

# 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

## The Western Maryland Scenic Railroad



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Cumberland, Maryland has been a railroading town since the first Baltimore & Ohio Railroad steam locomotive steamed into town in 1842.

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Rail traffic became an integral part of daily life for residents who learned to live with crossing delays and billows of black smoke; local railroads quickly became associated with progress and employment opportunities. The B&O was later joined by the Cumberland & Pennsylvania, Georges Creek & Cumberland, Pennsylvania, West Virginia Central, and Western Maryland railroads as they made Cumberland a destination for operations. While there were several carriers operating

in the city, it was the Western Maryland Railway's entry into Cumberland that proved to be a forerunner of the present day railroad that is celebrating its 25th anniversary season. The Western Maryland Railway and Western Maryland Scenic Railroad make for interesting partners separated by time but connected by generations of railfans who enjoy the lore of rails.

The Western Maryland Railroad was chartered in 1852 and quickly began to expand westward. In 1872, the line reached Hagerstown, Maryland, and was poised to make a major extension to Cumberland where rich natural resources awaited the carrier. At this time, local events became intertwined with national news events that catapulted the city and railroad into a national spotlight.

Jay Gould, the often vilified 19th century speculator and his son, George, sought to build a transcontinental railroad. Already controlling several railroads in the west, George Gould viewed the Western Maryland as the missing link needed to complete a transportation empire. In 1902, Mr. Gould completed an important step in the process when he acquired the Western Maryland Railroad through a

business arrangement with a group of investors known as the Fuller Syndicate.

To finalize the coast-to-coast railroad, a Hagerstown-to-Cumberland extension was necessary. While the Western Maryland extension finally reached Cumberland in 1906, it had proven to be a difficult and expensive undertaking that ultimately resulted in the collapse of the Fuller Syndicate and Gould's empire. Gould's financial woes made front page news across the country. In 1908, the Western Maryland Railroad entered receivership where it remained until emerging the following year as the Western Maryland *Railway*. In fulfillment of an agreement with the New York Central System, the Western Maryland built the 86 mile long rail line from Cumberland over the Allegheny Mountains to Connellsville, Pennsylvania, during 1910-12. This new track allowed its trains to go on to Pittsburgh and farther west.

The Western Maryland Railway established itself as a successful carrier over the next five or six decades. The railroad could not, however, overtake its major competitor, the B&O Railroad. Competition with the B&O proved to be costly and contributed to the Western Maryland's financial difficulties in the late 1950s when through passenger service from Baltimore to Elkins via Cumberland ended (1958) and freight operations declined. A second factor in the railway's demise was the number of consolidations



experienced by the industry that eventually absorbed the company. Incorporation of the Chessie System in 1973 meant the B&O, Western Maryland, and Chesapeake and Ohio railroads would merge into one entity. Duplicate trackage created by the merger resulted in abandonment of Western Maryland right-of-way.

## The Return of Steam to Cumberland, The Western Maryland Scenic Railroad (WMSR)

In 1987, the owners of the Alleghany Central Railroad generated excitement among railfans when they tested their steam powered locomotive on abandoned Western Maryland trackage. The test runs proved to be a new era for an established industry in Allegany County. Once again Cumberland residents experienced the sounds of iron horses and steam whistles.

The scenic rail excursions that followed blended the spirit of the former Western Maryland Railway with entrepreneurship, volunteerism, supportive government officials, and hard working employees to make the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad a national attraction.

Jack and Sally Showalter, operators and owners of the Alleghany Central Railroad, provided locomotives and mechanical expertise while the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad Development Corporation (WMSRDC) (a non-profit corporation formed in 1986) and dedicated volunteers prepared much of the ground work necessary for a steam



