

Restored vintage steam-powered locomotives pull restored railcars as the Texas State Railroad (TSRR) runs 30 scenic miles—through piney woods, past verdant fields and across flowing streams—from Rusk to Palestine in East Texas. In 2003 the 78th Legislature declared it the “Official Railroad of Texas.” It has become a rite of passage among many rail fans—to ride the TSRR at least once a year.

Constructed by state convict labor, the TSRR began life more than a century ago as an industrial railroad. It first served an iron foundry operated by the Texas prison system on the penitentiary grounds near Rusk, then later hauled regional products such as timber and tomatoes. Three times, the now-popular train almost ran out of steam—in the 1920s, the 1970s (when the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department took it over) and only last year (when the State, after much angst, turned it over to a for-profit private operator).

In 2006 the TPWD said increased operating costs would force the closure of the tourist train. Public sentiment (especially among rail fans and citizens of Rusk and Palestine) convinced the Legislature to find a solution. Early this year, the State selected American Heritage Railways as the new operator—and gave it funds to make the transition possible. American Heritage Railways owns two other scenic railroads—the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad in Durango, Colorado and the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad in Bryson City, North Carolina.

Company president Allen C. Harper maintains “the best way to preserve history is to make its presentation so interesting and exciting that people will pay a fair price for the experience.” To do so, he aims to operate weekend excursions year-round between Rusk and Palestine, plus an expanded spring, summer and fall service that includes family-friendly specialty rides.

The first scheduled event is “Day Out With Thomas,” October 19-21 & 26-28, 2007. As part of a 47-city nationwide tour, a 15-ton replica of Thomas the Tank Engine (star of the *Thomas & Friend* TV show on PBS) will pull TSRR cars through the East Texas forest with photo ops on board with Sir Topham Hatt (controller of the imaginary Railway), plus storytelling, video viewing and live music. (www.thomasandfriends.com/usa/parents/dowt.html)

November 23-December 23, families board the TSRR, decorated for the holiday season as the Polar Express. Inspired by Chris Van Allsburg’s book of the same name, and by the run-away animated movie starring Tom Hanks, the “journey to the North Pole” (aka the Palestine station) will feature cocoa and cookies served aboard the decked-out train, followed by a reading of *The Polar Express*. There will be Santa, carols and—just like in the movie—a jingle bell for each youngster to take home. (www.polarexpressride.com)

Next March, a similar special excursion train features “The Little Engine That Could,” a life-size replica locomotive patterned after the original illustrations for the classic children’s book of the same name. (www.thelittleenginethatcouldtour.com)

The specialty rail excursions are coordinated and licensed through Rail Event Inc., also owned by American Heritage Railways.

Interestingly, the company’s sister excursion trains in Texas, Colorado and North Carolina have much in common. All three were established in the late 1800s. Both the Texas and North Carolina lines were built by convict labor. Now operated with similar excursions (through very

different terrain), all three also have appeared in many movies and commercials.

The Texas State Railroad has a new logo and slogan: "A Texas Treasure." Rail fans (and the towns of Rusk and Palestine) hopes that remains just as true in the future as it has been for the past several decades.

I propose a light look (copy and photos) at the new lease on life for this scenic Texas rail ride. The package would feature the standard excursion and, if you like, one specialty run (could be the "Polar Express" for next year's holiday issue). I could also work up a sidebar on the two other excursion trains.