

A WWII Living History Day at IRM

THE ANZIO EXPRESS & NORTH PLATTE CANTEEN

By Rebecca Tulloch



Photo by Tom Davison

The men and women of the “Greatest Generation” and their trains were remembered on October 3, 2009 at IRM when the museum hosted its first WWII Reenactment. WWII Historical Interpreters populated our museum portraying American, Allied, Axis soldiers, and war time civilians; both on the home front, and in war torn Italy. Through out the day, our WWII period trains demonstrated the critical role that they played during the war years, culminating with the reenactment of an American Troop train making a whistle stop at the famous North Platte Canteen in Nebraska.

The event began early in the morning when museum guests began their visit to the museum by first being issued Italian identification cards at the main gate. They were instructed to carry their Italian ID cards with them through out the day because at any time German soldiers could ask to see their “Papers Please!”, and they did.

A ride on the “Streetcars to Italy Tours”, was first on the agenda for our guests. Departing from the Depot Street station, which doubled for a trolley stop in Anzio, Italy, patrons were greeted by the American Women’s Army Corps (WACs) who had set up their headquarters adjacent to the trolley stop just as this unit had done in Italy over 60 years ago.



Photo by Tom Davison

WAC Field Equipment and radio perator Abbie Manelly at the Anzio Trolley Stop.

Our guests were then invited to board the trolley for a ride into occupied Italy in 1944. The first stop on their tour was Cassino, Italy, the site of the famous battle for Monte Cassino; there a British soldier spoke to the passengers about the battle while part of the war was taking place just outside the trolley windows. He then warned them that the trolley would be entering into German controlled Italy and that they should be careful at they continue their journey. Soon after the trolley rolled into the enemy zone, passengers were met by German soldiers and scientists who were supervising an archeological excavation where priceless treasures were being unearthed and stolen back to Berlin. German soldiers then boarded the train to check ID papers only to discover an Italian female partisan was riding on the train. As the train rolled on down the tracks, the German officer began to interrogate the partisan on the train for all the passengers to observe.



Photo by Rebecca Tulloch



Photo by Tom Davison

Above: Red Streetcar 3142 passes by German Antiquities display. Right Corner: Italian Soldier Bob Starr. Right: Italian Partisan Lisa Dousharm is discovered by Germans.



Photo by Rebecca Tulloch

Suddenly, the trolley was ordered to stop as it was observed by the Germans on the trolley that Italian partisans were on the track a head setting up an explosive device. The Germans quickly exited the trolley to engage the partisans in a fire fight only to be extinguished by an American patrol squad who accidently stumbled into the scrap. After being rescued by the Americans, the trolley proceeded even further into the occupied zone eventually ending up in Viterbo, Italy. There all the passengers were asked to unload on to the platform for a papers check and questioning regarding the partisan attack on the trolley. All were required to comply, and the passengers smiled indicating their over all enjoyment of the unique view into history. They weren’t just watching a performance; they were in one!



Photo by Rebecca Tulloch

German Historical Interpreter Dave Fornell reviews guests’ identity papers at Springfield trolley stop which doubled for Viterbo, Italy.

By high noon, the announcement was shouted out for the departure of the Anzio Express from the Depot Station. German soldiers were loading their troops onto the train to make their escape from the Allied Forces closing in on Rome north back to Germany.

As the train rolled forward from the station, passengers heard the growl of a damaged American Patrol Airplane over head. Shortly after, the train approached an open field where the shot down Allied airmen were on the ground cutting loose their parachutes and making their escape into the fields. The Anzio Express came to a halt at the field and the Germans funneled off the train into the field to capture the escaping pilots. The



Photo by Rebecca Tulloch

Photos by Tom Davison

pilots were brought on the board to be taken back to Germany. While on the train, the passengers experienced papers checks and many other small skits that played out for museum guests to witness.