***Mountain Thunder* steams through Brush Tunnel on its way to Frostburg.**

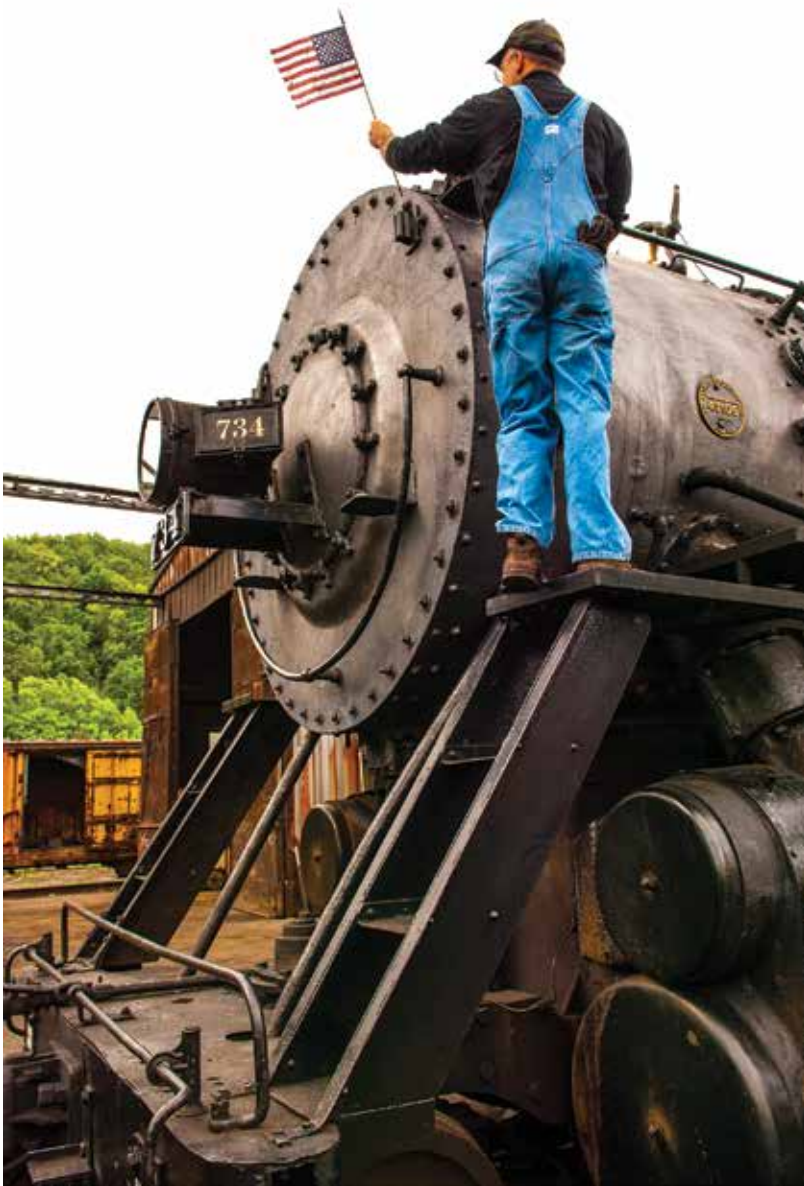
diesels, Alco units FPA-2 and RS-3 painted in “Fireball” schemes.

Although the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad operated diesels during its third year of operation, officials were committed to steam power and acquired a Baldwin 2-8-0 locomotive in January 1992. Dubbed “*Mountain Thunder*” and renumbered 734 by the WMSR, the locomotive was built in 1916 by the Baldwin Locomotive Works for the Lake Superior & Ishpeming Railroad, based in Marquette,

excursion railroad to operate on an abandoned 15.6 mile right-of-way between Cumberland and Frostburg. Negotiations among the WMSRDC, the Showalter’s, the State of Maryland, Allegany County, and the City of Cumberland allowed the Alleghany Central Railroad to begin public operations in April 1989, thereby marking the return of steam engine passenger service to Allegany County after a four decade absence.

The Alleghany Central owned two Pacific class steam locomotives, numbered 1238 and 1286, and operated a GP-9 diesel that was acquired by the City of Cumberland. Ridership during the inaugural year exceeded 40,000, nearly double the projected number.

In 1991, the contract between the WMSRDC and the Showalters was not renewed and Sheraden Rail-Op from Addison, Illinois, signed a one year deal with the nonprofit organization. Under Sheraden’s direction the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad operated vintage



**On Memorial Day, Engineer Donnie Shaw displays American flags on *Mountain Thunder*, as he does for other special holidays and occasions.**

Michigan. The classification type is a Consolidation 2-8-0; the numbers 2-8-0 refer to the two smaller pilot wheels to the front, 8 larger driving wheels behind, and no trailing wheels. This specific locomotive was used for switching and freight hauling in Michigan's Upper Peninsula from 1916 to 1956. In 1971, it was placed on display in the Illinois Railroad Museum, until the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad purchased it. Over 90% of the parts replaced on the engine were machined in the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad shop and the engine was put into service once again in 1993 on right-of-way formerly owned by the Western Maryland Railway. Although the locomotive 734 was not originally on the Western Maryland roster, the railway operated similar

2-8-0s for many years. In 1995, two General Motors (EMD) GP-30s were acquired from Conrail and also painted in Western Maryland livery. Passenger cars, cabooses, and freight cars have been acquired over the years. Today the WMSR owns and operates a variety of coaches and rolling stock.

