Trains of the Seward Peninsula

The Council City and Solomon River Railroad

At one time in all its vast 600,000 square miles, Alaska had less than 150 miles of railroad. All of this, with one exception, was narrow gauge. The only regulation standard gauge (4 feet 81/2 inches) in Alaska was the Council City and Solomon River Railroad, the farthest north and west in the country.

The Western Alaska Construction Company of Chicago selected the Seward Peninsula because it was a veritable storehouse of mineral wealth, yet it had no rivers of adequate depth for commercial navigation, and the surface of the coastal area was covered with tundra, over which travel was impractical. Transportation had been by way of shallow stream beds, but this was ineffective, perilous, and, at times, an impossible means of travel.

In 1898 the Discovery Mining District, a 10 X 20 mile expanse, was first organized on the Seward Peninsula, and Council City was founded on its southern border. As men swarmed along the gold-bearing creeks in the area, a trading post, saloons and rooming houses followed, and Council City became the seat of the Recorder Office. One of the richest and most promising sections in Alaska was located around Council City, which grew and flourished, and mining operations continued to expand despite prohibitive transportation costs and the inconvenience of freighting supplies to it and its mines.

Still, the exorbitant rates for a haul of a few miles across the muck and mire of the tundra made the cost of supplies so enormous that only very rich claims near the coast or along the streams could be worked at a profit.

A railroad provided the only solution to the urgent demand for transportation that could deliver supplies at a reasonable cost, and the amount of freight required by mining interests promised the largest and quickest return on investments.

With capital of a million dollars, the Western Alaska Construction Company of Chicago had been granted a right-of-way by the government to build the Council City and Solomon River Railroad. Vice-president and General Manager of the Company, J. Warren Dickson, literally put his name on the map, naming the 40 acre southern terminal of the railroad, Dickson.

Across the Solomon River from the village of Solomon, the site was chosen as the seaboard port and supply base instead of Nome because ships could lie within half a mile of the beach but they could

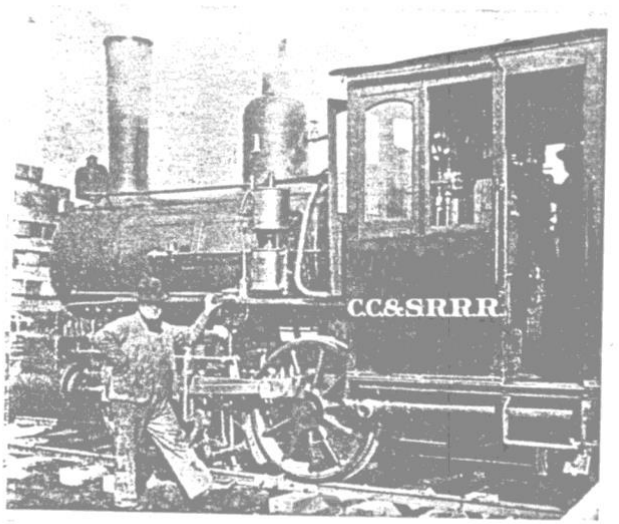
not approach within two miles of Nome.

Early in the season of 1903, several tons of cargo was discharged from the steamer Aztec. In addition to a pile driver, a hoisting engine, and a heavy derrick, there were 165,000 ties, 51 miles of standard gauge rails, four million board feet of lumber for trestles, culverts, offices, stations, employee dwellings, and a machine shop, including machinery and tools.

Also delivered were the first two of three relatively rare 23 ton 0-4-4T Forney type steamer locomotives built by the New York Locomotive Works in 1881 and 1886 for the New York Elevated lines. They were purchased when the NYC system converted to electric later in the 1880's and many of its steam locomotives were sold and dispersed. Included in the shipment were newer box- and flatcars which bore casting dates of around 1893.

Moreover, in Dickson there were 104 miles of copper wire, a number of Bell telephones and materials for a telephone system from Solomon to Council City. As the sole lessee of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company for the Seward Peninsula, the railroad would provide service not only to its stations but to all the mining camps. The government transferred the Post Office from Solomon to the Office building at the Dickson terminal and gave the railroad the contract for transporting mail as fast as the line was completed.

The railroad began at the mouth of the Solomon River and was to pass through the most active mining districts, with mineral deposits beyond computation. It was to follow the river to the Ruby Creek country through the Casadepaga and Niukluk Valley to Council City, which was the distribution point for the interior country, especially the rich Ophir Creek District. J. Warren Dickson intended the system to connect all the principal mining areas and population centers throughout the Solomon River, Council City, Ophir Creek, Bluestone, York, and Nome regions. He also wanted to connect them with the tidewater vessels at the Solomon River, Grantly Harbor, Port Clarence, and Good Hope Bay.



