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A KCS Christmas Carol



The Ghost of Christmas Present is alive and well on Kansas City Southern's annual Holiday Express train

by Peter A. Hansen



Charles Dickens didn't have a high opinion of American railroads. Compared with their English counterparts in 1842, they were slow and rough-riding, and he didn't care much for the open seating of American trains, either. "There is a great deal of jolting," he wrote, "a great deal of noise ... [and] the cars are like shabby omnibuses."

But if there's one American train Dickens might have liked, it would be Kansas City Southern's Holiday Express. To borrow the language of "A Christmas Carol," Dickens was a man who "always thought of Christmastime ... as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time.... I believe that it has done me good and will do me good." The elves, volunteers, and executives associated with the Holiday Express would agree.

It began modestly enough, when the Gateway Western Railway began running a holiday consist of a locomotive and two cabooses on its line across Missouri in 1989. The line was once part of the Alton Route, and it was absorbed through merger into the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio, then Illinois Central Gulf, which spun it off in 1987. The St. Louis-Kansas City line had always been something of an orphan in each of those systems, so maybe it was fitting that Gateway Western began this holiday tradition that has brought kids so much cheer ever since.

It was a very homespun operation in the early years, undertaken for the purest of reasons. Santa held court in a red caboose, while a green caboose held a stash of candy, along with winter clothing items for disadvantaged kids. The crew would scan the crowd, and if they saw children without coat, hat, or gloves, they'd discreetly ask the parents if they'd like their kids to try something on. Online charities and railroad employees donated the clothes they distributed. The train operated on a shoestring budget, too, making three or four stops a day in order to cover the entire system in a week; the crew would sleep in motels, four to a room.

"It was a grueling schedule," says Willis Kilpatrick, KCS's director of heritage operations, who inherited the operation after Kansas City Southern merged Gateway Western into its system in 2001. "But the Gateway Western folks still wanted to run the train, even after the merger. [KCS Chairman and CEO Mike Haverty] asked me to look into it and report back to him."

Kilpatrick made his report, and both he and Haverty were moved by what they learned. "It was obvious that there was a lot

The Kansas City Southern Holiday Express, led by KCS 2 in the Southern Belle paint scheme, rests at Kansas City, Mo., Union Station on Dec. 15, 2007. Roy Inman

As dusk settles, family members take photos of one another in front of the decorated train in Higginsville, Mo., on Dec. 18, 2008. Two photos, Roy Inman



of poverty in these small towns," Haverty recalls. "The kids would get a little plastic locomotive with candy in it, and in some cases, this would be the only thing they got for Christmas. Some of the Gateway Western people, they'd tell me stories about this train, and they literally had tears in their eyes."

It was hard to turn away, so KCS adopted the train as its own, vowing to expand it, and take it across the railroad's 10-state, 3,200-mile U.S. system.

The new Holiday Express is indeed bigger, better organized, and covers more ground, but it hasn't lost its down-home feel. Nowhere is that more true than with the volunteers who are the heart and soul of the operation. About 80 of them come and go during the train's customary month-long tour, joining and leaving as their personal schedules allow. The volunteers are complemented by KCS personnel, who are coordinated by Patti Tamisiea, an international

purchasing manager with the railroad.

Warren and Tillie Cailleff have volunteered on the train since 2001, its first year as a KCS operation. Warren comes from a railroad family (his dad worked at KCS during his 42 years in the industry, eventually becoming a master mechanic at the Shreveport, La., shops) and Tillie has adopted the railroad as her own, too. Early in their life together, she says, "Warren started taking pictures of trains, and I got tired of sitting in the car. So I said, 'Hand me a camera,' and I took pictures, too!" Tillie estimates that she and Warren spend about 500 hours a year preparing for the Holiday Express, which usually hits the road the day after Thanksgiving and runs until a few days before Christmas. Every year, the train makes about 20 stops in as many days, varying the route annually so different online communities get to see the train.

For the public, the train is a holiday phe-

nomenon, but for volunteers and employees alike, the work never really stops. In 2001, Kilpatrick grabbed Jim Davis, a facilities manager at the Shreveport yard, and the two of them went on a scavenger hunt to find the raw material for a longer consist. A tank car shell and flatcar became an ersatz steam locomotive, promptly dubbed "Rudy."

