



(Steam Railroading Institute photo)

Locomotive No. 1225 Conductor Tells Tale of Rail Gateway Affair Fundraiser 'Filling the Gap'

By Dianne Alward-Biery
Clever Staff Writer

CLARE – The Friends of Clare County Parks and Recreation presented its 10th Annual Gateway Affair last weekend at Jay's Sporting Goods north of Clare. The Saturday, May 11 event started off with a steak dinner provided by Ponderosa of Clare, and featured a reverse raffle, a live auction, a 50/50 drawing, silent auction items and a drawing for a \$100 Jay's gift card.

While the dinner event was less well-attended than in recent years, many names of persons not present were called in the reverse raffle drawing, indicating strong ticket sales.

The Friends group is a non profit 501 (c)(3) which has been working to fund the completion of the so-called Clare Gap, a 2.5-mile void in the Pere-Marquette Rail Trail which extends from the Clare Moose on the west to inside the east side of the city near the Pere-Marquette District Library. That gap requires walkers and bicyclists to leave the trail and travel on M-115 to later reconnect to the trail. That dangerous situation is a large part of what is driving the Friends to complete the project as soon as possible.

Marty Johnson, who is with the Friends group, explained to attendees the elements of the trail and how essential it is in the connectedness of trails in Clare County and surrounding counties. Johnson said the Friends group has used a grant to generate brochures which will serve as an interim step, guiding trail users in how to navigate the gap.

"We've been working to help Clare and the Department of Natural Resources close that gap," Johnson said. "It's a monster that we are trying to conquer here. A lot of money is going to have to be invested to access



Auctioneer Norm Yoder coaxes and cajoles just one more bid as he helps raise funds for the Clare Gap project.



Bruce Kuffer, attired in his conductor uniform, describes the Steam Railroading Institute's accomplishments, offerings and goals during the 10th Annual Gateway Affair.

the land, and then to build the trail."

Johnson said it is a two-stage effort, and that the Pere-Marquette Trail which used to be a railroad which ran from Midland to Baldwin is separated into two trails: the Pere-Marquette Rail Trail and the Pere-Marquette State Rail Trail.

"That distinction isn't that important," he said. "What's important is you've got that gap in the middle."

Johnson went on to describe the diverse, natural beauty of the trail, which can be enjoyed in all seasons.

"You can walk it, you can ride it, and in the winter you can snowmobile it," he said. "Eventually, we will have a trail that will come through by the railroad depot, with a way station for people riding it. All of this is going to take some time, but we're moving forward."

That trail includes an old coal tower near Lake Station which is one of 15 in the state, and one of only two which can be accessed. He also noted the great history to be discovered in railroad marker signage along the trail.

Johnson urged attendees to get into the Clare Depot to view the railroad museum inside and see what a great restoration has been done there.

After his presentation on the Rail Trail, Johnson introduced the guest speaker for the evening. The previous two events had included presentations on birds of prey and a photo journal of Isle Royale. This year, conductor-attired Bruce G. Kuffer offered a presentation on the Steam Railroading Institute which sits on 7 acres of the former Ann Arbor Yard in Owosso, Michigan. The SRI is the nonprofit organization which houses, maintains and operates the heavy steam locomotive No. 1225 which is the last locomotive of its class still operating in this country. It is known more popularly for its role as the basis for the train in "The Polar Express" film by Disney. In 2004 the SRI served as technical advisers for that film. Kuffer listed some data about No. 1225, which was built in 1941 by Lima Locomotive Works in Lima, Ohio. It covered 500,000 miles between 1941 and 1951 hauling freight and war troops. The locomotive and tender combine for an amazing 440 tons of iron (220 ton locomotive, 22 on tender and 22,000 gallons of water). It is 110 feet long, 16 feet in height, with 69-inch driver wheels. It consumes a ton of coal every 12 miles



Don Kolander, center, stands with Tom Bailey, left, and Amy Vanmeter, two of the big winners on the night at the Gateway Affair. (Clever photos by Dianne Alward-Biery)

and 150 gallons of water every mile. It operates at 245 psi pressure, and generates more than 3,000 horsepower.

