

[lagrange](#)

La Grange executive helps launch return of Pullman cars

BY JANE MICHAELS

jmichaels@pioneerlocal.com

Last Modified: Aug 2, 2012 03:18PM

LA GRANGE — A lifelong love of trains is driving a La Grange executive's latest project to restore Pullman sleeping cars for first-class trips from Chicago to New York and New Orleans.

"I've been having a lot of fun, and I'm really fortunate to be able to do this," said Edward Ellis, president of Iowa Pacific Holdings, LLC for 10 years.

"Most of what we do is freight, hauling everything from potatoes to red lava rocks for landscaping a garden," Ellis said. "We're a feeder railroad picking up products at their origin and hauling them to other lines, like the Burlington Northern Santa Fe. Some of our cars ultimately make their way through La Grange."

But what has Ellis excited on the job is the chance to bring back a little of history, both his own and the nation's.

"I've been in the railroad business 40 years and got into it because my mother refused to fly," he remembered. "We went everywhere by train, from coast to coast. I thought that was really nice, breakfast in the dining car and your bed being turned down at night."

At its peak in the late 1920s, Pullman was essentially the nation's largest hotel chain on wheels, because it offered accommodations for 100,000 travelers per night, said Ellis, an admitted railroad history buff.

"Pullman was a uniquely American experience, the way we went to see grandma or how traveling salesmen got to see clients," he said.

Ellis said travelers' expectations differed decades ago.

"In the 1950s, nobody missed having a shower," he said. "Now everyone wants to have one or know it's available in case. And we can't live without Wi-Fi."

At a Colorado repair facility, many of the historic Pullman cars are being restored and upgraded to run safely at 110 mph on the back of an Amtrak train, Ellis said.

"Some of the cars were built during Prohibition," he said. "Pullman put in soda fountains where you would normally put a bar. When Prohibition was over, they said 'let's get it in the shop.'"

The Iowa Pacific Railroad Co. began running private passenger cars in 1984 for charter groups or luxury and specialty trips and decided to expand on the idea by bringing back the Pullman experience. The company operates several passenger lines in the U.S., England and Peru to climb to the Machu Picchu ruins.

"After doing market research, it became clear to us one of the best ways to expand was to pick up regular

routes that have exciting end points that get a lot of trips repeated,” he said. “That’s how we came up with the two routes, Chicago to New Orleans, and Chicago to New York.”

The \$800 ticket for each overnight trip includes gourmet meals, drinks and first-class accommodations. Preparations are on track for an October launch of the Pullman venture. Details are available at www.travelpullman.com.

While the Pullman car trips are bringing back a slice of history, their ticket fee also is helping to bolster the future of passenger rail travel through fees paid to Amtrak.

“It’s important to me and my colleagues that we are, in fact, supporting Amtrak by providing this, “ he said. “We’re taking care of not just the people riding these cars but we’re helping to support other people riding trains, too.”

Copyright © 2012 — Sun-Times Media, LLC