The No. 1 locomotive of the Council City & Solomon River Railroad. The initials had to be crowded to fit on the side of the cab.

With continuous daylight and a crew of over 100 men laboring 10 to 15 hours a day, the work proceeded without interruption. Most of the activity seemed concentrated around the Dickson terminal where a heavy timber and rock-filled permanent dock was constructed in the lagoon, and a railroad bridge was built to connect the terminal with the beach. The Council City and Solomon River Railroad was constructed for permanency with a firm and level ballasted roadbed and two substantial company buildings. One was a residence for officials and had 12 rooms and a bath. The other was used for offices and a waiting room.

By the end of the season, the Company had completed about ten miles of main line with sidings, and the marsh was overlaid with a yard and a system of spur tracks.

During construction, trains ran on a schedule for passengers and freight as fast as the line was completed. In the last month, the railroad carried nearly 1,000 paying passengers, and two miners inquired into freight rates for 3,700 tons to be transported in 1904.

In the spring of 1904, a ten bed hospital with an operating room opened on the second floor of the company office building, yet other progress was slow. Frost and ice impeded construction and

much of the work entailed repair of the buildings and yards, for only by constant vigil could man protect his work from the Bering Sea and arctic winter.

Still, a permanent town-site was laid out, and steamship lines and merchants applied for buildings sites on the 40 acre terminal grounds. Several new businesses were attracted to Dickson, including the Northwest Commercial Company and Tanner and Clark Lumber Yard and Warehouse. Five saloons and six restaurants were constantly open, and the need for a marshal became apparent. With the base supplies and terminal buildings established, the company expected that over 50 miles of track would be in operation before the end of the season.

When the telephone line and rail services reached the Big Hurrah, about ten miles north of Dickson, railroad officials completed arrangements with Alaska Pacific Express Company so that money orders from Dickson, Shovel Creek, and Big Hurrah could be sent anywhere in the world and parcels could be expressed to any point in the United States. The Company optimistically predicted that the services would be extended to Council City by snowfall.

Yet, for all the ambitious planning and progress in other areas, the laying of track went forward slowly. By July first only 1,000 feet had been added.

Although the third 23 ton 0-4-4T Forney type steamer locomotive had arrived in the fall of 1904, the Western Alaska Construction Company opened a stage service from the Right Branch Station on the railroad to Council City. The introduction of the stage line was to be a temporary remedy until the railroad was complete. As it ended up, the decision to supplant rails was to be a portent.

A bill had been introduced in Congress to extend the rail line, at $10,000 a mile after the completion of the first 20 miles, the total not to exceed a million dollars. The bill apparently got little consideration from congress, and about the time it was introduced, J. Warren Dickson resigned his position with the CC & SR Railroad.

Sometime later Dickson organized a company to build a new railroad from Nome north to the Kougarok Region, which was to be called the Seward Peninsula railroad. In the meantime, the CC & SR Railroad had been contracted to be completed.

As the 1905 season opened, plans were laid to extend the tracks of the CC & SR Railroad 17 miles to the mouth of Ruby Creek, then down the Casadepaga for another 13 miles. However, the only construction seems to have been a 927 foot railroad bridge across the Solomon River. This brought the total length of the railroad to 13 miles.

After the arrival of the new contractor and general manager, Hugh F. Magee, the stage line opened again for daily service during June through November.

In 1906, Magee sold a thousand rails and quantities of fish plates, ties and other construction material from the CC & SR REA and transported them to Nome for use in extending the new Seward Peninsula Railroad. Although the CC & SR Railroad may have needed the cash, Magee's bosses were not happy with his decision and he was replaced with Theodor Knowlton.

Knowlton pushed construction work through Cheyenne Creek, bridged Coal Creek and had the road fully graded as far as Banner Creek.

In mid-September, construction had reached the junction of Penelope Creek and the Casadepaga, a total of 35 miles, but was halted there by lack of fish plates, ties and other construction material.

Knowlton said there would be no engineering difficulties in continuing the road to Council City and estimated the cost at about a quarter of a million dollars. However, not only was the quarter of a million dollars not forthcoming, the Company was three quarters of a million dollars in debt and unable to pay its stockholders. Also, the business in 1906 had not equaled that of 1905.

