

The 1977 Chessie Steam Special

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Nineteen seventy-seven marked the 150th anniversary of commercial railroading in the United States: the February 28, 1827, chartering of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in Maryland. It seemed like the perfect time to celebrate not only the birth of the B&O, but also its modern-day partnership with the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway and the Western Maryland Railway within the recently formed holding company, Chessie System, Inc. Chessie System chairman and president, Hays T. Watkins, authorized a number of Sesquicentennial activities, including a major rehabilitation of the B&O Railroad Museum at the road's historic Mount Clare Shops in Baltimore. The Museum had lately received the C&O's collection of steam locomotives, enhancing further its reputation for having perhaps the most comprehensive display of American railroad motive power.

Early in the Sesquicentennial Year, the Museum presented reenactments of the famous 1830 race between Peter Cooper's steam locomotive, Tom Thumb, and a horsedrawn rail car. True to history, the Museum's replica of the Tom Thumb lost each time to the horse.

To represent modern motive power, the Museum exhibited a GP40-2 diesel-electric built by EMD for B&O and numbered 1977 for the road's Sesquicentennial. It was painted in the new (1972) "Chess-C" livery of yellow, blue and vermilion.

The Museum was also host to more than 350 representatives of railroading, government, business and labor on the evening of February 28, 1977. Dinner seating was at tables placed within the

roundhouse. And, of course, there was a huge birthday cake baked and decorated by Chessie's Greenbrier Hotel. The evening's festivities ended with an impromptu bluegrass concert led by U.S. Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd on the fiddle, accompanied by Mike Seeger's band. Two months later, the Museum was the scene for the Annual Chessie System Shareowners' Meeting.

But the best was yet to come!

The vision, dedication and determination of a number of people both within the Chessie System and on the outside were being marshaled in late 1976 and into 1977 for a public celebration truly worthy of the occasion. It began with a proposal by Chessie System vice-president public relations Howard Skidmore to have the B&O

Railroad Museum offer Sesquicentennial Year visitors a short train ride within the Mt. Clare complex behind one of their vintage steam locomotives. A somewhat more ambitious plan envisioned using C&O Ten-- wheeler No. 377 and a short train of open-- window coaches for runs between the Museum and Ellicott City, Maryland. However, terminating runs at Ellicott City was ruled out by the inability to turn the engine at that point. Although the 377 could have been run around its train, operating a 4-6-0 backwards to Baltimore was considered risky because of the absence of a trailing truck. Furthermore, the pulling capacity of the 377 was limited to five or six cars. So it was back to the `drawing board' for a new idea.

What evolved next (September 1976) was a plan to operate weekend trips during the summer of 1977 from B&O's Camden Street, Baltimore commuter station out along the Old Main Line via Ellicott City to Point of Rocks, Maryland, and then back to Baltimore via Silver Spring. A train of open-- window coaches

pulled by C&O No. 377, or preferably a larger locomotive, would be used. This plan was approved by the Operating Department and enthusiastically endorsed by Mr. Watkins. The doorway was now open for mainline steam operations on Chessie System.

It was time to select a steam engine and begin assembling a train of open-window coaches in operating condition. It would cost at least \$50,000 to put C&O 377 back in service, and it would still limit the train's capacity to about 400 seats. As to coaches, Chessie did not own any serviceable open-- window equipment. These cars would have to be found from other sources.

David P Morgan, editor of Trains magazine, suggested using B&O's classic Pacific No. 5300, the President Washington, from the Museum's collection. This was the sentimental favorite of many B&O people for it had been built in the road's Centenary Year and exhibited at its 1927 Fair of the Iron Horse. Unfortunately, the cost of rehabilitating the 5300 was estimated to be well over \$250,000 and it was doubtful that Chessie shops had the capacity to get the job done in time.

Attention next turned to the C&O Greenbrier (4-8-4) No. 611 (ex-614) and streamlined Hudson (4-6-4) No. 490 on exhibit at the Museum. Once again, the cost and time required to rehabilitate the 611 for one summer's operation was deemed prohibitive. The 490, although in better shape than the 5300 or 611, was still far from ready to run. It appeared C&O 377 would have to be the locomotive used unless a virtually ready to run engine could be found.

When the American Freedom Train visited Baltimore in September 1976 toward the end of its two-year U.S. Bicentennial trip around the country, I approached its creator, Ross E., Rowland, Jr. to inquire about his future plans for his ex-Reading Railroad class

T-1, Northern (4-8-4) No. 2101 that had been used on the trains eastern operations. It seemed to be an ideal locomotive for Chessie's Sesquicentennial train. The 2101 had proven itself on a challenging schedule with a heavy train and appeared virtually ready to run again. Rowland was intrigued by the thought and promised to explore it further.

