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Doing the Locomotion

WHEN THE NOTICE FINALLY arrives in the mail it is a single sheet of white paper. It contains the appointed date, time, and directions, and advises me to be prompt. At the bottom is the name of one Carl Brown, Superintendent of Transportation. At the top are two words: CREW CALL. And I know exactly what that means because I've been waiting—pacing, dreaming—for weeks. In a few days I will pack my bags, leave three bowls of food for the cat, lock my New York apartment, board a jet to St. Louis and a prop to Champaign, Illinois, rent a car and drive through the night to the tiny town of Monticello for one reason and one reason alone:

I am going to drive a train.

I've been playing that line in my head like an endless loop of tape. Perhaps it is because I'm not sure I believe I'm finally going to do something I've dreamed of doing for just about forever. In a day when even things like boxes of cotton swabs have labels warning of their potential hazards, I, an ordinary enough person who's never driven anything bigger than Dad's '72 Caddy, will be taking the throttle of a 1,500-horsepower diesel locomotive and hauling a train for eight miles.

That I have the chance to do this at all is thanks to the vision of the Monticello Railway Museum, an all-volunteer organization that maintains 10 miles of track and 100 pieces of vintage railroad equipment on the wind-swept plains of central Illinois. With its weekend and holiday excursions, Monticello does pretty much what other tourist railroads do by giving visitors a chance to ride a swell old train. But four weekends a year, Monticello does what the others wouldn't dream of doing: It gives visitors a chance to drive one. If you're over 18, physically able to climb into an engine, willing to sign their liability waiver, and ready to fork over 75 bucks, it's all yours. Welcome to "Throttle Time."

Signs for this event fill up months in advance. People have come from as far away as Germany to drive the train. Schoolboys have done it. One year, an 80-year-old grandmother did it. Everyone has his or her own reasons, of course, and mine is pretty simple. I am going to drive a train for the sheer, unvarnished thrill of knowing for the rest of my life that I have driven one.

"We have people writing back and saying 'Thanks for a dream come true,'" relates museum volunteer Doug Nipper. "It's an opportunity you wouldn't have otherwise." Adds Monticello's chairperson Barbara Mann, "I don't want to say it's a toy, but when you turn people loose with an engine they have a fairly decent time."



Ah yes, the engine. That is, actually, the main reason I'm doing this. Railroad fever can be a virulent thing, but I've only got a mild case. I am not a "steamhead," and Amtrak is far from thrilling. Commuter trains? Nah, but BMD F-series engines are a different story. These were the great diesels of the postwar years with porthole windows, stylish cabs, and motors bigger than your kitchen. They pulled mile-long freights through snowstorms and whisked toasty Pullman sleepers through the mountains. They were loud, strong, ominous-looking things. To me they define everything that was at once gritty and romantic about American railroading. Or must have been. Most of American railroading vanished before I was born. Monticello has three working engines, but I am here for only one.

She is Wabash 1189, a 1953 EMD P7A powered by a Class 167 two-cycle V-65 diesel. She is 31 feet long. She is 115 tons. And right now, while I stand in the brown grass fighting a lump in my throat, the sleek gray monster with the pig-snout headlight and windshields that sweep down like some pair of tremendous, sad eyes is just about the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

She idles on the track beside the tiny Nelson's Crossing depot, a cozy hutch with plank floors and benches amid an otherwise desolate landscape of empty fields and power lines. Wabash 1189's diesel is running a little hotter today, because the engine is coupled to six cars instead of Throttle Time's usual two. It's like a train from the afterlife: a hodgepodge of grand dames from different eras and different railroads, commingling here decades after their sisters disappeared in the scrap yards. There's a 1918 Pullman combination baggage-car/coach, and a 1923 Rock Island coach with air scoops on its roof. There are Illinois Central coaches with orange stripes sliding down their chocolate-brown sides. A 1958 Canadian National steam-generator car sports thick rivets, followed by Wabash caboose No. 2824. Later, when I check my car roster and add up all the weights, the thought occurs to me: You will be driving something that weighs around 490 tons.

With the low autumn sun behind it, the depot casts a dark shadow in the grass. Faded sleepers and baggage cars repose on display tracks beside Monticello's main line. It is a cold morning, threaded by the distant din of the interstate. Every so often, the train makes a growling appearance and then roars out of sight.

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What's unusual is that there are so few people around. I'd expected crowds for something like this—hot dog vendors, hoards of cheering friends. But the occasion is strangely intimate. Throttle Time participants arrive with their families, wait for their turns, climb into the cab and go. It's almost as though they're not driving the train so much as keeping an appointment with it. As Nipper says, "This is a personal event for people."

For a day and a half I've been watching Throttle Timers emerge from their runs. Some are red-faced. Some shake their heads. All of them are smiling. (All is not many, by the way; generous time slots mean only about 12 people will have a turn between dawn and dusk.) Yesterday, I approached two men climbing down from the engine to ask them what it had been like. I wasn't just curious; I wanted to see what I was in for.

