

■ MIKE'S VIEW

South Simcoe Railway:

Vintage Passage through Nowhere

By Mike Davis

When she rolls into the station, she is wonderful to experience.

She is coal fired and uses water to create the steam to operate. The experience is the smell, the feel of her rolling in, her pleasant whistle, and the history. Sir John A. MacDonald was the Prime Minister, Queen Victoria was our head of state and the last spike on the Trans-Canada railway was still two years away when she was built.

She is a 132-year-old steam engine built for CPR and retired from active service in 1960. She is one of two steam locomotives still running in Ontario and

was purchased by one of the 180 volunteer members of the South Simcoe Railway.

Located in Tottenham near the Niagara Escarpment, here you will find living history in the form of operating vintage rail equipment. This is not a spit and polished tourist trap, but a working museum. It feels like a working rail yard from the past, which is interesting but not all that glamorous. The real charm comes from the volunteers with their knowledge and enthusiasm, and the iron beast in action. This is a federally regulated railway, that follows all the rules; the operating crews write the same tests as the main railways. There are 30 members involved in the operations.

On Sundays and holiday Mondays in the summer, locomotive 136 is scheduled to be pressed into service.

"We light the fire around noon on a Saturday," says Eric Smith, president and operations manager of the railway, "and bring it to pressure to test the safety valves and check for leaks, and then we flood the boiler to cool it down slightly until the next morning."

There are several more safety checks done prior to loading passengers. The locomotive uses 2.5 tons of coal and 4,000 gallons of water. Half way through the day, the volunteer fireman adds more water. The engineer runs the locomotive with the fireman. Those 2.5 tons of coal are all hand shovelled into the firebox, mostly by the fireman. The engineer intently watches the pressure gauge. Too much and the relief valve opens, draining valuable steam; too little and there is not enough steam for the excursion. The engineer orders more coal into the firebox to heat up, or injects more water into the boiler to cool down. It is more than operating a machine, it is a courtship, almost a relationship between the engineer and the machine.

Train excursions run on a five-mile remnant of a rail line that once connected the Great Lakes from Pt. Colborne in the Niagara Peninsula to Barrie/Collingwood. Engine 136 has seen the Escarpment lots of times in the past. A sign along the way reads "Nowhere," which the conductor pronounces as both "nowhere" and "now here." The population of the place is zero, except when a train passes through! I have been through Nowhere and back.

The excursion takes about an hour. The regular season runs from Victoria Day until mid-October. There are special excursions related to Easter, Halloween and Christmas. Autumn fall colour tours are the busiest and reservations are recommended. Other vintage locomotives may be used, such as the 1948 diesel-electric number 703. Call ahead for details of the equipment to be used that day.

Call South Simcoe Railway at 905.936.5815.

Mike Davis is co-publisher of, principal photographer and accounts manager for Niagara Escarpment Views. Contact him about advertising at ads@NEViews.ca or 905.877.9665.



▲ Eric Smith in his role as train engineer must pay close attention to the central steam pressure gauge.



▲ Locomotive 136 steams into Tottenham's station.



▲ The fireman stokes the firebox in Locomotive 136 with coal.