

UNUSUAL WAY OF TRAVELLING:

Welcome to the world of hi-rail cars

Gilles Gagné

SAINT-OMER: – Two Americans, Alan Freed and Douglas Brenner, travelled on the Gaspé railway on August 26 and 27 in a 1957 Pontiac Hi-Rail, a car adapted to circulate either on rails or on roads.

The trip of Mr. Freed and Mr. Brenner was original in the way that usually, the owners of such former inspection and track maintenance vehicles travel in groups. The size of the groups range mostly between 20 and 30 vehicles when they come to the Gaspé Peninsula. Such groups came in 1998, 2001, 2006 and 2011 notably.

This time around, the two men wanted some quietness and they picked the end of August for a couple of reasons, including the scenery.



Photo: G. Gagné

Douglas Brenner and Alan Freed benefitted from great weather during their Gaspé Peninsula journey.

Cont'd on page 11

HI-RAIL:

Cont'd from cover

“We also came to get some cooler weather but it is really hot,” explained Alan Freed with a smile. He is from Virginia while Douglas Brenner hails from California. When SPEC met the two rail fans in Saint-Omer on August 26, the temperature was at least 26 degrees in the shade and above 30 degrees under the sun!

Alan Freed is familiar with the Gaspé Peninsula. “This is the second trip in the Pontiac. I have also taken a round-trip from Truro to Sydney in the Pontiac. It is hard to say how many times I've come up on the train to Gaspé, probably at least six or seven. My family members have made the round trip at Christmas time at least three times and I remember coming to Gaspé on the train in the early days of Via when the train was still using blue CN sleepers. Around Christmas time, they would put a Park car on the back of the train and a full diner. We especially enjoyed coming up in the winter and found the ride to be spectacularly beautiful at that time of year,” he says.

Alan Freed is a retired locomotive engineer. He also operated a business in the military.

Douglas Brenner operates an automotive and motorcycle suspension business.

“We met through car racing,” points out Mr. Brenner, who was not a rail fan and who didn't have a particular interest in trains originally.

It is quite different for Alan Freed, who is 68. “I come from a family of railway workers dating back to the Civil War (1861-1865). My great-great grandfather, my great grandfather and my father worked for the railroad. My father was an executive type. He was disappointed when I showed interest for working as a brakeman first, then as a locomotive engineer,” he explains.

Alan Freed became a rarity

when he was appointed as a locomotive engineer at 24 years of age, in 1971. “In the United States, you usually get that position in your forties, sometimes late forties and early fifties. I enjoyed it. It is a complete occupation. You meet different people. Nothing compares to it.”

His 1957 Pontiac Hi-Rail is a rarity as well. Only 14 such cars were built for the needs of Northern Pacific.

“There are only two left. One is in Wisconsin, in a museum, and there is mine. It was mostly used for inspections”, he stresses.

The Pontiac was in a railway scrapyard when he bought it in the mid-1990s “but in OK order. It was working. To improve it, I took it to Massachusetts where a team of people stripped it to the frame and rebuilt it. It took six months. It took a lot of money to repair it. It had been inactive for 10-12 years. It burns some gas too, as we cover five miles to the gallon. It weighs 7,000 pounds,” he points out.

He was part of the NARCOA excursion to the Gaspé Peninsula in June 1998. The group was consisting of 22 railcars and his 1957 Pontiac. About 50 people were on board. NARCOA means North American Railcars Operators Association. They have more than 1,000 members in the United States and Canada.

The railcars are small, cube-like, diesel-propelled vehicles used in the past for maintenance and inspection purposes. They were gradually replaced by pickup trucks, more versatile with the capacity to circulate on the rails and the roads.

Railcars and hi-rail cars became gradually available to potential buyers in the 1970s and the 1980s when railroad companies started to rely on pickup trucks.

During their trip to the Gaspésie Peninsula, Alan Freed and Douglas Brenner were accompanied by a crew of the Gaspésie Railway Soci-

ety, for safety purposes. Mr. Freed prefers not to discuss the cost of the passage rights he has to pay.

Since he only had time for the one-way Matapédia-Gaspé trip, he left his 1957 Pontiac in Matapédia before taking the train to return to Virginia. “I will come back later this fall, probably in October, and take the road to Gaspé and come back on the railway.”

He is aware of the threat pending on part of the Gaspésie railroad. “This line is a treasure. It has to be reopened over its whole length. It is part of the community and country's heritage. You can't replace its value. It costs \$10,000 per mile to scrap it but it would cost \$10 million (per mile) to rebuild,” he says.

Mr. Freed operates a well-known organization in the United States. “Alan L. Freed Associates specializes in the design and development of non-partisan Public Policy Seminars for senior managers and executives from the Defense and Intelligence communities,” says the web site.

It is also mentioned that “In 1976, Alan L. Freed Associates founded and developed the original Capitol Hill Workshop and White House Workshop. Since then more than 800 executive-level policy seminars have been conducted in Washington, D.C., and more than 100 programs presented at various military bases around the United States.”



The Gaspé Spec keeps families connected