

Volunteer Gets Creative w/Operation Lifesaver



Jim "Bigfoot" Bellmyer, LASTA Volunteer and Operation Lifesaver Presenter. Bill Hamblin, Jr. photo

This year (at Gretna Fest) we took a different approach than last year. Instead of just a walk-through tour of a bare caboos, we turned LASTA 1 into a classroom and museum. Our focus was to continue to grab onto our rail heritage yet at the same time promote rail grade crossing safety.

Using my laptop computer with an additional monitor, we were able to show a variety of LASTA photos in the background - and when needed, we had Operation Lifesaver visuals at hand. We also collected and borrowed various pieces of railroad equipment for display; tools and oil cans and different artifacts that accented the railroad industry and safety equipment.

We began our tour by taking groups of 20 people through a job briefing on what to expect. Then keeping safety in mind we showed the proper way to enter and exit the car (holding on to the handrails). Then it was on to the conductors table, explaining his responsibilities and the mountain of paper work he had to keep up with. Then we went on to

explain the different types of cabooses, their purpose and some of the nicknames that had been given to them.

We then allowed our guests to sit by the bay window and observe the SP745 consist (with a great view of the journal boxes on the fireman's side of the train). Asked what they could see on the engineers side, many were surprised by how much vision is limited and that the visibility in a car is much greater.

We explained how the caboos was made obsolete by today's roller bearing trucks, FREDs (Flashing Rear End Device) and EOTDs (End Of Train Device), track detectors and other pieces of equipment along the track. We also explained however that there are states in the Midwest and the Northeast that still use caboos for certain train moves.

At this point we began to work on safety using the Operation Lifesaver visuals and a small train layout that displayed a typical rail grade crossing. We explained how every two hours in the U.S. either a vehicle or a pedestrian is involved in a train collision. Then we covered the different types of crossing's and markings, warning signs, gates, flashing lights and No Train Horn zones.

Taking it further, we asked those who crossed the tracks on a daily basis what they did when they came to a railroad crossing. Most replied if the lights were not flashing they did not bother to slow down or even look for a train. Then we asked how many have gone around the gates or went thru the flashing lights. These answers lead us into explaining the dangers that may exist.

Trains can stop but not quickly, they cannot swerve to get out of your way - that is why they have the right of way! Using the Operation Lifesaver brake chart visual we showed that a car traveling at 55MPH takes about 200ft. to stop, a school bus takes about 220ft. to stop, and an 18 wheeler takes about 300ft. to stop. 300ft. is equiva-

lent to a football field (and just to add impact to this statement we said that was equivalent to one Super Dome!)

Now a freight train traveling at 55MPH with approximately 12,000,000lbs of freight couldn't stop in less than 5280ft. (a mile plus) or 18 football fields or 18 Super Domes! How impressive it was to see their shocked faces after hearing that statistic!

We also explained how distractions play a major part in rail incidents, like radio's blaring, talking or texting on our phones, and reading books or maps while driving. Then we asked them to think of ways they have become distracted themselves while driving. We also pointed out that if they came across a double track to wait until it was safe to go as another train may be coming in the same or different direction. Then to continue to reinforce this point, we told them that most crashes or incidents with a train occur when the train is traveling 30MPH or less and within 25 miles from home!

The visitors learned that when approaching the tracks, it is very important not to get trapped on the tracks, and to allow school buses and larger vehicles time to clear before proceeding. "If you don't fit; don't commit," do not stop your vehicle on the tracks!

We asked the kids how they crossed with their bikes, explaining the best way is to walk a bike across the tracks, not to ride between the rails or play along the tracks. We told them not to throw items at a train, what could happen if they did, not to put things on the tracks, play around rail cars, play on the bridges or in tunnels.

We explained the Emergency Notification System and how to identify it at each rail grade crossing, how to use the toll free number and to report suspicious activities like people riding on the train. We also covered what to do if your vehicle stalls out going over

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the crossing and where to go - especially if a train is approaching.

Then we went into trespassing, explaining how many people ignore railroad right-of-ways and cross the tracks to take short cuts, having no clue of the dangers that exist until they become a victim (then it is too late)! We actually heard from a boy who "threw his dad under the train" revealing that dad likes to fish from a certain local railroad bridge.