"Jim and I fabricated a cab out of flat steel, and the smokestack was made from an old steel drum," Kilpatrick recalls. "Then we found an old air whistle, and hooked it up to a compressor. We got an old movie smoke machine to make it look like there was steam coming out, and that made up our engine."

Where we're supposed to be

That was just the beginning, though. They built a little village on another flatcar, complete with flying reindeer made from three-quarter-inch plywood. "Everything was painted by hand," Kilpatrick says, "mostly by the Kansas City Southern Historical Society. The paint really made the reindeer come alive, and then we put over 10,000 lights on the train. Most of it was done with labor from employees and KCSHS volunteers in the Shreveport area, about 8,000 volunteer hours in all." The consist also includes a caboose for Santa, another that gets redecorated every year (as anything from an elves' workshop to a doll display), a boxcar with a KCS-themed model railroad inside, and an-

“No one is useless in this world who lightens the burden of it to anyone else.”

— Charles Dickens, "Our Mutual Friend"



Casey Burges cares for the elf costumes.

other boxcar to stash the giveaway goodies.

Tillie Cailleff has a home economics degree, so she made the elf costumes worn by all the volunteers. "I had to make them big to fit over our clothes," she says. "None of us are as big as we look!" But the costumes are a nice, even necessary, touch: As Dickens observed in "Martin Chuzzlewit," "Any man may be in good spirits and good temper when he's well dressed."

Even with the costumes, volunteers regularly meet with skepticism from the kids, who say they're too big to be elves. "We have to be big," Kilpatrick tells them, "so we can help out on the train, or reach the top shelves in Santa's workshop." That usually satisfies the younger ones, at least. Still, one of them pressed Tillie Cailleff for her age, and she said she was 250. "And I think he believed me!"

Unlike the old days on Gateway Western, employees and volunteers live on the train, which includes the FP9s and several cars from the *Southern Belle* business train fleet. Kilpatrick, who also manages the *Belle* [see "Ready for Her Close-up," TRAINS, March 2008], puts two of his chefs and three or four of his porters to work on the Holiday Express, seeing to the housekeeping needs of 15-25 volunteers at any given time.

Out on the road, a typical day starts with breakfast, around 8 a.m. By mid-morning, Tillie Cailleff is rounding up the volunteers to stuff the goodie bags. They go back to the boxcar and form an assembly line: Crayons come from one box, candy from another, KCS trinkets from another, and so on. The bags are stockpiled for the hundreds of kids who will show up that night. Lunch is served late, at 1 p.m., not only because it takes a while to stuff the bags, but also because there won't be time to eat again until the train closes, far into the evening.

The volunteers clearly enjoy the job. Shawn Levy is typical: He loves the rail-





While stopped in Higginsville, Mo., on Dec. 15, 2008, Austin Bell, Dustin Alexander, and Elton Bindoo indulge in another time-honored tradition prevalent wherever railroaders and holiday train volunteers mix with a snowy setting: a friendly snowball fight. Roy Inman

road, and he loves Christmas. John and Candace Singleton live in Texarkana, Texas, but, like Levy, were working the train in Missouri. "There are a lot of holiday things we could be doing at home," says John, a Postal Service retiree, "but we feel like this is where we're supposed to be."

It's all about the kids

By 3:30, the elves are dressed, the sound system has been cranked up, and the kids are starting to queue. It's show time!

Dickens never visited Slater, Mo., but he would have recognized the spirit. A week before Christmas 2008, biting cold had set-

tled on the prairie. The temperature was in single digits, and the snow had a glaze on it that crunched under every footfall. But none of that seemed to matter, either to the townspeople or to the Holiday Express crew, which had been on the road for nearly three weeks by that point.

Slater is an old railroad town, dating to Alton Route days and beyond. It was a crew change point for the successive companies that owned the line, and the town once boasted a roundhouse and 17-track yard. Of all holidays, Christmas is a time to be with loved ones, so there has always been a special poignancy about railroad families at this

season of the year. Empty chairs stood beside their hearths, while their accustomed occupants toiled to bring other people's families together. And so, even though the roundhouse is gone and the crews now change at Mexico, Mo., 68 miles to the east, Slater is better acquainted with the bitter-sweet of Christmas than most places.

