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Something gone forever came back last weekend

By WILLIAM F. AST III - H-P columnist

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I wouldn't have believed it. There's a factual basis for "The Little Engine That Could."

In this case, the engine is Carey Williams' Cagney steam engine that took 1,752 paying passengers on fabulous time-warping trips around the grounds of the old House of David Amusement Park on Oct. 29 and 30.

Now this engine is smaller than the engines we had all gotten used to, the quarter-scale engines introduced in the late 1940s. Nevertheless, purists (you know who you are) like the Cagney engines because they were the engines first used at the park.

Here's what happened. The group restoring the grounds was hoping for a decent turnout, both to spread the word and to raise funds to repair the east trestle. They got more than they bargained for.

I got there at 12:30 p.m. on Sunday, and there were a good 50 people ahead of me. I waited 25 minutes to get a ride. And when I got off, the line had grown to at least 100 people.

It was like that all afternoon Saturday and all afternoon Sunday, volunteers told me.

"The lines were so long we added two additional coaches," Williams said in an emailed report about the weekend. "Five coaches, 42 people per whistle call. The Cagney pulled it! Yes, it knew something was behind it, and that was about the limit of the little engine, but it did it."

I got to drive the Cagney engine around the track in August. That was after I'd taken my first ride (and I can hardly describe my feelings as the train pulled out of the South Depot. It was overwhelming, and the metaphysical implications are staggering. Something gone forever ... was back. Had I not been a manly man, I might have wept).

Williams asked if I wanted to take it around the tracks once. Well, I'd never operated anything steam powered before. But Williams sat right behind me the whole time to make sure I didn't take any wrong turns or anything.

What an experience! Everything was blazing hot. The smell of burning coal was intoxicating. And to be able to operate the train whistle - oh, my goodness. For a few minutes there, I was master of the universe.

The layman's eye can't see any grade at all to the 1,200-foot loop track the volunteers built, but there is one. Williams told me when to throttle up to get up the slope, and it's just as well that someone as experienced as he was the engineer to attempt pulling five passenger coaches over the weekend.

Everyone was thrilled. People have been saying how much the old park meant to them, how much they were looking forward to a reopening, but last weekend was proof. To gladly wait in line a half hour or more for a five-minute train ride - well, it shows the community actually backs the project.

In these days of economic malaise and disgusting politics, it was cleansing to be at a place where everyone was smiling, even grinning. "Nothing but smiles," Williams said. Like me, they never thought they'd see the day the park would reopen, on whatever scale. There were also a lot of people there for the first time ever, and they were just about as excited and intrigued as those who grew up with the park.

Visitors were allowed to wander over the old parks grounds down in the ravine, to see the ornate terraces and stairs and bridges mostly cleared now of the undergrowth that had overtaken the site. They were thrilled at that, too.

I had the odd notion that even the remaining structures were grinning. Every time I'd seen them in recent decades, it was as though they were forlornly wondering, "Where did everyone go?" And now the crowds were back.

Local community and business leaders should take note. Most visitors don't come here for hyper-expensive new condominiums and new construction. They come for gracious old buildings and "quaint" (whatever that means) shops and experiences and the feeling of a solid past. Every time we lose a historic old building to development, it weakens us. We need to build on our past, not destroy it.

There I go complaining again. Well, all I need to do is think of a House of David train ride, and I can't help but grin.

Oh, here's one valid complaint. "Everyone who had ridden the train before claimed the seats had gotten narrower," Williams said.



Well, they have.

For those who missed last weekend or want another turn, Williams says the rides will be available again the Saturday and Sunday after Thanksgiving.

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