



YOU CAN RIDE BEHIND A BL-2 IN MAINE

Many people associate the EMD BL-2 diesel locomotive with the B&A. Given how late the B&A ran them, this is not surprising. A total of 59 of them were built (including a BL-1), and the B&A had a total of eight. Four of those eight made it into preservation, but only one resides within the state of Maine. It sits in the Cole's Land Transportation Museum in Bangor, with the building literally built around it. Stripped of major components it would not need in a museum, it is unlikely to ever run again. Which leaves the state of Maine, a state so tied to the BL-2, without a running example that you can ride behind. Or does it?

For the second year in a row, the Athens Historical Society in the town of Athens, Maine has put on "Old Home Days". The town of 952 people (in the 2020 census) takes the site of the Athens Exhibition Hall on South Main Street (Routes 150 and 43) and turns it into the sort of down-home small-town type of fair that most people have only seen on TV and movies. While you will not find the overpowering midway of a larger fairgrounds, you will find homemade crafts, homemade baked goods, a local food truck, and lemonade squeezed right in front of you.

The two-day event (this year held on Friday-Saturday, September 18-19, but check back next year for the 2027 dates) featured a live sawmill demonstration, the construction of a blacksmith shop the old-fashioned way, with axes and a crosscut saw, a horseshoeing demonstration, an antique car display, numerous antique farm tractors, a presentation on how to read and interpret maps, and on Friday night, a contradance.

So what does Athens, a town that never actually had a railroad in it, and its Old Home Days have to do with the B&A and a BL-2?



Above: The Antique Tractor display

Below: Building a building the old-fashioned way





Above: Food and Drink were particularly yummy!

Below: Blacksmith demonstrations went on throughout the day



On one corner of the site resides a former ice rink that no longer holds water. Repurposed into a train ride for the young and the young at heart, this loop of track is the domain of Roland Perkins, historian, preservationist, railroad enthusiast, and owner of the so-called "Rollicking Railroad," which has given numerous children their first exposure to any kind of train.

Below: Roland behind the controls of his BL-2





The story starts many years ago, in 1996 when the Hartmann Model Railroad & Toy Museum of Intervale, New Hampshire commissioned Roger Caron of Wales, ME to build them a train. The photo at left appeared in The Mountain Ear on October 17, 1996 (Page 14) and shows the first run of Hartmann's new railroad. Hartmann's closed in 2018 and the brochure for the museum from that year carried the photo at lower left, showing the BL-2 and Mr. Hartmann. Interestingly, when delivered the BL-2 appears to be in a Bangor and Aroostook paint scheme, but by 2018 had been repainted into that black red and yellow as shown. In 2018 Roland stepped up and bought the 12 inch gauge ride on railroad. 12 inch is a rather odd size for a ride-on train. 7.25 or 7.5 inch is much more common. As a result, just about everything is custom made, right down to the trucks. After bringing everything home, Roland stripped and repainted the BL-2, renumbering it 557 in honor of the locomotive that resides in the Cole's Museum.

Both of these photos came from the collection of the Bartlett Historical Society, Bartlett, NH. Our thanks to them for finding the material so quickly!

Inaugural Run. Executive Councilor Ray Burton (above left) was on hand recently at the Hartmann Model Railroad for a demonstration run of their new miniature railroad. The train was brought to Intervale by Roger Hartmann (center), who intends to have the rideable train carrying passengers next summer. Serving as the engineer of the inaugural run was the train's creator, Roger Caron (right) of Wales, Maine.



Next Page: Roland's 557 as it appears today





Top: Side view of Roland's 557

Above: The rear door opens to allow the control handle to be inserted. The broom is a nice touch!



Above: Under the hood of the steam outline locomotive

Mechanically and operationally, all the locomotives are essentially the same: a small Honda gasoline engine powers a hydraulic pump; that hydraulic fluid is used to turn a hydrostatic drive similar to many modern lawn tractors and other equipment. The air tank is used to run the whistle on the "steam" locomotive. One lever controls both the direction and speed of the locomotive. The throttle position on the gas engine is more or less fixed. The output from the drive system is sent to the wheels via a combination of shafts and chains, so that all eight wheels are driven on all the locomotives.

For a town that never had a railroad, Roland's train is the first and sometimes only exposure local children have to a train they can actually ride on. As a result, seeing it at the Old Home Days has already become a tradition for many. Much like the passengers, the primary motive power is a locomotive that proudly wears a smile on its face.



Above: A full-capacity train just about to leave the station

The locomotive might be powered by a gas engine, but the smiles it provides are genuine and enthusiastic! The BL-2 is not the only homage to the Bangor and Aroostook - have a look at the first car behind the locomotive!

This is the largest model State of Maine Products car your editor has ever seen. Although its passenger-carrying duty means that the roof has been omitted. This particular car came straight from Hartmann's with very few changes and continues its duty, putting smiles on people's faces.



Above: The 557 holds on the siding while the State of Maine car takes passengers around

Below: Roland and his Granddaughter take a train around the loop past the BL-2





Left: Your Editor behind the controls of the 557 - Note the smile!

Roland's family and friends have done a great service to their community and Bangor and Aroostook fans everywhere by getting this unique train ride back into the public eye, even if it's only for two days a year. It is truly a multi-generational project, with Roland's children and grandchildren showing up throughout the day.

Combined with the community built around Roland's museum (that is a story for another time), this train ride is not just a way for people to get off their feet at the local town fair; it's a way to get railroads

into the hearts and minds of the generation that will one day take over the preservation of our railroad history and heritage. Not a bad mission for one man and a BL-2, and just what one hopes for the future of the Bangor and Aroostook's story.

Editor's Note: This story would not have happened without Roland and his friends and family. The work that they have put into this train ride - all as volunteers - is quite impressive. Every single person I met in Athens during the day I spent there was friendly, welcoming, and only made me want to return to this town again. If you are looking for a unique small-town fair experience, I highly recommend Athens Old Home Days, and the chance of seeing the largest operating BL-2 in the state of Maine is just the icing on the cake!

I want to particularly thank Roland for allowing me to take over the controls of the 557 for a few laps. I can say that is the most fun I've had railroading for some time! -JTK