Following discussions during the fall of 1976 with Howard Skidmore and other Chessie officers, Ross Rowland prepared a detailed proposal for the railroad's consideration. It was far more ambitious than anything Chessie management had envisioned, and even the road's most enthusiastic proponents of Sesquicentennial steam excursions feared it could undermine the Operating Department's reluctant acceptance of the earlier plan with C&O 377. Rowland proposed a system-wide program of some 40 trips during the summer of 1977 with an 18-car train powered by the ex-Reading 2101. Furthermore, he suggested outfitting two baggage cars to exhibit artifacts from the B&O Railroad Museum collection and material spotlighting the modern Chessie System. The exhibit cars would be opened to the public at the various cities visited by the excursion train. Under this plan, the 2101 would be made fully serviceable by Ross Rowland's Steam Locomotive Corporation of America and leased to Chessie. Accompanying the engine would be a SLCoFA crew for certain operations and maintenance consistent with Chessie's labor agreements. It was hoped that most of cars could be leased from Amtrak.

A number of Chessie officers, including Howard Skidmore, were immediately enthused with the Rowland plan. Others raised a variety of concerns, and it was February 1977 before John T Collinson, executive vice president-operations, and Mr. Watkins

gave their final approval. Chessie entered into an agreement with SLCofA on March 11, 1977.

With the first trips scheduled for early May of 1977, it was concluded there was not enough time to prepare the exhibit cars. Furthermore, the Museum was reluctant to provide significant artifacts from its collection during the Sesquicentennial when it was expecting record crowds itself

The project called for the train to have both open-window and air-conditioned coaches, plus some premium-service accommodations. Amtrak was unable to help supply cars, but an assortment of equipment of many vintages was assembled from a variety of sources. Necessary repairs, modification and painting would be performed by either the equipment's owner or at C&O's Huntington, West Virginia, shop.

Meanwhile, the 2101 was being overhauled and painted at a former Reading Railroad roundhouse in Saucon Creek, Pennsylvania outside of Bethlehem.

There was considerable debate over a name for the train and its color scheme. "B&O Birthday Train" and "B&O Sesquicentennial Special" were among the ideas that fell by the wayside en route to the final selection by Howard Skidmore of Chessie Steam Special. As the project evolved it became increasingly focused on promoting the new Chessie System "brand," in addition to celebrating B&O's birthday. The Chess-C color scheme and graphics would be applied to the locomotive and cars, much to the chagrin of some railroad historians and railfan purists. Bob Lorenz, a well-known artist from Fremont, Ohio, was retained to incorporate the Chess-C brand with the B&O birthday theme. He worked in cooperation with (and sometimes in competition with) Chessie's

director of visual media and design, Franklyn Carr. Mr. Carr designed the official Chessie Steam Special logo.

Although on-line railroad historical organizations were invited to help market, sell and staff the excursions, Chessie defined the territories to be visited, train schedules, operating procedures, accommodations and fares, on-board services and promotional activities. The railroad prepared press releases, media advertising, posters, flyers, and ticket stock. It also oversaw the design and content of all on-board handout materials and branded retail items.

Upon completion of repairs and painting of the 2101 at Saucon Creek, the engine and six cars ran to Philadelphia and then Baltimore on April 23, 1977. Representatives of the press were invited to ride and were treated to a dramatic photo run-by across B&O's Susquehanna River Bridge.

The train was officially dedicated during ceremonies at the B&O Railroad Museum on April 30th when a jar containing waters from Chesapeake Bay and the Ohio River was smashed across the rear coupler of the train's observation car.

The maiden revenue trip of the Chessie Steam Special got underway at 8:30 AM, Saturday, May 7, 1977, to traverse B&O's historic route to Ellicott City. Passengers made a brief visit to the former mill town and a museum housed in a depot nearly as old as the railroad. The excursion proceeded to Frederick Junction for photo run-bys and then to Point of Rocks en route on a circle tour that brought it back to Baltimore via Silver Spring.

Thus began the six-month odyssey of the 1977 Chessie Steam Special, By the time of its 47th and last trip on October 16th, more than 24,000 people had ridden the train, with another half

million observing its passing at trackside. Operating over lines of B&O, C&O, and Western Maryland, the train covered ten states and the District of Columbia. The Special was used effectively by the railroad's traffic and operating officers to entertain customers and showcase the Chessie System. This included a Chessie Shippers Special between Baltimore and Martinsburg, West Virginia, on May 20th for the exclusive use of the road's traffic departments. Likewise, Chessie's public relations and government affairs officers used the Special to spread the company's message among the media, legislators, and community leaders. On at least one occasion, several members of Congress (including a future Vice President, Dan Quail of Indiana) and their families enjoyed an outing aboard the train. But perhaps most gratifying was the interest and participation in the Chessie Steam Special project by the railroad's employees and their families. Some volunteered their time and talents, while many others rode the trains and often brought along their neighbors. As hoped, it had a unifying effect on the diverse Chessie family and put a personal "face" on the new Chessie System in on-line communities and businesses.

Although bedeviled from time to time with mechanical problems on No. 2101, especially toward the end of the season, the project was judged a success. With the enthusiastic endorsement of Mr. Watkins, it was extended for a second season in 1978. &

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