Construction stopped at Penelope Creek.

A July 1907 train schedule listed the three hour trip to Penelope Creek on Tuesdays and Fridays,

and the one hour trip to East Fork on the other days of the week.

Perhaps if practical experience had coupled with sound judgment, Solomon and Council City could have been connected by rail. Yet apparently J. Warren Dickson's optimism exceeded the boundaries of practicality and his elaborate dream ran out of steam.

Originally it was predicted that the CC&SR Railroad would become part of a great transcontinental system from Vancouver to the Bering Sea, helping to develop the greatest mining empire in the world. But today the tracks are gone, there are no bridges, and the terminal buildings have collapsed. Only the rusting ruins of three steamer locomotives, abandoned a few feet from the Bering Sea in 1907, remain of a railroad which was intended to be one of the most extensive and prosperous in Alaska.

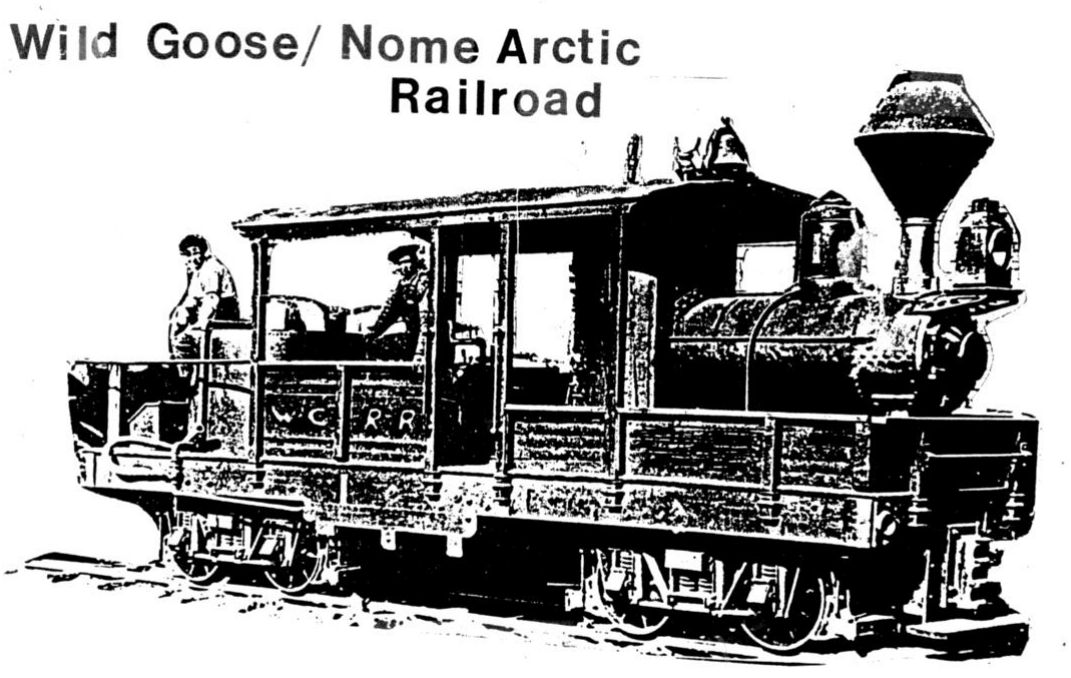
In recent years several groups tried to rescue the locomotives of the Last Train to Nowhere for museum display, but transportation costs were too prohibitive. In a final irony, the circumstances that brought the railroad to Alaska nearly a century ago now prohibit it from being preserved.

Wild Goose Railroad

Gold was discovered in the Nome area by a trio of fortunate Scandinavians in September of 1898, and less than two years later a train rolled over the unstable arctic terrain into the area, something even those daring first miners would never have dreamed possible.

By then hundreds of prospectors were along Nome's beaches for miles and up on the streams. These miners needed supplies, but moving materials over the spongy tundra was time consuming and expensive, costing $200-$300 a ton.

One of those who paid the exorbitant price was Charles D. Lane, an experienced mining entrepreneur who had become wealthy from mining enterprises in the Lower 48. He arrived in Nome in 1899 and established the Wild Goose Mining and Trading Company with a capitalization of over $1 million. A prominent Nome resident, he was president of the Company which had rich operations in the Anvil Creek area, and he convinced his firm's directors that the building and operating of a railroad would be a good investment. He bought a steamer and loaded the entire cull stock of a Northwest lumber mill, two 15-ton Climax 212 Class A geared narrow gauge locomotives, rails, a dozen eight-wheel flat cars, and other supplies on to it. As soon as the ship anchored in the Nome roadstead, work started on the railroad.



