



## Pacing Steam – On Snowshoes!

The high point of the trip? Walking alongside steam rotary No. 1 and Nos. 73 and 69, high in the mountains, on top of lots of snow, while the rotary cleared the line. Here's how it came about.

I was surfing the web and dropped into the [White Pass and Yukon Route site](#), and they had a home page declaring "[Spring Steam Rotary Event](#)." Intrigued, I discovered that they were offering 3 days on the narrow gauge for railfans to ride behind the rotary while they cleared the line. I signed up, as did my friend [Robert Steele](#), and it was fabulous!

### Saturday:

I've never been to Alaska, so we flew into Juneau and spent the night. Two notable things: Juneau has no highway connections to the rest of the world, and the tides range from -4 to +20 feet. The town was very quiet, even though the legislature was in session. The cruise ship season wouldn't start until May 6, and most shops were closed and/or feverishly getting ready for the season to start. Robert and I explored the town on foot.





We spent a very memorable hour or so with Fr. Simeon, the pastor of [St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church](#), with he and Robert discussing the building, the Mother Church, the history of the parish, and life in general.

**Sunday:**

The [ferry ride](#) up the fjord (the Lynn Canal) for six and a half hours was just gorgeous.



(Above, Robert and me with scenery.)



Got to Skagway, and it was deserted. Only 300 year-round residents. That swells to about 900 residents during the season, and when the cruise ships dock there could be 10,000 people in town. Challenge: Only 4 eating places are open off-season: a cafe for breakfast, a bar with pizza, a brew pub, and a Thai restaurant(!).

### **Monday:**

8:00 a.m. at the WP&YR depot downtown (far left building in the photo). We were met by very friendly staff and we discover that there are only seventeen paying customers, dedicated railfans all. We find out that the WP&YR deliberately kept the count low, since "This is the first time we've tried this" and "We're dealing with uncertain weather and 100-year old equipment." Their advertising had promised 3 days on the RR, but asked that we set aside 5 days just in case.



We pick up our snowshoes and board vans to go up to the shops on the north end of town.

There we meet our trains:



The rotary "fleet" consisting of Rotary #1, an 1899 Cooke Locomotive product; Mikado 2-8-2 #73, a 1947 Baldwin; Consolidation 2-8-0 #69, a outside-frame 1908 Baldwin, and combine car #211.



The passenger train for us railfans, consisting of two diesels (99 and 91) and five passenger cars (yes, for 17 paying guests).

Time for photos, and the Blessing of the Fleet ceremony, and then we load up and head up the mountain, passenger train leading. We are in the last car of the train, the "Queen's Car" (Lake Lebarge) with a large observation platform at the end. Coffee and scones are provided. The crew and passenger reps are with us, and are extremely personable. Via their radios throughout the trip we are able to hear conversation between the train crews.



Our first instance of Wait Patiently & You'll Ride occurred a little way out of town, when the second diesel unit failed. After attempts to restart, we backed down to the shops and replaced it. We left again and lead the way up the mountain, and could see the rotary fleet following us, and hear them. The stack talk across the valley was very cool.

Milepost 14, Glacier: After several miles of 3.8+ percent grade we arrive and wait for the Rotary Fleet. The engines have to make a water stop here. There's a tank car and MOW crew ready to top them off.



After watering, we re-board and are taken to the far side of bridge 14A and are dropped, and then our train backs down out of sight. Then the rotary fleet leaves Glacier giving us a photo opp as it crosses the bridge and proceeds up the mountain. Double-headed steam, wonderful stack talk, and #73 occasionally slips and provides a show.



By the way, throughout the entire trip we were blessed with great weather. Clear but cold days, occasional clouds, and occasional snow showers at the summit. We're told it was very unusual. Robert and I were prepared for a lot of wet weather. We did need the layers we brought when we got to the snow. There wasn't any snow on the ground at sea level, but it quickly appeared as we climbed to the heights, and at the summit there was plenty of work for the rotary.

We followed the rotary fleet up the mountain, with great shots. We passed the landmark cantilever bridge, now unused. Along the way we heard that the work train had already been out and had cleared a slide ahead of us that morning. The work train carries a Cat tractor plow and a big backhoe on depressed-center flatcars. In very constrained settings, the backhoe is put on the front of the train and pushed up to the slide where it does its work while on the flatcar.

We got heavy rotary action at White Pass, where we were able to de-train and walk up past the rotary. As the rotary fleet attacked the snow we walked ahead of it, watched, and took pictures.



Ok, call me naive, but I thought that the rotary would just rev up and grind through the snow. Well, it did that in some places, but a whole lot of time was spent plowing deep or packed snow. There it was very different. The rotary would rev up, two whistles to come ahead, the engines would push it into the snow bank until it stalled either with the blade full and stopped, or with it stuck and unable to move forward. One whistle to stop. Three whistles to back. One whistle to stop. The rotary would reverse its fan blades to unstick the snow. Repeat. Each whistle signal was repeated by each engine. Quite a ballet. Occasionally the rotary would be so stuck that the engines would have to back-and-forth to break it free.









At the deeper sites the Cats had been at work, taking off the top layer of snow. Sometimes it was so hard-packed that the rotary and the Cat would have to work together, the Cat breaking it up and the rotary tossing it.

Both trains came back down the mountain at the end of the day.

## Tuesday:

Today Robert and I took the option to ride the bus and get ahead of the fleet. Great shots of the steam fleet climbing the mountain.