In 1957, it became a static display at Michigan State University, serving also as an educational tool for the industrial park.

The Institute also owns diesel locomotive No. 126 which it uses for most of its passenger excursions. He said the main driver of that choice is cost: fuel, preparation and labor for each outing made by No. 1225 costs approximately \$10,000. Thus, any trip using that locomotive must be

decidedly profitable. The routes No. 1225 can run is also limited by its enormous weight. The diesel is much lighter and uses far less fuel.

The Institute has added two new two-story parlor cars to its lineup, which will afford the opportunity to book some adults-only excursions with bar service. Kuffer described the SRI's formation,

which evolved from the MSU Railroad Club which began in 1972. It was that club's efforts that restored No. 1225 to operation. Three books on the locomotive were mentioned: "The Restoration of 1225 Pere-Marquette 2-8-4," "Twelve Twenty-Five: Life and Times of a Steam Locomotive" by Kevin Keefe and "Images of Rail – Pere Marquette 1225."

Kuffer employed many maps and graphics of rail routes which spiderwebbed across the Midwest and, of course, went into considerable detail of the railways in Michigan. His talk also emphasized what he calls the

"Sentinels of the Railways" – the many depots where goods were loaded and unloaded while passengers boarded and disembarked the trains. Kuffer had multiple slides of Michigan depots in their heyday and, most notably, the buildings which have been saved, renovated and put to new use while cherishing their places in history – places such as the Clare Depot.

In speaking of the Clare Depot, Kuffer told the crowd how much the SRI volunteers enjoyed their 75th Anniversary excursion to Clare in November 2016, and the warm welcome received.

Kuffer spoke in admiration of all that the many volunteers accomplish in their work of maintaining not only the physical equipment of the locomotives and passenger cars, but also their dedication to preserving the "magic" that surrounds railroading and enabling people to be part of that magic.

The SRI's mission statement speaks to how it tries to keep that magic alive: "To educate the public about steam-era railroad technology and its impact on the culture and economy of the Great Lakes Region by safely operating, preserving, exhibiting and interpreting historic railroad equipment."

When Kuffer finished his talk, Don Kolander presented him with a framed art print titled "Homecoming" which was a drawing of a steam engine adjacent to the Clare Depot which included an adult reaching to embrace a running child.

Kuffer expressed his appreciation

and reaffirmed the importance of Clare to the SRI.

"We cherish our relationship with Clare," he said. "This is cool, thanks!"

Then the evening moved on to the live auction, where auctioneer Norm Yoder brought his quick-tongued talents to bear. With a young lady showing off the items using hand gestures that would make Vanna White proud, Yoder teased and cajoled higher and higher bids. Some outstanding items had been donated by sponsors, and those who took advantage of the opportunity were rewarded with solid value for their bid.

The real gem of the live auction was the "Golden Ticket" offered by the Steam Railroading Institute. That ticket provided passage for four people to take the first North Pole Express excursion of the season aboard Train No. 1225 to Santa's Village, a calendar, a book, vehicle decal, and four ceramic mugs for hot cocoa. Bidding was vigorous, ultimately bringing in a bid of \$450 for a trip to the North Pole.

Winning 3rd place prize of \$500 in the reverse raffle was Tom Bailey, who remarkably had just bid \$450 for the North Pole Express excursion. (Way to balance the books, Tom!) The 2nd place prize of \$1,000 went to Amy Vanmeter, and the 1st place winnings of \$1,500 was won by Deb Edwards, who was not present.

For information on the effort to close the Clare Gap and other projects supported by the Friends of Clare County Recreation, visit www.clarecountyrecreation.org, or connect with Don Kolander online at kolander@clareco.net or by calling 989-539-2761.

Information on the Steam Railroading Institute information is available by mail: 405 S. Washington St., P.O. Box 665, Owosso, MI 48867; by calling 989-724-9464; or by visiting www.mstrp.com, www.michigansteamtrain.com and on the Steam Railroading Institute page on Facebook.

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