Under the direction of a Civil War veteran, who had worked on building the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific railroads, crews started laying cull lumber foot by foot across the squishy tundra. Rail men followed these construction gangs.

Originally the line began on the sand spit at the mouth of the Snake River, opposite the center of Nome. By July, four miles of railroad had been completed to Discovery on Lower Anvil Creek. By late in the season two and a half more miles of track had been laid to Anvil Station on the western slope of Anvil Mountain. Later a line was run into Nome and two branches were built at right angles along the old beach line.

Anvil Creek was highly profitable for the Wild Goose Company, producing $21 million in gold. The little narrow gauge proved profitable too. By the end of the first summer, income was more than nine times what the cost had been to construct the railroad at $5000 a mile plus equipment. The railroad became known as the Paystreak Express, carrying freight at two cents per pound and passengers where they could find space for fifty cents a piece to Discovery or $2.00 round trip to the end of the line.

The roadbed continued to sink into the marshy tundra, giving a roller-coaster effect, and despite an eight-miles-per-hour speed limit, half of the train crews' time was spent jacking either the engine or the flatcars back onto the tracks. The train kept busy during the summer, but closed down in November.

Business thrived so sufficiently that by 1902 it was necessary to obtain a third locomotive. The 15 ton Climax 315 Class A geared had a box cab to enclose the crew from the weather. A fourth Climax 315 was added later.

As the Wild Goose Company sought new operations in the Ophir Creek District, Lane planned construction of a second Wild Goose Railroad, known as the Golovin Bay Railway Company. The two Wild Goose Railroads were within about 60 miles of each other, one running from Nome to Anvil Creek and the other running seven miles from Council City to No. 15 on Ophir Creek and some of the other claims, a sort of detached subsidiary of the Nome line. They both also used some of the same equipment, the No. 4 15-ton Climax 315 locomotive having been brought over from Nome.

Construction began in late June 1902 and was finished within a month. The first excursion train over this Wild Goose Railroad carried 150 people on a Sunday outing to the mines at Ophir Creek. Planks were laid on boxes on open flat cars to accommodate the merry crowd. As long as gold was plentiful this railroad prospered, but when the gold petered out in 1906 it folded as the CC & SR Railroad had.

Meanwhile, in 1903, the original Wild Goose Railroad was reorganized as the Nome-Arctic Railroad. The plan to bring the railroad into town was revived with a terminal on Second Street from which a spur was run to the beach. The line ran along Fourth Street, back of St. Joseph's Church, across Steadman Avenue, and then south to Second. Another branch line was built from Anvil Road to about a quarter mile beyond the Wild Goose Company's plant on the Snake River.

Due to a government tax of $100 per mile, the Nome City assessment of $20,000 and troubles with longshoremen, the Nome-Arctic Railroad operated only four months in 1905, and work ceased in the fall.

Seward Peninsula Railroad

As activity on the Wild Goose-Nome Arctic and Council City and Solomon River railroads began to diminish, former vice-president and general manager of the Council City and Solomon River Railroad, J. Warren Dickson, announced plans for the Seward Peninsula Railroad Company in 1905.

The Northwestern Development Company of New York, with $2,000,000 in capital, was organized in 1906 to build a railroad to tap into the Kougarok gold fields and to develop extensive

mineral holdings which the company had acquired. The narrow-gauge line ran from Nome into Kougarok country, but it was also part of a plan to connect the Seward Peninsula with Valdez.

The railroad was to be constructed as soon as the sea opened up to navigation and was to push forward as rapidly as possible.

During the 1906 construction season the railroad reached 85 miles to Lane's Landing, or the village of Shelton on the Kuzitrin River, the railroads terminus and supply point for the Kougarok gold fields.

At $5000 a mile, the first few miles of the line were very inexpensive to construct. However, trackage through the Pilgrim River and Nome Valley proved to cost more as the road had 128 bridges and trestles. The trestle over the Kuzitrin River was about 1000 feet, and the ice took it out during the winter of 1907. From then on it was removed each winter and reinstalled each spring.

