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Railroad buffs steam into town at full throttle

Locomotives, talks, excursions likely to draw 1,300 train fans

BY JEANIE SENIOR

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For the some 1,300 members of the National Railway Historical Society who will gather here next week for their annual convention, Portland is rail buff nirvana.

“Portland is the only city that owns two operational steam locomotives,” explained convention Chairman Arlen Sheldrake, listing the city’s chief, but not sole, attraction for rail fans.

The city’s star attractions are the Southern Pacific No. 4449 and Seattle, Portland & Seattle No. 700, two of the biggest steamers still operating in the United States. Seeing the locomotives, which are maintained and operated by volunteers, may be a thrill for locals, but for rail fans, it’s an experience far beyond a thrill.

“There’s a lot of envy out there” for Portland’s status as a city that owns operating steam locomotives, said Jim Vanderbeck, president of the Pacific Railroad Preservation Association, which looks after No. 700.

The focus of the railway historical society’s some 17,000 members is on railroads, and their importance to the growth and expansion of the United States, but also on what’s happening with railroads today. Many of the 170 chapters manage rail museums, run rail excursions and restore rail equipment; a national convention is a chance to share a mutual passion Ñ and to see what’s happening in other regions of the country.

The convention, which is themed Go by Train 2005 Ñ a nod to the sign on the tower at Portland Union Station Ñ runs from Tuesday through July 9.

The Portland Oregon Visitors Association, which classifies the rail society as part of the “hobby and affinity market,” estimates total spending by people attending the five-day convention at just under \$1.1 million, according to Deborah Hall Wakefield, POVA’s director of communications.

The event is attracting members from every state but Rhode Island, as well as from Canada, Britain and Australia, said Sheldrake, who lives in Portland. Many of them will arrive by train, some by Amtrak, others on a special convention excursion train that leaves the San Francisco Bay Area today and arrives in Portland on Monday. Others are paying as much as \$5,000 to travel to Portland on luxurious, privately owned rail cars coupled to Amtrak trains. Many of the cars will be parked at Union Station during the convention.

The five-day convention features a schedule of activities and excursions likely to keep visitors rolling at top speed, depending on which events they choose.

There are a variety of rail trips planned, including a one-day charter of the Lewis & Clark Explorer Train from Linnton to Astoria; a trip from Banks to Salmonberry along the coast on the Port of Tillamook Bay Railroad; and a trip on the Mount Rainier Scenic Railway.

Shorter excursions will include rides on the Willamette Shore Trolley to Lake Oswego and the zoo train, as well as a Willamette River trip on the Sternwheeler Rose and a Columbia River trip on the Sternwheeler Columbia Gorge out of Cascade Locks. Sheldrake said the trips are priced individually, available only to railway society members, and range in cost from \$15, for a tour of the MAX shops at Ruby Junction, and upward.

The city’s two big steamers are the focus of several events. They will be steamed up, for example, for an evening photo opportunity at the roundhouse, from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Vanderbeck said about two dozen volunteers have been working steadily to get the two locomotives ready for the convention.

Another city-owned steam locomotive is at the roundhouse, but it's not in running condition. Oregon Railway & Navigation Co. No. 197, which is older and smaller, is being restored.

The city's locomotives are a major draw, but there are a lot of things in Portland to make a rail fan happy, said Sheldrake, a member of the railway society's Pacific Northwest chapter, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary by hosting the convention.

The city is served by two of Amtrak's most well-regarded long-distance trains, the Coast Starlight and the Empire Builder. "But it's also one of the destinations of the Cascades Amtrak service, which utilizes unique Talgo train sets Ñ you can't find those anywhere else in the United States," he said. "And, there's the Washington Park Zoo Railroad, which is a unique attraction."

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