The Tri-State Limited is greeted by the Hartford High School band upon its arrival from Boston Saturday in White River Junction.
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White River Junction Back On Tracks

By DAVE COBURN
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ABOARD THE TRI-STATE LIMITED — Steve Marshall, standing in the chilly space between cars, looked out to the east where the flat bottom of the Connecticut River valley gives way to the White Mountains. The snow-capped peaks of the Presidential Range rolled by, shining in the bright October sun.

"I think this is one of the things that could rejuvenate White River Junction, the economy of White River Junction itself," said Marshall, who believes that White River could well become "the economic center of this (Vermont) side of the Upper Valley."

What he was talking about was Railroad Days, a three-day celebration of the town's rail heritage, and more specifically the Tri-State Limited, a five-car diesel train which took over 700 railroad buffs and leaf peepers on tours of the valley between White River Junction and Woodsville yesterday.

The Limited, chartered for the weekend by the Mystic Valley Railway Society, a group of railroad enthusiasts from the Boston area, was, for many, the highlight of the event, which ends today. It was also the biggest money-maker of the weekend for Railroad Days' sponsor, Downtown White River Junction, Inc. The group, which sold 670 tickets for the two three-hour tours, expects to clear a profit of about $1,200, according to Frederick Briggs, a member of the businessmen's association.

Along the 40-mile stretch between White River Junction and the Woodsville depot, the sumac which thrives in the roadbed of the Central Vermont Railway had lost its bright red flame. Other trees had already passed their peak for the season too, but crisp, clear October weather accompanied both tours.

The Limited, a modern diesel-powered train on loan from the Boston and Maine Railroad, rolled up the valley at a leisurely 30-mile-an-hour pace. The tracks parallel the Connecticut River most of the way, offering passengers spectacular views of New Hampshire from the bottomlands all the way to the eastern slopes of the Whites.

Riders on both the morning and afternoon trips were entertained by barbershop quartets which pieced the length of the train singing old-fashioned songs. Passengers, a mixed group of all ages, joined in a hand-clapping sing-along when the quartet struck up, "I've Been Working on the Railroad." The passenger cars, among the most modern rolling stock owned by the B&M, erupted in a chorus of "oohs" and "aahs" as the snowy caps of the Presidential Range came into view about an hour north of White.

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Railroad

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Vermont Railroad Museum, a collection of railroad nostalgia organized by DWRJ Inc. Railroad Days. The museum this weekend was a display of pictures in the caboose of “Old 494” behind the Municipal Building but organizers hope to find a permanent home for the museum.

Marshall, a train buff who works at the Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory in Hanover, said he felt the Collage tour could succeed as a regular fall attraction. “Of course, we’re steam buffs,” he said looking out to the mountains east of the river. “But this is great.”

His 5-year-old son Jamie turned away from the endless fields of whitened cornstalks rolling away beneath his gaze to concur. Asked how he liked his first ride on a diesel, he flashed a toothless grin and said, “It’s great.”

Such exclamations of delight were probably a daily occurrence before the B&M dropped its regular passenger service in 1964. Today, the B&M runs only three freight trains a day on the White River-Wells River section of the road.

Organizers this morning hailed the Railroad Days celebration as a success, although they conceded it was difficult to determine how much extra business the event generated for the downtown business community. Many of the 130 railroad enthusiasts who rode the Tri-State Limited from Boston Saturday stayed at local hotels and patronized downtown restaurants and theater.

Robert Triplet, the outgoing executive director of Downtown White River Junction Inc. this morning called it “a rousing success. The town really got into it.”

Enthusiasm for Railroad Days among downtown merchants began building a week ago with a rush on pin-striped engineering caps ordered by the business group to promote the event.

“This little hat kicked it all off,” said Briggs yesterday as he stood in the doorway of a passenger car on the return trip from Woodsville. Briggs said the group sold over 300 of the hats during the week. “This little hat brought that whole Main Street together,” he added.

Phidias Dantos, owner of the Hotel Coolidge, which hosted 70 of the visitors from the Mystic Valley Railway Society, said the weekend was part of the businessmen’s group’s effort to build a solid foundation for the renaissance of the village, not just a one-shot injection of retail business. The effect of Railroad Days on local businesses would be impossible to gauge anyway, he said, because foliage season and bow hunting season also tend to increase activity in the stores.

Triplet ended his 11-month stint with the downtown organization Sept. 30 but stayed on in a voluntary capacity through today to oversee the event. The downtown association has not officially announced his replacement, but DWRJ chairman Dubois S. Thompson said last week that Lawrence G. Chase, vice-president of Twin State Electric Co., was the leading choice for the full-time position.

The three-day event also gave visitors a first glimpse at the embryonic Vermont Railroad Museum, a collection of railroad nostalgia organized by DWRJ Inc. Railroad Days. The “museum” this weekend was a display of pictures in the caboose of “Old 494” behind the Municipal Building, but organizers hope to find a permanent home for the museum.

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