The car, a restoration of a 1946 Santa Fe coach, will soon be in service furnishing snack food, beverages and souvenirs to A&TC passengers. The interior of the car—dubbed *Cedar Park*—has been completely redesigned and new air-conditioning, electrical and mechanical systems installed in an effort managed by ASTA Director Joe

Pinnelli.

Total cost of the new concession car will be \$315,000.

Amplify Austin is an annual project of the non-profit umbrella group I Live Here I Give Here. This year the one-day push brought in more than \$9.8 million for nearly 700 non-profits in the seven-county Austin area.

ASTA celebrated the final push of Amplify Austin on March 2 with a celebratory event at Whitestone Brewery in Cedar Park.



Beer, Wine, Cocktail Trains Pulling in Happy Passengers



Some of the A&TC's most popular runs are our beer, wine and cocktail specials. Each is presented by a local brewery, winery or distillery and includes expert discussion of the libations as well as delicious catered meals. Check our website, austinsteamtrain.org, for details, schedules and reservations!

A Special Thanks to Our Friends and Supporters,
the City of Cedar Park and Cedar Park Tourism Services!



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