The WMSR's 15.6 mile route to Frostburg begins in Cumberland and heads west into the Narrows. The ride to Frostburg is a challenging 1,300 foot vertical climb from Cumberland and includes a stretch of track rising at nearly 3% grade. The final two miles are on the former Cumberland and Pennsylvania Railroad's route because it enters Frostburg at closer proximity than the original Western Maryland Depot which burned in 1963. Additional highlights of the trip include Helmstetter's Curve, Brush Tunnel, and an operating 100 foot turntable that enables *Mountain Thunder* to turn and prepare for the return trip. While at Frostburg, visitors may visit the Thrasher Carriage Museum, shop at nearby depot stores, or sightsee in the town of Frostburg, a community of 8,000 residents and home to Frostburg State University.

To keep the WMSR maintained and on time requires a crew of dedicated employees. Mike Gresham, the railroad's superintendent, believes it is vital that everyone strives to provide a positive experience for visitors. "We work really hard to make visitors feel welcome when they arrive at the Cumberland station. Operating a passenger train requires us to create a positive experience for visitors at every point we make contact with them. Our employees are dedicated to making that happen for our guests." The superintendent's train crew must synchronize its efforts much like the moving parts in the locomotive they operate.

Danny Pluta, an eight-year employee, arrives in the predawn hours to light the boiler and



**Fireman, Steven Diehl shovels coal into the firebox to maintain steam pressure at 195 psi.**

maintain the required temperature because *Mountain Thunder* never completely sleeps during the operating season. Danny's work is followed by fireman Steven Diehl who arrives at 8:00 am to prepare a fresh bed of bituminous coal in the firebox. "I break the coal bank that Danny prepared and then light off the fire. As the fire gets hotter the boiler temperature increases. One of my responsibilities is to get the steam pressure to 195 psi and keep it at that level. It takes about five or six hours to get the engine up to operating pressure. I also top off the lubricators for air compressors, journals, cylinders, and the stoker (a mechanical screw device that moves coal from the tender to the firebox)."

Brakeman Trevor Laber has worked on the WMSR since attending Allegany High School, a total of three years. "It's a job that I really

like doing. Basically, in the morning I help to get the train ready by fueling the cars and completing mechanical inspections. Then I assist on the train ride to Frostburg and set the handbrakes."

Engineer Donnie Shaw, a five year veteran of the WMSR, notes that all steam training is "on the job." Donnie operates both *Mountain Thunder* and the diesel units but prefers the former. "I like steam best because it is more fun and almost a life form. The compression of steam is its lungs, the coal its food, and water its drink. *Mountain Thunder* even sweats when blowing off excess steam pressure. Operating a steam engine is an art because you learn to feel what the engine is doing and cope with its different personalities. There could be two consecutive days with the same conditions, but it runs differently each time. I once read that steam locomotives are the closest thing people have invented to creating mechanical life forms. Operating the steam engine got in my blood and I really enjoy my job because it is fun and rewarding."

A ride in *Mountain Thunder's* cab is a step back in time and a great example of living history. No LED gauges, digital instrument panels, or climate controlled enclosures for the engineer, fireman or brakeman. Those technologies did not exist in 1916 and they are not to be found on #734. A roaring fire heats the cab, coal dust covers everything in sight, a sulfurous smell hangs heavy in the air while the sound of steam permeates the passenger station complex like a giant whistling tea kettle.

Operating the iron horse creates a simultaneous cacophony or symphony depending on whether one is new to the event or an enthusiast who enjoys the interaction of mechanical and human motion the engine requires. Engineer Donnie directs the symphony with his raised left arm that pulls and pushes the brake handle and long



**Engineer, Donnie Shaw (left) and Conductor, Jim May prepare to board *Mountain Thunder*.**

throttle, a series of linkages that allow steam into the pipes and cylinders. If more speed is desired, the handle is pulled to allow more steam pressure to be released to the pistons. A steady rhythm of ***CHOO-choo-choo, CHOO-choo-choo*** means the symphony is in full progress and all systems are go. Any drop in pressure is a cause for concern and a call to action. Monitoring the symphonic sounds is a key component in the operation of the iron horse.