The old Alton depot commands the end of Main Street, and on this December night, despite its dark brick and decrepitude, it shone like a beacon for all the town to see. The Holiday Express idled behind it, the 10,000 lights investing the station with a kind of halo.

Talk to the townspeople, and you'll find dozens of reasons why the Holiday Express matters to them. For Galen Norris, Christmas and trains have always gone together, his career as a riverboat pilot notwithstanding. "Who wouldn't like to see Santa Claus, especially on a train?" he asks with a child-like enthusiasm that belies his lined visage. "I'm like a big kid with this. I suppose some folks without kids might feel kind of crazy walking through this by themselves, but it doesn't bother me."

John Markovich is Slater's pharmacist, and he has at least two reasons for braving the weather to see the train. "A friend's mother died a couple of days ago. Last night,

“There was nothing very cheerful in the climate or the town and yet was there an air of cheerfulness abroad that the clearest summer air and brightest summer sun might have endeavoured to diffuse in vain.”

— Dickens, "A Christmas Carol"



Volunteer Bruce Hutchins Roy Inman

his dad said, 'We need to get out and enjoy the train.' The father was in his 70s, and it was good for him to get out of the house after his wife died." But beyond that, Markovich is one of Slater's many volunteers at this stop. He donated the hot chocolate (particularly well-received on a night like this), while other townspeople brought a variety of treats for the waiting families.

But whatever their other reasons for being here, for most people, the Holiday Express is about the kids. "It's all some of the children in town get to do," says Cathy Jacobson, a lifelong Slater resident. "They don't have a mall here, and they don't see the fantastic things other communities have. This is the biggest thing these kids have at Christmas." And, she adds, the train is free, so it's something any family can do together.

That's a recurring theme along the train's route. Places like Mena, Ark., and Pittsburg, Kan., are a hundred miles or more from anything like a big city, and income opportunities are similarly limited. "If the train didn't stop in these little towns, they wouldn't have a Christmas at all," says Kilpatrick. "The kids might just get a small bag of candy and a talk with Santa Claus, but this is the only Christmas they have."

Brian Duckworth works in Kansas City Southern's credit and collections department, but for a week or two every year, he's Santa Claus. ("I volunteered as an elf and worked my way up," he says.) Seated in the caboose, with his real-life wife, Kathy, playing Mrs. Claus, he talks about a boy who visited him in Pearl, Ill. "This is probably one of the poorest towns we go to. A lot of people coming through, you can tell they don't have a lot. This one young boy said, 'Santa, I'd like to have three packages of lead for my mechanical pencil.' Well, I'd like to have stopped the line right then and taken him shopping. It breaks your heart."



"Rudy" is a makeshift steam locomotive fashioned from a tank car shell and flatcar, with a steel drum for a smokestack. With theatrical smoke and an air whistle hooked up to a compressor, it charms visitors at Kansas City Union Station in 2008. Roy Inman

"Every year we'll have some kids who say they just want their mom and dad to get together," Duckworth says. Kilpatrick offers an example: "A little girl, about 13, an age when kids don't believe in Santa anymore, says, 'I'd like for my mommy and daddy to get along.'"

"Santa asks if they've talked to anyone. 'They've tried,' she said.

"Well,' said Santa, 'Have you talked to your preacher, maybe?'"

"My daddy is the preacher."

Then there was the little boy who asked Santa for a car. "You want a toy car," said Santa, more as a declarative than a question.

"No, sir. I want a big car."

"Why do you want a big car?"

"I want one for my mommy to drive. They repod her car, and now she has to walk to work. She walks four miles every day, and four miles back."

"Mama was standing there in tears," Kil-



Elves patrol the dark and very cold streets of Higginsville, Mo., in December 2008, and guide the young and young at heart onto Santa's caboose to share their holiday wishes and everyday needs. KCS donates gift cards to communities along the train's route. Roy Inman

patrick recalls. "There's only one way out for Santa: He has to say, 'Well, we'll see if we can find your mama a car.'"

"We have a little box next to Santa Claus," he goes on, "and kids can drop their letters to Santa into it. I read them every night, and a lot of them will be lists of toys that the kids maybe copied out of a catalog. But one night, I had this one from a little girl. She puts in there that she'd just like to have something for Christmas. She's 10

years old, and writes, 'We've never had anything because we're just too poor. Maybe you can bring us something this year,' and then she puts her address on it. Brian Duckworth took the letter from me, and he took it around to the whole crew, and we all chipped in. He and Kathy bought the children toys, or whatever it was they wanted; I can't remember. They put it in a nice big box and sent it to them, so they had Christmas that year."

