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Train rides and many memories



Photos by John Madill / H-P staff Carey Williams of Chicago, one of the principal investors in the Eden Springs Park at the House of David, operates one of the park's trains Saturday. The park from noon to 5 p.m. today will offer rides to the public. The rides cost \$2 each to help raise funds to repair the east trestle at the old park.

The trains are running again at Eden Springs Park

By **RALPH HEIBUTZKI - H-P Correspondent**

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BENTON TOWNSHIP - Trains are running full tilt again at Eden Springs Park all weekend, and those who count them as part of the soundtrack to their lives couldn't be happier.

Bill Gibson is one of them. Now living in Dowagiac, Gibson has vivid memories of the park, which Janet Keefer and her fiancé, Mike Lagness, helped acquire in 2009 from the Israelite House of David, and are working to restore.

"My brother, in '52 or '53, ran the engine over here," Gibson recalled. "I used to come over here all the time - he was 16, and we hung around here a lot. He was old enough to get a job running that train, around and around - I rode all I wanted."

Saturday marked the public's first opportunity to ride the trains that had fallen silent for so long, at just \$2 a ticket. The rides continue from noon to 5 p.m. today.

As of 4 p.m. Saturday, Lagness - who, along with Keefer, describes himself as a railroad buff - estimated that they had been admitting 150 people per hour into the site.

Keefer, the park's preservationist, has been hearing a lot of stories about people's memories of the site off M-139. The park started in 1908, five years after the House of David began in Benton Harbor, and operated into the early 1970s.

Asked what stands out most about her restoration efforts so far, Keefer responded: "The love these people have for this property. They have shared that love with us. They have come in and been our volunteers. They have told us stories."

Volunteer Dave Myers of Paw Paw got involved helping to restore the powerhouse.

"What isn't appealing about it? I love living history, not just reading about it in books. And that's what we're doing here," he said.

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Gibson, who lived near the site, can still recall the big band sounds he heard coming from the theater - one of many attractions that distinguished the original park from its competitors, he said.

"I listened to all the big band music in the summertime with my window open, in bed, and you could hear the music over here," Gibson said. "It was just a normal thing. At night, you could listen to the music."

At its peak, the old park boasted numerous attractions that included an arcade, a beer garden, miniature racing cars, pony rides, souvenir stands, a vegetarian restaurant, a hotel, and a zoo and aviary.

For St. Joseph resident Deb Appelget, riding the train "brought back a lot of memories" of growing up in the early 1960s.

"I liked the ice cream and the little round ice cream tables and chairs," Appelget said. "I am happy to see them (the trains) running again. It'd be nice to go back in time and see the whole thing the way it was."

Fairplain resident Kenneth Sipress and Mickey, his wife of 43 years, were among the patrons who never lost hope of hearing those train whistles again.

"When we were first married, we lived right across the street, on Britain (Avenue), in 1968," said Kenneth Sipress, who said the couple are diehard train buffs. "It wasn't going as strong, but it was still going. We rode the trains at night and listened to them at night. It's been in my life most of the time."

"I'm more apt to find them (trains) and tell him, 'Hey, we're going,'" Mickey Sipress said, laughing.

"I knew it was going to happen some time, but I didn't know it was going to be quite so quick," Kenneth said. "I just was hoping that something was going to happen with the park."

Watervliet resident Richard Smith brought his wife, Barbara, and son Jerry Henslee, plus his six children.

Deep down, though, Smith doubted that he'd ever get another chance to experience the park again.

"I didn't think it'd ever come back, no. We always hoped it would, you know? Because you don't have the family things to take the kids to," he said.

Barbara Smith relished the chance to relive memories of living down the road from the park when they first got married.

"We used to come here for the music and ride the train - it was a beautiful place. We loved it," she said.

Keefer and Lagness are caretakers and project managers at the park, which is co-owned by Carey Williams, of Chicago, Ill., and an investor from North Carolina. They've been working with a core group of 20 volunteers to restore the site, where Williams himself was on hand, serving as the miniature train's engineer.

"We didn't know what we were taking on," Keefer said. "Carey needed someone on-site, because he lives in Chicago. We were looking for a house, and he said, 'Why don't you live there?' It just all fell into place."

All proceeds raised from this weekend's event went toward repairing the east trestle, which would expand the current quarter-mile loop to one mile of track and give the trains more room to run, Keefer said. The estimated cost is \$30,000.

"Our vision is to ultimately have the track on the original layout - that's years down the road," Keefer said. "It's all money and time."

Trains may run again at Thanksgiving or before Christmas, but those plans have not been confirmed yet, he added.

"Today is (intended) to let people know, 'Yes, we're serious, we're going to run trains and want to put a lot more track in - and we're going to be here forever,'" Lagness said. "We've got a long ways to go, but we've come a long ways."

For further updates, visit the park online at www.edenspringspark.com.



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blue_ice wrote on Oct 30, 2011 6:15 PM:
 " Great to see this park back again "

Eden Springs wrote on Oct 31, 2011 7:48 AM:

" Thanks to all who came out on a wonderful fall weekend to help us out. I heard a LOT of stories more than I ever imagined. I know everyone had as much fun on the train ride as we did giving it to you. I would like to also thank all the volunteers who made it possible because most of them thought they would never see the trains run again. And thank you Herald Palladium Ralph Heibutzki and Rick Ast for all the help getting the word out. "

Return to: [Local News](#) < | [Home](#) < | [Top of Page](#) ^



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