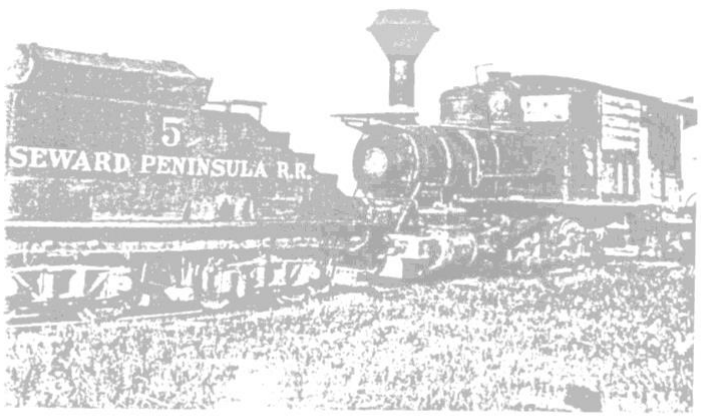
The soggy mud of the thawing tundra presented many operational problems as the roadbed had the stability of a wet sponge, and derailments were a normal part of operation.

The Seward Peninsula Railroad had taken over two 15 ton Climax 212 Class A geared locomotives and one Climax 315 Class A from the Nome-Arctic Wild Goose Railroad, yet increased business required additional locomotives.

The first of the new railroad equipment was a small, 14-ton Porter 0-6-0 rod engine named Blue Mountain which had been built in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in January 1878. It was one of the first locomotives shipped around Cape Horn to the Washington Territory where it was used to haul freight on the Walla Walla and Columbia River Railroad. In 1906 it was one of the oldest locomotives in existence and already a museum piece when it was obtained from Washington State, freshly painted and shipped to Nome.

It had a low-slung chassis, which held to the track on turns better than the Climax 212 locomotives it replaced, which had a tendency to derail. Most of the other engines had to be handled with great care on the curves and poor roadbed, so the little Porter became a favorite of the engineers. Light and powerful, No. 4 was suited to the moist tundra terrain and climbed the grade over Anvil Mountain with relative ease. The crews could make good time with her, so she was the most popular locomotive owned by the company.

The line also purchased three new, larger Climaxes in 1906: The 23 ton Climax 670 Class B geared, the Climax 672 Class B geared, and the 28 ton Climax 682 Class B geared, numbered Nos. 5 (1st), 6, and 7. They were too heavy and cumbersome for the roller coaster trackage of the Seward Peninsula, so after only one season of service they were shipped back to Washington and Oregon for use on lumber lines.



One of the several locomotives (No. 5) used by the Seward Peninsula Railroad, along with the tender. This locomotive is the 0-6-0 Baldwin built in 1890 for the Alberta Railway and Coal Co. as their No. 1. It was obtained by the Seward Peninsula in 1906. (University of Alaska Archives—Henderson Collection)

In 1907 a larger and newer 0-6-0 Baldwin #10882 was received and designated as Number 5 (2nd). It had been turned out in 1890 for the Alberta Railway and Coal Company where it had been in service for years.

Freight trains with a light load made the run from Nome to Lane's Landing in 10 - 12 hours, but if many cars were added, it could be 16 - 20 hours. For a return trip the cars were usually empty so they would bounce along into Nome in six to eight hours.

The Seward Peninsula Railroad moved a

lot of gold, but within a few years, gold mining on the Seward Peninsula began to decline, and the train schedule was cut to two or three trips a week. In the fall of 1910, railroading on a commercial scale came to an end on the Peninsula.

Nomeites were inconvenienced by the lack of service, and the mines which were still operating needed supplies. Ownership of the railroad changed in 1911 and 1913. Between 1913 and 1920 when Jafet Lindeberg, of the Pioneer Mining and Ditch Company, operated the line, it was used intermittently for the transportation of light freight, a few passengers, and the mail. It was during this period that a wide assortment of picturesque conveyances were used for travel over the tracks, including pupmobiles. Residents used dog teams and flanged wheel carts instead of trying to cross the mushy tundra in the summer months.

