

Eight Seconds With Eighty-Four Forty-Four . . . *

By Marie Watkins

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The press release that came in the morning mail said Union Pacific's historic steam locomotive would pass through New Haven on March 12 on its way to the World's Fair at New Orleans.

No. 8444, the news release said, was 40 years old and was the last steam-powered engine to be built for Union Pacific. Well . . . if we remembered . . . we'd walk up from the Leader office to the railroad track that day. Out of polite respect for the past, we would watch the old steam engine chug by, hear it creak and moan, and click a photo or two.

It snowed on Monday, March 12, the wind was biting and the day was a dull, dull gray. We remembered about old No. 8444, and shuffled up to the crossing to wait for the old steam engine . . . just out of respect for the past. The cold quickly stung the toes with pain, and the people who strung along the track wandered here and there and stomped their feet. A train

or two passed, but there was no sight of the old steam engine with the cow catcher.

We milled about, that half-hearted gathering of the cold and the curious. Over there was Orville Benz, and here were Bill and Mary Kelley. Dorothy Borcharding and children waited patiently in their car while Donna Dreftmeyer's troupe stood nearby in the nasty wind. Across the track the Sheehans hid behind turned up collars; Ervin and Viola Mann stood quietly while Bernard Laune wandered up and down, inspecting the track. Down Front Street, a string of people stood waiting . . . Norb Schwaller in a trench coat; Wendy calling from the doorway of Krulls; and over there was . . .

A hoarse whistle moaned . . . Lord! Mercy! It was unbelievable!

Old 8444 exploded across the Front Street track like a page from Armageddon. It would be inappropriate to say the old geezer was smoking —

she was breathing fury like a black demon. You'd a thought she was mad at somebody. And m-o-v-i-n-g? That iron monster never heard of chug-a-chug-a-chug. She hit with such blithering force that it caused terror to rise up and go forth. Black thunder swept all breath away and the air roared with mocking anger. "A hunnert miles an hour! A hunnert miles an hour!" the people would say later with disbelief, for the wind from No. 8444 blew one onlooker right off the railroad crossing.

Before she even got here, No. 8444 was gone.

A black funnel hung in the air and the silence was strangely unreal. We stood stunned, as if we had just been spit out of a tornado. It was awesome, just awesome.

I, for one, was pleased to have had the experience of seeing the old relic creak by. Out of polite respect for the past, of course.

***No. 8444 was renumbered to its original number, 844, in 1989.**