

For the Love of Steam!

We know that volunteers are one of the strongest threads that tie a community together. We know that often it is up to volunteers to really make things happen. But how many of us realize how long it takes to get a project on track - that if it weren't for tenacious folks like Ernie Ottewell and Fred Olsson, some things just wouldn't go full steam ahead?

For 46 years, Ernie Ottewell was a railway engineer and his career included the honour of driving the first full train through the MacDonald tunnel. In 1986, a couple of years before Ernie retired from CP Rail, he participated in the Expo '86 show of historical steam engines in Vancouver. There he met others whose interest lay in the preservation of Canadian railway history and its artifacts. At that time, the Canadian Railway Historical Association (CHRA) put in a request to CPR that 6 different classes of steam engines be preserved and the 5468, which eventually ended up in Revelstoke, was one of them.

As well, representatives from CRHA in Calgary, Canmore, Kamloops and other communities turned their eyes to Revelstoke. Because of its proximity to the 'Last Spike', Revelstoke seemed a natural place to have a railway museum in Western Canada. The Selkirk Division of the CRHA was formed, as Ernie puts it, "to get the junk". It was 1986, and the dream to build a Railway Museum in Revelstoke was born.



A retired city fireman, Fred Olsson's connection to the rails began with his father, who was a blacksmith for CPR. Fred developed a passion for model railways and was on board with Ernie from the beginning. "For six years we had meetings after meetings, sometimes 2 to 3 times a week. For a long time, you couldn't see anything happening." But they had good people: other old time railroaders, some who have since passed on; Ruby Nobbs, from the Revelstoke Museum, knew how to overcome problems; Ken Magnes, Chair of Community Futures at that time, and Doug Weir, the City's first Economic Development Commissioner, brought in additional partners. The City donated the land, funding came from both provincial and federal governments, and additional support came from near and far. Kozek Sawmills contributed much to lower the capital costs of constructing the museum.

Ernie says, "When we talked about a railway museum, I thought we'd just get maybe some pictures, switch lamps, and old magazines". But then, they caught wind of a steam engine that was in still in fair shape sitting in Quebec waiting for a home. The engine was one of only eight oil-burning engines of its class that was built. A whirlwind of fundraising brought in just enough to send Ernie to Montreal for 6 weeks, and Fred for 3 weeks, to prepare the steam engine for its historical journey west. The primary work required to move the engine was to replace the existing grease cellars under the carriage wheels with the freshly built ones, and to replace the journal packs. The steam engine left Montreal bound for Revelstoke on September 29th, 1991. But by the time they got just outside White River, Ontario, smoke appeared from the trailing truck journal box behind the rear carriage, and they could go no further. The engine spent the winter in Ontario, the rear wheel repaired, and its journey resumed the following spring.

In the meantime, a home for the engine had to be built, for without cover, the old engine would turn to rust. Once in Revelstoke, many more hours were spent cleaning and repairing the machine, including taking apart and cleaning each of the 56 valves in the engine room, and replacing lubricators and drill boxes. As well, many donations to the museum came from Revelstoke railway families and artifacts found in the region.

Today, in addition to being a founding member of the model railway club, Fred still sits on the Board of Directors of the Revelstoke Heritage Railway Society that manages the Railway Museum. For Fred, it's all part of "doing what you have to do" and being part of the community. In the tourist season, Ernie spends 2 to 3 hours a day talking to visitors to the museum, enjoying the children, and dusting the engine. Ernie has a deep understanding of the mysterious workings of the old steam engine and tourists repeatedly tell him "it is so nice to have someone to talk to who knows something!" For both men, the hours and years of volunteer work is simply part of their lives and what it really comes down to is "the love of steam..."