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60 years later, Knott's train still puffing

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BUENA PARK – History books note that the proliferation of railroads helped start the large-scale settlement of the western United States.

In a similar fashion, the railroad that Walter Knott had installed near his family's chicken restaurant was the start of what is now Knott's Berry Farm.

While other attractions here have come and gone, the Ghost Town & Calico Railroad – like its 120-year-old steam engine – has endured.

The park will celebrate the 60th anniversary of the opening of its first

ride on Thursday with a re-enactment of the "golden spike" ceremony that opened the railroad and tours of the park's roundhouse.

The train, like its neighbors the Calico Mine Ride and the Timber Mountain Log Ride, has withstood the test of time and remains one of the park's most popular attractions.

Jennifer Spaeth of Fort Irwin stepped off of the train on a recent weekday, several young children in tow. She said her family likes the antique nature of the train and the mock robberies that take place with every ride.

"We come here every year, and we have to ride the train," she said.

The train, like Ghost Town itself, grew out of the popularity of Mrs. Knott's Chicken Dinner Restaurant. The eatery opened in 1934; by 1940, the restaurant served up to 4,000 dinners on Sunday evenings. Lines frequently stretched up the highway from the restaurant's front door.

To entertain guests who sometimes had to wait three hours for a table, Knott created his Ghost Town.

He uprooted and imported several of his buildings from actual Old West towns. After a few years, when Knott decided his Ghost Town was incomplete without a railroad, he wasn't about to settle for an inferior substitute.

That's when Knott heard about the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad. The expansion of automobile travel in the late 1940s and early '50s had a dramatic effect on the regional narrow-gauge railroad, and company officials were looking to sell it.

In late 1951, Knott purchased D & RGW steam locomotive No. 409, which had been built in 1881. Renamed No. 41 as part of the Ghost Town & Calico Railroad, it still chugs around the park today. As part of this week's anniversary events, No. 41 will be re-christened the "Walter Knott."

Because the Colorado railroad was a narrow-gauge type, Knott's purchases had to be shipped out west on flatbed rail cars at the hefty price tag of \$25,000. Still, Knott was determined to have his railroad.

"He had a love for the railroads," said Tim Davey, a Knott's maintenance technician with an appetite for railroads and history. "He knew they were an integral part of the Westward movement of the country. His objective was to preserve our American past for future generations. ...When you talk about 60 years of

narrow-gauge trains in Buena Park, that's pretty neat."

The locomotive runs on tracks skinnier than most seen around Orange County, because it originally chugged on a line with trestles and on tight ledges in the mountains. Knott's railroad is a 5/8-mile loop.

Of course, any train system needs a depot. The one in Ghost Town is an original Pacific Electric depot that once served Stanton. Knott had it brought to the park, shored it up, and added to one side a little bit.

While the steam engine and passenger cars are the railroad's centerpiece, Knott's also frequently runs the Galloping Goose, a diesel engine that looks more like an old school bus. It was used for lighter work on the Rio Grande Railroad, such as shuttling commuters and carrying mail.

The Knott's collection includes two specialty cars, the Edna and the Durango. The Edna was the private car used by Otto Mears, the president of one of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad's subsidiaries. The car, restored by Knott's crews, was designed for Mears to travel in comfort. It sports a full kitchen, including a bunk above the prep area that folds down so the cook could wake up in the morning and get right to work.

It also has a full bedroom, equipped with a toilet that flushed right onto the tracks – a common practice at the time. The toilet lid is now wired shut.

"It's a museum piece," Davey said.

Edna's sister car, Durango, was built in the 1880s. She's a sleek palace car with 14 swivel seats, electric lights, and heating. During the anniversary celebration this coming weekend, Knott's will offer evening dinner served to guests in the Durango.

The specialty cars are largely kept off of the main line.

Aside from the historic nature of the railroad, one of the most popular features are the robbers who burst into the cars, waving empty six-shooters and demanding money from passengers.

"The bandits were there from the very beginning," Davey said. "Walter Knott wanted to give guests a taste of what it might be like. Where else can you go in the United States, get robbed, and thoroughly enjoy it?"

When the attraction started up, however, the robberies seemed a bit too authentic for some passengers. They fought back with the bandits.

"Knott's Preserved," a history book about the park, notes that one robber had to take 11 days off because of injuries over his first few years, after absorbing punches and wildly-flung purses. That time off included several stints in the hospital.

The golden spike ceremony will take place at 11 a.m. on Thursday Jan. 12, and is open to the public with park admission.

Reservations for dinner on the Durango are available for Friday, Jan. 13 and Saturday, Jan. 14 and can be made at 714-220-5298. Dinner is \$50 per person. Information: knotts.com.

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