Again we emphasized distractions; people walking or jogging with their MP3 players, so "into" what they are doing when suddenly "surprise!" they are now face to face with a train - a train that can't swerve to miss them.

For each group that we brought through we had a Q & A session and we boasted about LASTA's mission, handing out LASTA's brochures and those of Operation Lifesaver. From Friday afternoon till Sunday evening we had 708 participants. I honestly

must admit I was surprised by how many people waited for their turn to come through, and by some who came through more than once bringing others to see the presentation.

The bottom line is I believe we were successful in relaying to our guests a better understanding that "ANY TIME IS TRAIN TIME" and to "ALWAYS EXPECT A TRAIN". Most were not going to take crossing the tracks for granted any more.

Finally, I would like to thank the following people who helped make this weekend possible: Karl Smith, one of LASTA'S behind-the-scenes guys that makes events like this go very smoothly (and his wealth of knowledge brings a lot to the table!) Barry Keegan, for getting the LASTA brochures and coordinating the event. Bill Morris, LASTA's President, a retired UP engineer who sat in on a few of our groups giving us first hand experience of what an engineer may see or do. Erich Lendermon, our

NOCG conductor and also a LASTA crew member, explained his duties and encounters working on the New Orleans Gulf Coast. John B. Price for the pictures and his knowledge of railroads here and abroad. Ann Colston (retired), works with both AARP and Operation Lifesaver as a volunteer and a presenter. And Tim Minott who currently works for UP's MOW team and is a new Operation Lifesaver Presenter and volunteer.

Last but not least I would like to thank all the members and crew that helped bring SP745 to Gretna Fest and back (including the Ellsworth Corporation's sponsorship of the NOPB transfer fee). That was a lot of work so you are the unsung heroes of this LASTA organization. Take a bow, you all deserve it. In closing all I can say is that this weekend was simply amazing and we brought a lot of joy to many, many rail fans young and old alike. We are fulfilling our purpose!

J. "Bigfoot" Bellmyer

Rail Tales - Long Black Train

On February 12, 1930 an article from the Lafayette *Daily Advertiser* reported George W. Wrighton's recollection of having piloted President Lincoln's Funeral Train.

The article also contained a map of the entire trip, which left Washington, DC on April 21, 1865 headed for Springfield, Illinois. Wrighton recalls the somber run; the train was shrouded in black bunting and draped with American flags. A large picture of the president was attached to the outside of the locomotive cab just above the cowcatcher.

"Lincoln's Special" as it was called was a 1,654 mile, 13 day journey and 11 planned memorial services. The trip essentially retraced the president's rail trip in 1861. The funeral train leisurely rolled down the tracks while slowly tolling the engine's bell as the miles rolled along; allowing

longs lines of silent grieving mourners a chance to view the president's train. Millions were estimated to have viewed Lincoln's funeral train while standing in the cold and inclement weather and even in the dark of night. When spectators caught sight of the black draped locomotive, hordes crowded along the track. Some waved small flags while others silently wept. After the train passed they stepped between the rails and watched it fade into the distance.

At each switch, Wrighton peered cautiously from the locomotive cab. Each railroad switch had been lined and spiked from the mainline to prevent tampering until the train had passed. The cortege was given right-of-way over all other rail traffic.

"The Old Nashville", a steam locomotive complete with its large distinctive diamond shaped smoke stack

pulled the train. It was the most common engine used during that era. The engine was equipped with the American 4-4-0 wheel configuration. The engine had four pilot wheels followed by four tall drivers beneath a slim boiler, which made a graceful unit.

Lincoln's Special consisted of nine cars: five newly built Pullman sleeper cars carried Lincoln's family members, government officials and newspaper reporters. The car carrying Lincoln's body was the eight car.

Lincoln's funeral car had been his converted private car. It was reported to be the most opulent private car of its day. Lincoln never used his newly built private car while alive, but it carried his body on then long journey home. In 1911, Lincoln's funeral car was totally destroyed by a prairie fire in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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