

Adventures in McCloudland

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Chapter 31

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There'd been a buzz about town for weeks. The Big Engine was coming back for the weekend; borrowed back from Yreka where it had been living for many years as the Blue Goose. It would be repainted to look just like it had 50 years ago when it used to haul logs and lumber out of McCloud. It was Big 19.

During the summer months the McCloud River Railway Company, run and owned by Jeff Forbis, had been taking out excursion cars on holidays for an hour ride. Families and kids loved it and we loved having the activity directly across the street. He had converted a couple of flat bed cars into excursion cars with railings and a double row of seats, back to back, running the length of the car. Families would clamber up a makeshift ramp and wave at anyone in the hopes they would wave back. They'd be off on an adventure, led by a huge silver and black diesel engine. This time, though, it was something entirely different.

We'd often see Jeff at Tommy's having lunch or visiting with local folks. Jeff has one of those friendly, open faces that invites you to enter his conversation. Our hotel project had been stalled and Jeff was always upbeat and excited about his project. One evening when we were in Mt. Shasta, we ran into him at Lalo's and we shared a dinner table. We were having a tough time with our project and felt comfortable sharing some of the frustrations with Jeff. He told us how he had been an employee of the railroad when there had been talk of selling it. His father had been in the railroad business and Jeff had always dreamed of having a railway. The tracks ran from north Mt. Shasta east to McCloud and on to Burney. Along the way was some of the most spectacular scenery anywhere. A few small spurs still remained, but had been abandoned. One of those spurs ran from the McCloud rail yard south along Main Street and stopped just before Lawndale...placing it squarely in front of our hotel. Jeff told us how he had bought the railway to save it from becoming scrap. Everyone had said it couldn't be done...but he was doing it.

He spoke quietly about faith and hope. And that dreams really can come true. He told us not to let it get us down. Hang in there.

He told us all that corny stuff we ached to hear. We'll always have a soft spot for Jeff and his willingness to help us that evening. It meant a great deal to us.

No one can discern the future...we never would have predicted the outcomes of his and Verline's dream...but for a while it was a quiet bit of inspiration. And we appreciated it.

But it wasn't quiet the weekend that Big 19 came back. Several old passenger cars had been brought down the tracks the night before. The engine would arrive soon. It would take an all day run to Mt. Shasta, then back to Burney. It was a run designed for train buffs as it would stop often, off load passengers, back up, and then move forward again so folks could take pictures of the approaching train. The 30 mile trip would take 8 hours.

By 7 a.m. cars started parking across the street, up the street and all over town. Dozens of people milled about with cameras of all sorts. It was cold, but men with young sons, grandfathers with grandchildren, whole families were bundled up and waited anxiously. The children peered up the tracks for any sign of the engine and jumped excitedly in anticipation...or maybe it was to keep warm. More cars and more people came until there were over 100. We watched the show from our porch and marveled at the number of visitors who had found McCloud because of a train. We didn't begin to understand the true significance of Engine 19 returning here. Even for one day.

Suddenly a dozen excited men ran down the tracks toward Main Street and announced the engine was about to leave the yard. Men and cameras moved in mass toward Colombero St. to get the first camera shot. Lee, Jeff and I also crossed Main Street to get a better look

The 50' tall massive engine nearly coasted as it backed across Colombero and gently stopped to collect the rest of the cars. It was a freshly painted black, with huge silver lettering proudly announcing "McCloud Railway Company, No. 19." Behind the engine was a tender car loaded with oil and water to feed the monster engine. Huge puffs of steam escaped from somewhere deep in the engine and shot out into the onlookers who quickly reacted by jumping back. The engineer walked the length of the train checking valves, peering at the undercarriage and looking mighty official. Onlookers, and would be engineers, approached with questions. But he kept to his task.

These steam spurts were only a prelude. Suddenly it cut loose with a deafening, powerful shot of steam lasting about 30 seconds. We all covered our ears, turned and ran from the piercing scream. Some folks were laughing from the unexpected intensity, but it was a nervous laughter. We all continued to back up and kept our distance lest it surprise us again. We all gained a new respect for Engine 19.

It was then that a new sound of rhythmic power began and the engine with its cars in tow began inching forward. Huge clouds of black smoke bellowed above the engine then rose into the still air. The ground shook under us. I couldn't quite believe the whole experience. As it gained speed and crossed Colombero and headed north it continued to leave a huge trail of rising black smoke. I wondered if the EPA knew about steam trains.

When Lee was in high school in Roseville, their home was just a few blocks from the railroad yards. He often talks about him and his dad spending time at the end of the street, watching the trains. Now I understand better.