Fireman Steve moves in a two step pattern to monitor the analogue pressure gauge, firebox, and stoker. "I open and close the stoker to move coal into the firebox. By controlling the amount of coal that moves from the tender into the firebox, we regulate the fire and heat it produces. If the fire looks too dark, the stoker is cut back."

How fast is ***Mountain Thunder*** traveling? Don't bother to look for a speedometer because it doesn't exist. Donnie monitors the speed by consulting a railroad pocket watch; one mile in four minutes, or 15 miles per hour, is a typical gallop for the iron horse, at least until climbing the 3% grade near the town of Frostburg.



**Western Maryland Scenic Railroad's Mechanical Department: (Top, left to right), Robert Handley and Scott Nixon; (Bottom, left to right), Chief Mechanical Officer, Dan Pluta; Dan Pluta II; Fireman, Steven Diehl; Leonard Faidley; Mark Andrews; Engineer, Donnie Shaw; and Fleet Manager and master machinist, Chris Talluto.**

While passengers are enjoying the scenic ride, conductor Jim May carries out assigned duties. Like many of the WMSR employees, his work day begins long before the train arrives at the station. In fact, Jim reports for duty at 10:00 am to monitor ridership, sign out the track, and inspect the interior of passenger cars. A former CSX employee, Jim understands rail operations and the importance of attending to details. "When everything is ready, I give permission for the train to enter the station and prepare to board passengers. It is a really enjoyable experience to talk with passengers who come from all over the world. The steam engine is the big draw for train enthusiasts and it is amazing that steam is still here."

Maintenance operations are performed at the former Western Maryland Ridgeley Yard complex located a short distance across the Potomac River. The original Western

Maryland shop opened in August 1913 and featured a state-of-the-art brick and steel roundhouse hosting 20 engine stalls. Most of the original complex was destroyed by fire and demolished before the 1980s, so facilities needed to be built or upgraded. Today the shop employees repair and maintain the WMSR cars and locomotives, as well as refurbish equipment from other railroads.

Dan Pluta, chief mechanical officer, father to Danny, and a 22-year veteran of the WMSR shop oversees all work related to engineering designs, ordering materials, and mechanical repairs. “I basically organize the work for shop employees. Our employees are cross trained and everyone is willing to do whatever is necessary to get the job done.” Chris Talluto, fleet manager and master machinist, works with Dan to maintain *Mountain Thunder* and the complement of diesels and coaches operated by the WMSR. Employees Mark Andrews, Scott Nixon, and Robert Handley also enjoy working on the old technology and everything associated with the historical aspects of the WMSR. According to Superintendent Mike, “Dan and the crew really keep the railroad running. It is also interesting to see Dan passing along the skills and knowledge associated with one hundred year old technology to his son and other employees that will keep the tradition alive for the next generation. That is what makes the WMSR so special.”

Donna Corley, office manager, has supervised the gift shop, acted as a liaison with the accounting office, and operated the business operations for eleven years. “We all work together to provide a positive experience for our visitors. Steve Spring and Nicole Gray handle the ticket sales and we add seasonal reservationists and gift shop employees during our operating season. We are fortunate to have so many experienced employees at the WMSR.”

The Western Maryland Scenic Railroad continues the passenger train service that Cumberland has experienced since the mid 19th Century. Passing along those traditions and mechanical technologies associated with the industry to contemporary visitors make the railroad a unique place to visit. The WMSR invites residents and visitors to be a part of special activities and promotions during its Silver Anniversary season.



**Track Crew (left to right): Andy Buskirk, Josh Nixon, and Bruce Soistman.**

## WMSR Track Crew

Visitors to the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad often associate the train with employees that are visible, particularly the conductor, fireman, and engineer. Other employees are not so visible yet contribute to the railroads success and safety. The WMSR track crew carries out a number of important duties that are mandated by regulators. According to Bruce Soistman, track foreman, “We gauge the rails, install ties, and conduct twice a week track inspections. During the off-season we spend a lot of time clearing the right-of-way. We also transpose rails; that means unfastening the rails, picking them up, and turning them around, so there is a sharp edge on the rail.” Mike Gresham, WMSR superintendent, noted that the State of Maryland track inspector recently complimented the crew for its excellence in maintaining the 17 miles of track. “We can have the best equipment and train crew but if the rails are not maintained, we are not going anywhere. Most people don’t think of the track crew when they see the train. We are fortunate to have a hard working crew at the WMSR.”

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