We arrived at the designated point on the highway around 10:00. Lots of white snow, and no RR. We were told that the SnowCat would be there to take us to the RR, but that it wasn't due for about another hour. So, five of us decided to snowshoe in. An hour later, after fumbling around and me getting stuck at least once, we arrived at the "Canadian Shed" cut. The rotary fleet was also just arriving.



(Left photo: from the highway: "The railroad's out there somewhere.")

What transpired was about 3 hours of man against snow. The snow was deep enough that I got some great shots from literally above the locomotives and rotary. Steam and snow were flying.



Robert took some kidding about his sketching the trains in addition to taking photos. The kidding stopped and admiration set in back on the train when he showed some of his work and began to turn it into watercolor paintings.



We took the snow cat back to the bus to pick up Robert's backpack. And then we decided to finish the day on the train, but when we rode back to the RR on the snow cat the train was about a mile away. No problem, they called it back for us!

The trains came back down the mountain. The diesels ran around our train and we came down with them on the point. The rotary fleet backed down, but with one of the work train diesels on the point.

### Wednesday:

Up the mountain again, passenger train leading. This time they took us to a spot just past the tunnel, just past the famous cantilever bridge, so that we could get shots of the rotary fleet passing the cantilever bridge, new bridge, and tunnel. We walked around the side of the mountain on the old right of way to find the best spots. Fabulous!



The rotary fleet moved up to continue plowing, us following. We got off and walked ahead using our snowshoes. Lots more snow, some deep and some not so. After one particularly deep spot which required lots of work, the snow evened out to "only" 4-5 feet deep. There was one very memorable stretch where the rotary and the engines moved at a good walking speed, throwing snow. We were able to keep up and "pace" the plow and engines, basically right next to them. Incredible! Altogether we probably snowshoed about 2-3 miles that day, up close and personal with the fleet.





Several times we were in the cloud of exhaust from the rotary, which once or twice was more fuel oil than water. We were filthy and guys were protecting their cameras and not themselves. That night at dinner we had oil on our faces, hands, hats, and jackets. Tired, but very happy.





We made it to Fraser, MP 27.7. The super decided that we were doing so well, he would approve the crew time to complete the work and run all the way to Bennett, MP 41. So we continued.



The rotary fleet made good time. It was downhill most of the way to Bennett, but there were occasional difficult spots. We were in the chase train, close behind, but no opportunity for photos.

About half-way to Bennett we stopped. The rotary was having a problem, and the engines were getting low on water. The mechanics who had been riding with the rotary took care of whatever the problem was, but low engine water and crew time were the controlling factors so we called it quits. We backed up to Fraser.

We left the trains at Fraser and everyone (including the crews) boarded vans to return to Skagway. Vignette: The super yelling at one of the mechanics to take off his overalls before he got into the pickup truck.

Our van had the "trainee" rotary pilot and a couple of trainmen. The pilot told us that they were using this trip to write the operating manual for the rotary. We found out later that the rotary had a pilot, engineer, fireman, the super, the retired (30-year) pilot, and occasional mechanics onboard.

We barely got back to Skagway in time to get to the local bar/restaurant (the Red Onion) before it closed. They accommodated a bunch of dirty, tired, happy guys!

### **Thursday:**

Back in vans, back up to Fraser. Boarded our train and followed the rotary fleet this time all the way into Bennett. Watched and photographed the rotary clearing the snowdrift in front of the station. Hard-packed snow, and we were joking about starting a contest to guess how many runs the rotary would have to make before it broke though. I think it was at least 20. Breakthrough came, and they shut down the rotary.









Our train had turned on the loop track, and we boarded for the 40-mile trip back to Skagway. Absolutely gorgeous! Sat on the rear observation deck for part of the trip, and just let the experience wash over me. One last piece of excitement on the way back: A fitting on the main air line broke on one of the passenger cars while we were on a narrow shelf on the mountain. The train stopped, and the crew ran a bypass air hose around the car and we continued home without incident.

Later that afternoon everyone, employees and railfans, met for a reception at the depot. It was a very nice way for us visitors to meet and thank everyone, and a couple of the railfans showed selections of their pictures.

Robert and I had a flight home on Friday, so we missed the shop tour.

### **Conclusion:**

For me this was the trip of a lifetime. First time in Alaska, first time on snowshoes, and first time so up close and personal with narrow gauge steam. The WP&YR staff and crews were fabulous. They treated us like adults, pretty much gave us free rein on the property, and set up wonderful experiences for us as railfans and photographers.

I swear that the week was really designed for the employees. I think we met almost everyone who worked on the railroad, and they generously shared their knowledge and experiences with us. I'm just happy they included us in their party!

The WP&YR may be narrow gauge, but it is a big-time operation. When the cruise ships are in the railroad may run over a dozen trains in a day, some with 15 or more passenger cars. They know how to manage large numbers of tourists, and they certainly did right for us.

### **The Author: Jon Schmidt**

I live in San Rafael, CA, USA, and am the president of the Nicasio Northern Railway, an HO-scale "rails in the mud" 1920's era Northern California pike. I've been a train fan all my life. I'm married with one son. I'm still in the work force as a computer geek (<http://www.banbottlenecks.com>). I'm also a singer (a Broadway-style tenor) doing solo work and singing with a men's chorus in San Francisco. I also occasionally act, direct, and produce little theatre.

### **Paintings by Robert Gantt Steele**



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