“Business!” cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”

— Dickens, “A Christmas Carol”

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus

“Mankind was my business,” said Marley’s ghost, repenting too late of a misspent life, holed up in the gloom of his counting house while humanity went unserved outside. It’s unlikely that the people responsible for the Holiday Express will have any such regrets when their times come.

The train is not an inexpensive venture. Its annual tour sometimes covers 2,000 miles, and it represents a lot of labor expense, both for the operating crew and the on-board service personnel. Kilpatrick says the train accounts for a considerable amount of his time year round, and that other employees devote significant portions of their time, as well.

One such person is Doniele Kane, Kansas City Southern’s assistant vice president for community affairs. She oversees what has become a sizeable fundraising and distribution effort centered around the train. KCS no longer stockpiles donated clothing on the Holiday Express; it was too difficult to keep a good inventory, especially considering that the train now draws more than 40,000 people a year. Instead, Kane organizes a fundraising campaign, reaching out to vendors, employees, and various friends of the railroad. (In 2008, donations



Higginsville, Mo., Mayor Bill Kolas and his wife, Donna, distribute goodie bags in their community on Dec. 15, 2008. Roy Inman

totaled \$126,200.) The contributions are channeled through a community foundation in Kansas City, thus providing a tax deduction for the donors, and the proceeds are used to buy store gift cards.

KCS doesn't distribute the cards itself, but rather turns them over to the Salvation Army in towns along the route. "We wanted to work with the Salvation Army," Kane says, "because they best know the needs in each community. We just ask that the cards go to provide warm clothing. The Salvation Army knows where the needs are."

Kane also handles the public relations aspect of the operation, including advertising in each community, updating the Web site, making sure sponsors are recognized, and handling media inquiries. Between the public relations, the fundraising, and coordination with the Salvation Army, the Holiday Express represents as large a share of her time as anyone in the company, except Kilpatrick. For Kane, the effort is worth more than the sum of its parts.

"This is all about goodwill," she says. "Just as important as the charitable component is the fact that we bring Santa to these towns. Some of them will use it to generate traffic downtown, with popcorn, hot chocolate, and parades that end at the train."

"It's really important to KCS management that we be seen as a company that cares about our communities," says Haverly. "We want to be seen as a good corporate citizen. It's amazing to see the letters I get from citizens, mayors, some of the needy people. We pass them around and let our people read them."

"Our people are so proud of this train. It's extremely important that anything we do — that I do — comes across as credible, honest, sincere, ethical, and scrupulous, and



Santa and Mrs. Claus (also known as Brian and Kathy Duckworth) welcome visitors to the Holiday Express' stop in Higginsville, Mo., on Dec. 18, 2008. Roy Inman

I want that to be filtered all the way down through the entire company. When [our employees] see us doing things like this, they know they're working for a good company, a company that cares."

It's hard to put a dollar value on all that, and Haverly doesn't try to. Asked if he's willing to say what the train costs to operate, he replies, "I don't really know the exact number, and I'll tell you what: I really don't ask for all the details. Ordinarily, everything we do, we put a [return on investment] to it. But this is intangible. You can't calculate what this does for you. It's not cheap, but the way [KCS President] Dave Starling and I look at it, it's something that's built into our culture. It's money we have to spend to help our communities, to help people out, and we're not going to fret about the cost."

That said, KCS isn't immune to the nation's economic woes, and the railroad seriously considered a drastic curtailment of this year's itinerary. In the end, however, the train was deemed too important to the corporate culture and to the communities the railroad serves. This year's Holiday Express will go on as before: The F units, the twinkling lights, Santa, the Salvation Army, and basketfuls of good will included.

So, to adapt one last thought from Dickens, "It was always said of the railway that



Sometimes the letters left for Santa can break a heart. Among the requests for dolls and ponies, Jess Porter asks Santa for flowers for her sister's grave. Roy Inman

it knew how to keep Christmas well, if any company possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!

And so, as Tiny Tim observed, 'God Bless Us, Every One!'" I