

GRAND CANYON RAILWAY

By Patricia Arrigoni

WILLIAMS, ARIZONA – The rebirth and growth of the Grand Canyon Railway is an amazing feat which has been celebrated by hundreds of thousands of railroad fans from around the world since the line's reopening in 1989. My sister and I took a ride on the train the last Saturday in October 2004 and were astonished by a crowd of 611 eager passengers this late in the year. Three locomotives and a power car were needed to pull twelve passenger cars up to the Grand Canyon and back to Williams, Arizona, an outing that lasted seven hours and forty-five minutes. Since it was Fall, the “leisure season,” our train was pulled by three diesel engines. Steam locomotives are only used in the summer from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

The Grand Canyon Railway was originally a branch of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad built to haul copper ore from mines south of the canyon and passengers to the canyon. It began operation on September 17, 1901 and continued for 67 years though train equipment was requisitioned during the early 1940's for government use during World War II.

The demise of the railway began after a road for vehicles was built in 1927. That year 70,382 passengers arrived by train. By 1933 out of 73,034 visitors to the park, only 11,239 rode the Grand Canyon Railway to the South Rim. Still, the line managed to hang on until 1968 when only three passengers rode the last run from Williams up to the canyon.

The situation looked pretty dismal for the next twenty-one years and railfans thought all was lost. The tracks, railroad stations and equipment deteriorated year after year. Finally the railroad equipment was scheduled to be sold for salvage. Then a miracle happened. On January 10, 1989, Max and Thelma Biegert, the new

principals of the Grand Canyon Railway, made an announcement that the train would reopen in just seven months.

Seventeen Pullman Standard passenger cars built in 1923 which had been in use on a Southern Pacific commute run from San Jose to San Francisco and Richmond, California, were purchased that January and sent to the Pacific Fruit Express car yards in Tucson, Arizona for restoration.

The sixty-four mile, 4' 8 1/2" tracks were in terrible shape, but an inspired crew rebuilt them in just five months. The newly revised company also began purchasing locomotives and other passenger cars which could be restored. The Grand Canyon Railway met their announced deadline and the maiden run of the restored line occurred on September 17, 1989. Thousands of rail buffs and local citizens turned out to cheer both in Williams and the Grand Canyon.

Though the first few years of the railroad's operation did not break even, its success now has been phenomenal. In 2003, 190,000 passengers rode between Williams and the Grand Canyon. This also saved 50,000 vehicles from entering the Grand Canyon National Park.

Over the years, more equipment has been restored, railroad stations rebuilt, the old Fray Marcos Hotel turned into an historical museum and a new hotel built in Williams.

A tremendous effort went into restoring steam engine #4960, a 2-8-2 (wheel alignment) Mikado type Baldwin built in Philadelphia in 1923. It had run on the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroad, and was purchased in 1989 though repairs did not start for another four years. The restoration took three years, 80,000 man hours and 1.6 million dollars to complete.

Our train eased into the Williams station at 8:25 am on Saturday, October 30, 2004. I hurried out from breakfast to take some photos and saw it was being pulled by three green diesel engines, all FPA-4 models built by American

Locomotive Company in 1959. The engines, numbering 6776, 6773, and 6793, had been purchased from the Canadian National Railway. Following the locomotives, there was a power car which provided electrical power for the train passenger cars.

Next were several of the 1923 Harriman-style Pullman coach cars which had been beautifully restored with green velvet cushions on seats that had room for two passengers on each side of an aisle. Matching green shades were pulled down over the windows, and the ceilings were painted white with white lights and fans. Original mahogany wood paneling and doors had also been restored which gave each car a classic look. The painted floors were made of four inches of poured cement.

Gold stripes bordered with red decorated the outside of the cars' aluminum bodies. The coach cars were painted a Pullman Green.

The train also had a Pullman Club Car to which a mahogany bar had been added. Two First Class air-conditioned Observation Cars, the "Coconino" and "Kakapelli Cars," featured small upper level glass enclosed domes and had been furnished with deep red velvet seats and floral carpet on the floor and walls.

The First Class air-conditioned car I rode in called the "Arizona," had roomy reclining seats with blue upholstery. There were large tinted windows and fluorescent lights which ran along the top. Racks placed above provided ample space for coats and luggage. Serving trays came down in front of each seat like an airplane.

The Café Car contained a snack bar with several tables and signs which said that tables could be used for fifteen minutes only and no card playing was allowed. There was also a good sized souvenir shop.

I made friends with Bernie Heimenz, the Brakeman, who told me he also traded positions with the conductor. Bernie escorted me into the air-conditioned

Parlor Car at the end of the train which was only open to anyone who purchased the higher priced tickets.

The Parlor Car had small couches and leather upholstered chairs facing in toward the center aisle, plus tiny round tables for food and drinks. It also had an open-air rear platform which, in my opinion, except for riding in the locomotive, was the best spot on the train. I loved the feel of the wind in my hair and seeing the beautiful high desert and Ponderosa pines. It was terrific to be able to photograph the scenery without having a glass window in the way.

