

The Legendary Empire State Express

History



The 1890's were the hay-day of the American railroad industry. The aggressive spiderlike consolidations of the New York Central Railway by the industrial barons of the day, Erastus Corning and Cornelius Vanderbilt came under a cloud of negative public popularity. To change this image, the NYC embarked upon breaking the world train speed record just before the Chicago World Exposition in 1893. On May 10, 1893 on a run between Buffalo and Syracuse the specially designed train was the first vehicle to achieve over 100 miles per hour, reaching the unheard of speed of 112 miles per hour. The engine behind this record was the legendary 999 which was rebuilt and now is located at the Chicago Museum.

The Collinwood Yards



The Collinwood Yards are one of the principal repair facilities and freight transfer points of the New York Central railroad, originated in 1874 when it established a rail center in the village of Collinwood. A brick roundhouse was built to house and repair locomotives; nearby, a machine shop, housing an engine room, blacksmith shop, and an office was constructed with upstairs apartments for the use of the road's employees. The freight transfer yards were located on the south side of the main tracks, with extensive stock yards north of them. In 1874 at least 500 engineers, firemen, brakemen, conductors, and other employees made their headquarters near the yard to handle the 72 freight trains

arriving daily. As the railroad grew, so did the village of Collinwood, with its population reaching about 3,200 by the 1890s. The yards, situated along present-day E. 152nd St. just south of the Lakeland Freeway, were expanded in 1903 and again in 1929; at that time they included 120 miles of track and could handle 2,000 cars daily. In 1933 the facilities employed about 2,000 workers. By the end of World War II, the Collinwood yards became a major switching and diesel repair facility for the NYC.

Genesis of Replica "999"

Sometime between 1930 and 1940 a group of NYC workers, members of the American Legion Post 999 which consisted of only railroad workers, clandestinely built a replica model of the Legendary 999 on a 1930 Hudson frame. Once the NYC management got wind of vehicle, they supported its viewing as a show piece by transporting the "999" to various national venues, including several Rose Bowls Parades in Pasadena CA and Washington D.C. Early on Post 999 exclusively took care of it before transferring it in about 1980 to current owners The La Societe Des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux which translated in English is the Society of the Forty Men or Eight Horses which generally goes by 40 and 8. The 40 and 8 is a veterans organization with one of its many functions which is dedicated to preserving the memory of French Boxcars in WWI which carried 40 men or 8 horses.



Current

It was and still is a Parade Vehicle and is classified as one by the DVM and as an antique vehicle has those plates which have no cost. It was in the Cleveland Christmas parade for many years and for most of those led the parade with Santa on board. It was also in the 4th of July Kamms Corners parade almost yearly plus Memorial Day and other patriotic parades over the years. We for many years took it to the Camp Cheerful on its opening day and took the children on rides. It was at a Downtown Willoughby event and I believe the first Grand Reunion (Bud Day made the arrangements)

Facts

- Condition - We recently had the opportunity to visit the vehicle in its storage location and determined that it is in remarkably good shape considering it is over 80 years old. It seems to have been very well maintained by all parties involved over the years. However, it would be well served to have a mechanic thoroughly go over the entire vehicle.
- Power Plant - while we did not start the engine, we were assured that the last time it was moved, a charged battery and fresh gas was all that was needed. The 1930 Hudson power plant has been replaced by a recent Ford engine and transmission sometime around 1996.
- Dimensions – the engine and tender are 33 feet in length, tender about 16 feet. Width is that of a standard car.
- Licensor Fee – as a historic vehicle, none.
- Insurance – liability only, based upon number of time vehicle is on the road. We believe due to its historic value, we can get a reasonable appraisal value for collision and vandalism insurances.
- Operation – take a crew of 4 people; two to drive vehicle and a lead/follow escort car.
- How Used – Grand Reunions, parades and public events.
- Storage – located at West 103 and Madison in private storage facility. Storage lease ends on Dec 31, 2015.

Opportunity

According to our primary contacts, Joseph Cronin and Andy Kiral of the 40 and 8, their group is interested placing this historic vehicle with another group because they can no longer effectively maintain and operate it. They have considered many options including placing this with the Crawford Auto Museum, but it is too large for internal display and relegating it to the external environment would be destructive. Since time is of the essence, several members suggested placing the 999 on eBay which would most likely mean it would leave the Cleveland area. It would be a shame for this Collinwood artifact to leave the area.

The Collinwood High School Alumni Association (CHSAA), the only officially sectioned CHS alumni organization with over 1,000 members has a mission of connecting alumni and keeping CHS memories alive. We are keenly interested in keeping this vehicle in Cleveland, specifically near the Collinwood area where it was built. To that end, CHSAA is taking the lead position on acquiring this historic vehicle, preserving it for future generations and making it available for events in and around the Collinwood area.

Michael F. Cavotta
President, CHSAA
Class of 1955