

THE STORY OF THE WISCONSIN GREAT NORTHERN RAILROAD

The Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad (WGNR) is the successor of the Duluth & Northern Minnesota Railway Company (D&NM) which operated dinner trains on the North Shore Scenic in Duluth, MN during 1996.

The D&NM was incorporated by Greg Vreeland and Kent Rengo in July of 1992 for the purpose of organizing a shortline freight railroad. The shortline plan never came to fruition so they decided to purchase and rebuild railroad passenger cars for lease.

The first project was #28 the "Arrowhead", a 1912 mahogany interior coach built by the American Car & Foundry company of St. Louis. The car was originally used by the Duluth & Iron Range for passenger train service between Duluth and Ely, MN until passenger service ended in the late 1950's. The car was rebuilt by the Duluth Missabe & Iron Range (DM&IR) into a solarium coach in 1938. At that time the vestibule on the rear end was removed and the large picture windows were installed. The car was last used by DM&IR as a crew sleeper for track gangs and was seriously dilapidated by 1994.

The roof has failed and severe damage had been done to the interior. The D&NM purchased the car in May, 1994 and completely rebuilt the car from the ground up. Work completed includes: a new roof, vestibule area, brake system, wiring, plumbing, floor, restroom, kitchen, wet bar, and interior furnishings. The Arrowhead is now classified as a first class diner-lounge. The rebuild project took one year to complete and was unveiled on June 2, 1995 during a formal dinner for the Lake Superior Railroad Museum.

In February, 1996, the D&NM was asked by the Lake Superior Railroad Museum to operate a dinner train on the North Shore Scenic Railroad. The D&NM felt that it would not be able to operate this service with only the Arrowhead so it purchased its second car on March 1, 1996, and immediately began rebuilding it into a full table car. D&NM car number 32, the "Apostle Isle" is a 50 seat mahogany interior dining car with a food service area in one end. During the three month rebuild the car was sand blasted and repainted, received new vestibules and brakes, and was completely renovated and refurnished inside. The car carried its first passengers on June 7, 1996.

Following the 1996 season the partners decided that they wanted to explore opportunities to operate their own railroad. Discussions were held with local government and business leaders from Spooner and Washburn County in February, 1997. The community supported the proposed railroad and the partners set about putting the project together. During the next 120 days the partners arranged financing, leased and rehabilitated the track, purchased and restored a locomotive to operation, and moved the equipment to Spooner.

Showing no superstition, the Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad, which was incorporated in Madison on April 1, 1997, operated the first public passenger train from Spooner Depot on Friday, June 13, 1997.

The WGNR purchased two additional cars in 1997 including our tool car #112 and office car #34. These cars were purchased from the DM&IR and arrived in Spooner on July 4, 1997, ending a 4 year purchase negotiation.

The first season was spent working on the equipment and running trains. Trains operated daily during July and August and on weekends through October. Work continued throughout the season to convert tool car #112 into a full length concession car, containing a snack bar and gift shop. Office car #34 became our ticket office and was parked next to the old Chicago & Northwestern depot in Spooner.

The second season of operations in Spooner began with the Cottontail Express in early April and ended the final weekend of October. The trains continued to operate on the 7 miles of track between Spooner and Trego. We added a full slate of special events throughout the 1998 season including buffet trains, picnic trains, Hobo

Trains, and Rodeo Train Robberies. All season there was a cloud over the operation as the Union Pacific railroad announced their intention to abandon our outside connection between the Wisconsin Central at Hayward Jct., and our track at Trego Jct. The battle to purchase this 12.68 miles of track lasted through the winter and into the 1999 operating season, with the track finally being purchased by the Washburn County Transit Commission in early July, 1999.

The third season dawned again in early April and this year trains operated right on through Christmas with the North Pole Express on Saturdays during December. Our most popular train to date also began operating as part of our regular schedule in 1999 when the Great Pumpkin Train ran the final three weekends of October. Several different dinner trains were operated including the Buffet Train on Friday evenings during July and August, and the Elegant Dinner Train on Friday evenings during September and October. The dinner trains met with mixed reviews but the Pizza Train held firm as our most popular dining train. The 1998 season also brought us a new ticket office as we refurbished the former Railway Express Agency building north of the main Spooner Depot building. Trains arrived and departed from a wooden platform behind our new office and the large parking lot made parking closer and easier. Track crews spent all summer and fall up until freeze-up installing over 1000 new ties, largely by hand, on the new line to Hayward Jct.

The 2000 season brought major changes to the operations and the equipment on the Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad. A major change was the adoption of a standard schedule to be utilized from year to year offering train rides on weekends during May and June and again in September and October, and daily trains during the summer months of July and August. The second major change was the institution of an operating agreement with the Locomotive & Tower Preservation Fund, Ltd., of Eau Claire regarding their steam locomotive #2719. The #2719 came to Spooner in late June and operated trips every other weekend through early September. We also began Birthday Caboose service and had Soo Line Business Car #1000 on the property for the summer. The crew worked throughout the season to convert our office car #34 into a full length dining car. Most of the work was completed by fall and the car made several trips. All of these things were positive changes for the WGNR, but the biggest change was the opening of the new track allowing us to increase our basic trip to 2 hours and 20 minutes and almost a 30-mile roundtrip. Beginning with the summer season and continuing through fall the trains now traveled between Spooner Depot and Springbrook near Hayward.

The big story for the 2001 season, our fifth in Spooner, was the introduction of new equipment. We were fortunate over the past winter to have made arrangements to acquire two former Chicago & Northwestern F-7A's, #400 and #423. The bulldog nosed locomotives are some of the classiest diesel locomotives ever built and we are lucky to have found a pair of them. There were over 8,000 of them built and fewer than 200 remain today. Both locomotives had been out-of-service for over a decade and required major work. A detailed inspection revealed that the #423 was the better of the units so the crew began rebuilding the unit. Throughout the winter, spring and well into the summer the volunteers and employees of WGNR worked scraping paint, replacing body panels, rewiring, replacing windows, sandblasting and repainting, and finally starting the classic looking diesel. The unit began regular service in September and is a welcome addition to our growing fleet. Many pieces of maintenance-of-way equipment were acquired by friends of the WGNR and several important track projects were completed. Steam Locomotive #2719 returned for operations on weekends during July, and the Great Pumpkin Train was a near sell-out.

Looking to the future finds us busy planning for the 2003 season. As you will see on this website, we are again adding a number of special events to our schedule and continuing the best of our past events. We have several major track projects and a number of equipment projects that will occupy all of our spare time. We are always looking for additional help on projects, and even offer the opportunity to learn how to run some of the equipment. If you are interested in working with us, please email us.

We would like to thank those of you who have rode with us the past six years and invite new visitors to come and see our progress as we build our railroad empire.