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Assignment Alaska: Alaska Railroad Engine 557's Long Journey Home

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by Rhonda McBride and Shawn Wilson
Channel 2 News
KTUU

8:29 p.m. AKDT, August 16, 2012

ANCHORAGE, Alaska—

It's been a long journey home for Alaska Railroad Engine 557. This week a semi-truck carried the steam locomotive to a railroad shop in Wasilla for restoration, but her odyssey

began in 1944, when she first arrived in Alaska, as part of a **World War II** effort to move troops and supplies.

The 557 was the last steam engine to be used for regular service in Alaska. In 1957, she was retired, pushed aside by more powerful and efficient diesel engines. But in June of 1962, the locomotive turned out to be the little engine that could. She was briefly brought back to service during flooding in Nenana. The steam engine was able to ford high water over the rails, something the diesel locomotives didn't do very well.

But finally in 1964, 20 years after her arrival in Alaska, she was sold to a scrap dealer in Washington State, who also owned a museum -- so she avoided the scrap yard and shuttled school children around.

When her owner died, Engine 557 seemed doomed to the scrap yard, but two brothers, Jim and Vic Jansen, came to her rescue. The Jansens, who own Lynden Transport, bought the locomotive and

donated it to the Alaska Railroad, with the understanding that the engine would eventually be put back in service.

The Jansens moved her to Seattle. And in January, Engine 557 arrived by barge in Whittier and then rode on a rail car to Anchorage, the first leg of her journey home.

This Wednesday, she was loaded up on a tractor-trailer rig and navigate the busy traffic on the Glenn Highway, a transportation corridor that must given her a bit of culture shock. After all, it was a half century since she had traveled in Alaska under her own power.

She had to zigzag back and forth from the highway to the on and off ramps. The load on the truck was too tall to make it under the overpasses. But there are worse things that no old girl likes, like getting weighed.

"The total weight of this train was 253,850 pounds," said Daniel Byrd, who works at the Alaska Department of Transportation weigh station a few miles from Eagle River.

"This is not something you see every day on the highways of the state of Alaska," said Byrd.

Drivers who passed her along the Glenn probably had no idea that they were watching an important piece of Alaska history go by.

She was known as a Gypsy Rose locomotive. There were 2,120 of them made, but only twelve were sent to Alaska. The rest went all over the world

As is, Engine 557 is worth about \$250,000. But railroad mechanics say she is in near-running condition, so her chances for rehabilitation are good.

At the Alaska Railroad shop in Wasilla, the engine will get inspected by a locomotive expert next week, and then she will likely be dismantled, cleaned, repaired and painted.

She comes with her own fuel tender, which once carried oil that was so thick, it had to be heated to flow. Originally, the 557 used coal for fuel.

Although volunteers will do a lot of the work, refurbishing the old engine could cost as much as \$700,000.

A group called the Engine 557 Restoration Company formed on Thursday, electing Patrick Durand as its president.

Durand believes that railroad buffs from all over the country and those with direct ties to its history will support the project.

"Railroads, you might say, are in the blood," said Durand. "You don't have to look very close in the family tree to find an uncle or a grand dad or a brother-in-law who worked for the railroad."

The 557 already has a \$350,000 matching grant from the Rasmuson Foundation to help it get on the comeback track.

Once she's ready to ride the rails, the Alaska Railroad would like to put her in service on a weekly passenger route from Anchorage to Portage, or make her available for charters. So instead of being used as workhorse for hauling goods, she'll steam along with an air of glamour, mixing nostalgia with a scenic tour. The Alaska Railroad is betting this will be a tempting combination during the summer tourist season.

Oh, one more thing to mention.

If Engine 557 looks familiar to you, she probably is. Her sister, Engine 556, has been a longtime fixture at the Anchorage downtown park strip. She's also in the process of getting a \$250,000 facelift. The two sister locomotives may have the last laugh over the diesels who drove them out of service. If all goes well, they can serve as proof that is possible to not just get old, but get better too.

Contributions to the Engine 557 Restoration Company may be made to the Alaska Community Foundation at www.alaskaacf.org.

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