Children and adults were equally excited to be interacting with the WWII actors in such a unique way. Near the end of the excursion, the train was stopped again as the Allies attack the Germans and rescued the downed airmen. Later that afternoon, the Germans counter attacked with a full out battle in the steam engine bone yard which doubled for an Italian rail yard some where outside of Rome. Allies and Axis soldiers battled for victory in and around the locomotives. The crowd cheered and rooted for an American victory through an explosive demonstration of a WWII battle.

The most moving part of the day was the reenactment of the North Platte Canteen. Shortly after the start of WWII, troop trains became a very common site in America. On December 25th, 1941, Rae Wilson along with other women volunteers of town North Platte, Nebraska met the 1st Troop train stopping at North Platte with home-cooked food, fruit, gifts and coffee. Rae wrote, "We can do our part... Why can't we, the people of North Platte and the other towns surrounding our community, start and open a Canteen now?" At its peak, 3,000-5,000 troops were being served each day by volunteers.

North Platte Canteen during WWII IRM Canteen 2009



Photo Courtesy of Union Pacific Railroad.

Photo by Rebecca Tulloch



Photos by Tom Davison

The soldiers were packed into rail passenger cars with little or no food, sleeping quarters, and very few rest rooms. The home sick soldiers were tired from little rest and scared about what lied ahead for them once they got into the fight. Most of these troop trains were pulled by steam locomotives and required regular water stops about every 50 miles or so. At these water stop, the troops would have a little time to get off the train and stretch their legs. Ten minutes later, the whistle blew and all the troops piled back on to the train. North Platte, Nebraska was and still is a major rail hub for the Union Pacific Railroad.



Photo by Rebecca Tulloch



Photo by Rebecca Tulloch



Photo by Tom Davison

For the next five years, volunteers from North Platte and the neighboring towns and communities operated the North Platte Canteen, meeting every troop and hospital train serving more than 6 million servicemen and women who traveled through Nebraska. Many food items and small gifts such as playing cards were given to the soldiers. If a birthday was discovered among the troops, bingo a birthday cake was revealed along with a the singing of "Happy Birthday".

IRM recreated this famous homefront canteen by running a WWII era train with GIs huddled into the troop cars. The train even made a stop on its route to pick up a soldier being dropped off by his fiancee and parents at the Seemann Road platform. Upon the trains arrival at the depot, women met the troops with food items such as fruit, cookies and cakes as was done during the war. Inside the depot, period volunteers served hot soup and other tasty treats to the servicemen. After ten minutes, the whistle blared out, and the GIs quickly ran back to board the train on to an unknown destiny. Goodbyes were tearfully exchanged on the platform, and the train slowly pulled out of the station for war.



Photo by Tom Davison



Photo by Rebecca Tulloch

The 2009 IRM WWII Living History Day was a resounding success treating Museum guests and members to a new and unique educational railroad experience here at the museum. The historical interpreters of the 10th Mountain Division Living History WWII Group worked long and hard with Ed Rosengren, IRM Marketing Director, for many months leading up to the event to see that this special day was well organized and enjoyable for all. Members of the 10th promoted the event through out the summer at the musum by making appearances in WWII attire on the 4th of July and again at the IRM Members Weekend. Because on the large favorable response from the public and membership, IRM has scheduled the second annual WWII Living History Days for Memorial Day Weekend 2010. The 2010 event will be a three day memorial to our WWII veterans with another tribute to the men and women of the "Greatest Generation" culminating with a memorial service to all veterans on Memorial Day. For questions regarding the 2010 event, contact Ed Rosengren or the IRM website at www.anzioexpress.org. for event details. See you next time at the The Anzio Express & North Platte Canteen WWII Living History Days at the Illinois Railway Museum.



Photos by Tom Davison

10th Mtn Member Rebecca Tulloch pictured here portraying a Rocford Peach Baseball player for the WWII Girls Baseball League at IRM Members Weekend.



Photo by Rebecca Tulloch



Photos by Rebecca Tulloch

10th Mtn Members Phil Lauricella poses with his wife Lynn on IRM Members Weekend.