"There's definitely a feeling of power," Tony Billio of Crete, Illinois, told me. "There's a lot more to it than I thought. I ran the coze over, and the run made it hard to see the dials." Billio's friend Richard Tippett from New Lenox, Illinois, added, "We got up to 20 mph. That doesn't sound very fast, but when you're up there, you're moving. The air brake was my challenge. The air brake," he warned me, "is touchy." Great.

A list taped to the register in the gift shop says that I will be running at 2:30. There's some time to kill, so I accept conductor Hank Brickman's offer to ride with him in the caboose. "There's the mental part to this, too," he advises me, tinkering with his kerosene heater. "You have to be constantly on the alert." Before long, he checks his watch. "It's your turn," he says.



For all of 1189's magnificence, her cab is a cramped, stifling place. It's humid, vaguely redolent of oil. Behind the wall, the idling diesel grumbles: "kuuema-chuuema-chuuema-kuuema." I sit on the right side, look out at the ground that is suddenly very far below and face a control panel that looks as though it were salvaged from a submarine. It is a myriad of valves, dials, levers and switches.

Quiet, overall-clad Carl Brown, serving as fireman, shuts the cab door behind him and nods. Then my instructor, Charles Daigh, begins what is likely the world's only locomotive quickie course: "There's your reverser...that's the throttle...there are eight running positions...the white needle is the brake pipe gauge...this is the squalling reservoir..." I internalize perhaps 20 percent of this. What I cannot get over is the throttle itself, just off to my left. It reminds me that a 1,500-horsepower locomotive hauling hundreds of tons of steel, wood, glass and human tissue is governed by something roughly the size of a hot dog.

I map to, and Daigh wants me to practice "setting up" the brake, a highly fickle instrument I will get to shortly. Then Daigh says it's time to go. He orders me to push the brake handle forward to release it ("kloong!"), turn the bell on ("ku-Ching! ku-Ching!"), bleed off the engine's cylinder pressure ("Waaaaaaah-clock!") and pull two on the horn ("Waaaah! Waaaaaaah!"). And now the moment of truth: "Move the throttle up a notch."

It is like waking a dragon. The diesel roars to life with an impatient "Garrrrumgh!" "Another notch," Daigh coaxes, and the engine changes its tune. It walks now, powerfully, almost mournfully, with the weight of its work. As the brakes drag off, the whole hulk begins to move, slowly



at first, then gradually gains momentum. Though the cab is a symphony of heat and noise, the physical sensation is like skating across glass—it's just a mountain doing the skating.

Throttle on three, past the grade crossing—where I hang on the horn, I see the odometer already pushing 20. Suddenly a bright red light on the console flashes in my eyes. It's a safety device called the Crew Alerter, and it wants to make sure I'm not sleeping. I hit the switch to assure it that, yes, I am quite awake.

"If you ignore it, it will set the emergency brake," Daigh says, "which you don't want to do."

The train roars around a bend, then over the wooden trestle with a river beneath. I don't need to keep my hand on the throttle, but I do. It seems like the right thing to do. Because driving something this size, I feel more powerful than I ever have in my life—and profoundly humbled. Though Daigh is one step to my left and here in a second should anything go wrong, the sudden feeling of responsibility is enormous. I could level a bomb with this thing. And if someone were to suddenly jump in my way there would be nothing I could do about it.

But there is little time for reflections. Suddenly we're a few hundred feet from the dreaded orange traffic cone. My worth as an engineer will be tested by my ability to halt the train before it. I knock my throttle down to idle. "Set up five pounds of air," Daigh orders.

Air pressure is the blood of a train. It needs it to run and it needs it to stop. Right now there are 50 pounds of pressure in my pipe that are holding the brake shoes off all the wheels. "Setting up" five of those pounds actually means releasing them. The more air you dump, the tighter your brakes. Got it? Alright, the train actually has two separate braking systems—one for the engine and one for the cars. And now, hurtling toward the cone, Daigh instructs me to deactivate the engine brake. Huh?

"The engine brake applies faster than the coaches," he yells. "If you let the engine brake set first the coaches will slam into the back of the engine!"

Some things you'd rather not know. I hold the engine brake valve off ("Whooooo!") then grab the coach-brake handle on the right and yank it back ("Hissssssss!"). I keep it there, watching the gauge needle fall for eight loud, agonizing seconds. When it hits 84, I throw the brake into Apply. The maneuver takes much finesse, and apparently I have enough. Within a few yards, 1189 and her steel charges screech to a gentle rest before the cone. *Chiamona-chiamona-chiamona-chiamona.*

I ran her back, up, back, and then up again for the next half-hour. At one point I stuck my head out of the window to stare back at the coaches swaying like drunken giants to the 1,500 horses I held in my left hand. Everyone has at least one scene burned into his memory forever. That one, friends, is mine.

The dying orange sun is throwing its last rays through 1189's windows, and Daigh folds down the visor so I can see. "Can I ask you a stupid question?" I say.

"You can ask me anything you want."

"OK, how am I doing?"

"Pretty good," he says, smiling for the first time. "We're still on the tracks."

ROBERT KLARA'S life usually only includes the less glamorous subway trains of New York City.

