



Engine 557 started as a workhorse for WWII

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MOSES LAKE - During the World War II, the United States Army Transport Corps was called upon to provide a heavy freight steam locomotive for use in Europe and Africa.

Many of the locomotives were to be stockpiled in Britain in the lead up to the D-Day invasion of Europe, and some were to be loaned to British railway companies to help with the war effort.

The result was the type S-160 2-8-0 wheel arrangement conforming to the British loading gauge. The designer was Major J. W. Marsh of the US Army Corps of Engineers.

There were 2,120 locomotives of this type built from 1942 to 1945. The three major American builders Baldwin, American Locomotive Company and Lima were all engaged in this massive effort.

While most were scattered all over the world, 12 remained stateside and were transferred for use to the US government owned Alaska Railroad.

US Army designated engine 3523 was built, by the Baldwin Locomotive Works in 1944, was one of the 12. It became the Alaska Railroad 557.

It is 61-feet long, weighs 161,000 lbs., and has driving wheels that are 4-feet, 9-inches in diameter.

It is designed to burn coal. The boiler is 5-feet, 10-inches in diameter and set to work at 225 lbs of steam pressure.

As the end of the steam era came to the Alaska Railroad, memories of war time shortages lingered. As a result strategic reserves were part of planning for most organizations. The Alaska Railroad stashed serviceable steam locomotives at several locations. Engine 557 was tucked into the Whittier engine house as of Aug. 31 1957.

Engine 557 was the last steam locomotive in regular service on the railroad.

It was kept around to help during high water conditions at Nenana, Alaska, where the Tanana and Nenana rivers regularly flooded the entire town and rail yard.

Diesel traction motors don't like water and the steamer could easily ford 2-feet of water over the rails.

In June of 1959 engine 557 was cleaned up and painted for some rail fan excursions between Whittier and Anchorage. It made its last run in Alaska on Sept. 5, 1960, to the state fair in Palmer.

It was sold for scrap in 1964 to Michaelson Steel & Supply of Everett.

One source has the scrap yard donating the steamer to Monte Holm of Moses Lake.

The current tender is not original to the steamer and is from an older Alaska locomotive.

Sister engine 556 has been on display in Anchorage since 1959. There are about 25 of these steamers preserved worldwide.

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