I found later you could open windows a little way in the coach and club cars, but they were heavy. Bernie later opened two windows on a platform between cars for me so I could shoot some pictures of the outside of the train curving through Coconino Canyon in the Kaibad Forest.

Each of the cars was staffed by a passenger service attendant. In first class cars they served fresh fruit, pastries, coffee, tea and juice on the trip up. Coach Class was provided with soft drinks while First Class was served champagne on the way back, plus plates of cheese, nuts, and other snacks. The First Class cars, including the Observation Cars and the Parlor Car also sold mixed drinks. All the cars had tiny rest rooms in the back.

Our day started out in Williams at the Grand Canyon Railway Hotel (formerly the Fray Marcos Hotel) with a wild west show at 9:30 am in a specially built corral which had a backdrop of wooden store fronts. Six cowboys belonging to the Cataract Creek Gang led by Two Feathers, staged a fight over who was going to pay for breakfast. Guns were soon blazing and everyone ended up dead. The show lasted a half-hour and put everyone in a jolly mood.

We boarded the train at 10:00 am for our two hour and fifteen minute ride over sixty-five miles of track through classic old west territory. No billboards and few telephone wires marred the beauty of this high desert which was covered in a

blanket of snow. It was a journey back in time as we passed through canyons and pinion and juniper woodlands. I learned we were traveling through the world's largest stand of Ponderosa pines, part of the 1.5 million acre Kaibab National Forest. Some of these trees were reported to be 300 to 400 years old.

When I began exploring all the cars, I soon ran into four cowboy musicians and singers who were serenading passengers with Western songs. In another car, I heard an Indian singer, Clarence Clearwater, who was crooning the old Bing Crosby and Andrew Sisters hit, "Along the Navajo Trail." He had also recorded Navajo music which he was selling on CD's.

While there was no commentary on what we were seeing on our journey, a tabloid-sized newspaper with information on the train and a small magazine about the Grand Canyon were available to everyone.

Our altitude at Williams was 6800.' Looking toward the south as we took off, we could see the snow-covered 9,264' Bill Williams Mountain. We crossed Cataract Creek on a 182 foot trestle at milepost 4 and reached Williams City Limits at milepost 5. This was followed by some historic ruins of old supply lines and stations, cattle tanks and abandoned copper mines. Between mileposts 28.5 and 36.7 we viewed the magnificent San Francisco Peaks about thirty miles to the east. These are the highest peaks in Arizona at 12,633' and 12,356'. When we passed Coconino Canyon between mileposts 54.0 and 58.0, we slowed down to cross several bridges and switchbacks. At 59.9 we entered the National Park and by 63.7 we had reached the Grand Canyon Station.

We looked for wildlife all along the way as there were supposed to be elk, mule deer, antelope, and rabbits. We only saw a few cows which our hostess, Reeta, called "slow elk." Reeta also said, "If you have questions, don't bother me, I'll be busy!" She had actually retired four years before from the railroad but had

been called back on an emergency basis. She was entertaining and kept us all laughing.

Our visit to the Grand Canyon lasted three hours and fifteen minutes and was spectacular. We walked around shooting photos of the magnificent multi-colored canyon from the South Rim. We had learned on the train from an announcement just before arriving that the canyon was 277 river-miles long, an average of ten miles wide and about a mile deep. The Grand Canyon was declared a National Monument by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908 and became a federal park in 1919.

After strolling for a while along the rim, my sister and I stopped to browse at Verkamps Curios and the 1905 Hopi House, both large shops carrying museum quality Indian crafts along with souvenirs. Lunch followed at the historic Bright Angel Lodge (1935) which was situated right next to the rim.

Then it was time to return to the train for our ride back to Williams. We departed the log cabin style Grand Canyon Depot at exactly 3:30 pm. As the train got under way with its run back through Coconino Canyon, the gentle rocking of the cars on the rails soon had many passengers snoozing.

Around 5:00 pm the train slowed to a stop and six train robbers jumped on board at the front. It was around 5:30 pm before these bandits made their way back to our car. With grim faces they sternly demanded our money and jewelry.

Ten minutes later, black-clad Grand Canyon Railway Marshal John B. Goodmore (the “B” stands for “B good or B gone”), entered our car and everyone pointed toward the rear where the bandits had gone. Another ten minutes passed and the desperados returned, hands in the air as our hero, the brave Marshal, had been successfully rounded them up. We all cheered.

At 5:45 pm the train arrived back in Williams. The sun had already set, the air was crisp as the large crowd headed back to the Grand Canyon Railway Hotel

and into Spenser's Bar. This relaxing lounge was named for an artist who had designed the huge hand-carved 1887 oak wood bar for a pub called the Lion's Den in the small town of Shepard's Bush, England. Other passengers went to Max and Thelma's Restaurant for a hot buffet. It had been a spectacular day of railroading and an unforgettable experience of seeing one of America's most famous tourist destinations, the Grand Canyon National Park.

The Grand Canyon Railway runs everyday except Christmas eve and Christmas day, December 24 and 25. For current rates and reservations, call 1-800 The Train (1-800-843-8724) or check their website: www.thetrain.com.