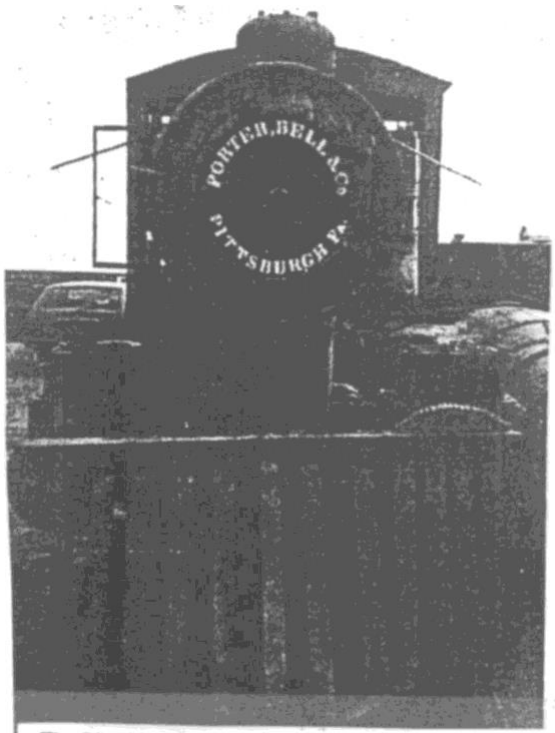
In 1921 the Territory of Alaska Legislature purchased the railroad and equipment, stipulating that it shall be put in good operating condition and operated as a public tram and highway. Besides the roadbed and some real estate in Nome, the sale included five locomotives, one of them being the Blue Mountain, a coach, a box car, cook car, bunk car and twelve flat cars.

In the fall of 1922 the Alaska Road Commission, a federal agency that handled road and trail construction, purchased the road for the Territory and noted that repair of the 87-mile tram was of great public interest.

The Alaska Road Commission purchased a light gasoline locomotive for use over the road, and during the summer of 1924 the line between Little Creek and the Nugget Roadhouse was rehabilitated. By the end of the year the Commission had spent $32,653 to bring 42 miles of line into good operating condition for light loads.

The Alaska Railroad Commission maintained the line for anything imaginable that had wheels being operated on the track. The railroad became widely used by miners and merchants who became very adept at attaching flanged wheels to automobiles or wagons. Arrangements were made for draft animals to use the right of way, and planks were placed between the rails on bridges and trestles. Dog powered rigs proved to be the most practical since they could be derailed when meeting an oncomer and launched again. The vehicle with the heavier load had the right-of-way, with the vehicle being derailed going to the high side of the track, so that the operator could put it back on the rails.

Eventually regulations were put into effect, and a powered vehicle was required to have a siren, suitable brakes, a sander, and, if pulling a loaded car, a hired employee. Each locomotive was to be numbered, and if anyone planned to wander beyond the Nome River area, a travel plan giving the destination and time of departure was to be filed.



The *Blue Mountain*, a 1878-vintage Porter-Bell locomotive

Such operation continued until September 1941, when the Army of Engineers purchased the equipment from Kougarok Limited, Inc. of Nome and assumed control of the line.

With the onset of WWII the narrow-gauge line became even more active than in its mining history. The military made some repairs, controlled traffic and brought a couple of LeRoy-powered Plymouth locomotives for use on the trackage as far north as Little Creek. But the heavy loads took their toll on 71 of the 86 miles of poorly constructed roadbed.

Winter snows and glaciations made the road unusable from mid-November until mid-May when a

good percentage of the track would sink into the boggy tundra and have to be rebuilt.

In spite of the difficulties encountered, the little railroad hauled over 100,000 tons of supplies and materials during the winter of 1942, and served the Army engineers well until after WWII.

In the meantime the remains of the little Porter No. 4 locomotive had been used as riprap to shore up part of the Nome seawall.

In 1967, miner Herb Engstrom, unburied it from the sand and placed it on display on Front Street. Later he took it to his residence and started to rebuild it as a working train to be operated on a circuit of his gold mining and dredging operations for a tourist attraction.

Approximately the same age as the little engine, Engstrom tinkered with it for five years, putting over $8000 of his social security money into a replacement boiler and other parts that were manufactured at the Seattle Boiler Works in 1973.

The new boiler and frame were reassembled, with some reconfiguring of the drive wheels, but, due to deteriorating health, Engstrom ceased work, and in 1986 he died.

For years his daughter, June Engstrom Wardle, sought a buyer, and in 1992 a member of the Washington State Railroads Historical Society arrived in Nome to help prepare Engine No. 4 for its return to Washington, from whence it came. Railroad buffs worked to restore it as much as possible for a banking family from Walla Walla, descendants of the Blue Mountain's original owners, who planned to exhibit it.

Information compiled by Sherri McBride for the Nome Convention and Visitors Bureau from the resources of Sam Dahl, Western Alaska Construction Company, Alice Osborn, Bernie Wright, Mark Cardinal, June Wardle, W.H. Dahl, and Bob Yarger. (Summer 1996).