

INSIDE

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2005



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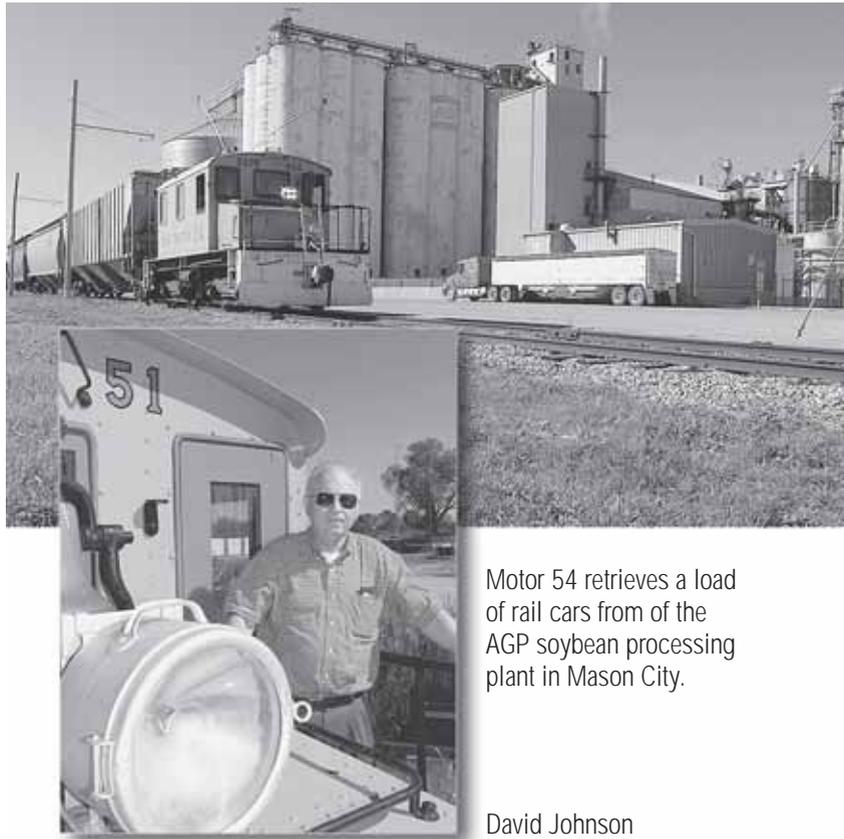
Iowa's electric railroad

With overhead trolley lines running for nearly 10 miles, the Iowa Traction Railroad (IATR) in Mason City is thought to be the only remaining freight-hauling, 600-volt, DC-electric Class III railroad in the country. The railroad commenced operations in 1897 to carry tourists to Clear Lake and, uniquely, to also interchange freight with steam railroads. Several owners and operational changes later, the railroad was put up for abandonment and purchased in 1987 by David Johnson and a few stockholders. The son of a railroad telegrapher, Johnson had worked for railroads a good portion of his life. A mechanical engineer by training, Johnson set out to operate and restore this Iowa transportation treasure.

"I had worked briefly for the New York Central and Union Pacific from 1967 to 1979, and then as a systems analyst at Sperry Univac. When they closed down the unit I worked with, I decided to have a go at this full time. It's what I always wanted to do. One day I handed Kay the checkbook and said, 'I'm going railroading.' I needed to get a loan from the Iowa Rail Finance Authority (IRFA). To do that, I had to convince them I wasn't crazy," said Johnson. "I must have accomplished that, because the IRFA board gave me the loan."

The IATR now runs four engines, or "motors" as they are called in electric railroads. The oldest, #60, was built in 1917. The other three "50-series" motors were built in the 1920s. "The twenties were the heyday for electric railroads," said Johnson. "Keeping these motors in operation takes some innovation. The technology isn't complicated, but there aren't a lot of spare parts lying around. I have to remanufacture parts to keep the motors running. Seventy years from now you wouldn't be able to do that with the engines most railroads run now. The technology is just too complicated. For example, the computer control parts would be extremely difficult and time consuming to hand fabricate once discontinued."

When Johnson took over the IATR in 1987, the motors moved approximately 350 cars per year. By reinvesting back into the equipment and infrastructure, and using his flair for salesmanship, Johnson has increased car movement to more than 2,000 cars per year and added two full-time employees. His wife, Kay, continues to work part-time in the office, as she has since the beginning.



Motor 54 retrieves a load of rail cars from of the AGP soybean processing plant in Mason City.

David Johnson

To provide Mason City's exports to world markets, the IATR connects with the Iowa Chicago and Eastern (ICE) and Union Pacific. The railroad hauls a variety of agricultural goods including soybeans, soybean meal and oil, as well as fuel oil, ethanol, crop oil, farm fertilizer and scrap metal. "I'm trying to operate this like a 'real' railroader would," said Johnson. "So many of the railroads today have lost the sense of what this is all about. It's not about the bottom line; it's about getting out and offering a service that is useful to the customer. Done correctly, the bottom line will take care of itself."

Johnson says his current customers wouldn't have access to rail service if he didn't provide it. "With the cost of diesel fuel going up," he said, "I expect other companies will look into rail as a cost-effective alternative."

Because of the money he's put back into the infrastructure, the IATR is prepared for growth. "We received an infrastructure grant to upgrade rail weight and add ballast on our busy section a few years ago.

Electric railroad,

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“Last year we replaced about 900 ties, added ballast, and straightened and leveled two miles of track. This year we changed 700 ties, rehabilitated the U.S. 65 crossing, and will straighten and level another two miles of track.”

A few years ago Johnson bought an interurban passenger car he’s been working on restoring. “Insurance costs won’t allow us to charge for rides, but donations are welcome from groups who want to take excursions,” he said. “We’ve had a few groups take a ride. That’s a project I’ll be working on for a while.”

“When I bought this railroad there were two possible outcomes,” said Johnson. “If I went broke people would say I was crazy. If I made money, they’d say I was a visionary. Neither was really correct. It seems if you give customers good service at reasonable rates you are rewarded with growth.”

Christy to lead combined Operations and Finance and Director’s Staff divisions



Christy

DOT Director Nancy Richardson has named Mary Christy to head the merged Director’s Staff and Operations and Finance divisions. Christy, a 32-year veteran of the department, has been with the Director’s Staff Division for the past 15 years, first as director of the Bureau of Policy and Information (now the Office of Media and Marketing Services) and then as division director. Richardson had previously been director of the Operations and Finance Division before being named DOT director effective Oct. 1.

Kudos!

VIA E-mail

To: **Director Mark Wandro**

From: Julie Beitz, Western Springs, Ill.

On July 22, 2005, I accidentally left my camera behind at the Council Bluffs rest area. By the time I noticed this, I was too far to turn back. I was unable to contact the Iowa DOT until the following Monday. The woman I spoke with took all my information and told me she would check with the maintenance crew.

I had very little hope that my camera would be found. However, not 10 minutes later the woman called back saying that they did in fact have my camera! The gentleman who had it would be calling me soon to work out how to get the camera back to me. I spoke with him soon after and we arranged to have him ship the camera to my home in Illinois.

He was so kind and helpful, as was the woman who originally answered the phone. I arrived home two and a half weeks later and my camera and all its contents were there, having arrived safely after the careful packaging done by the wonderful people at the Iowa DOT.

I guess my four-year-old daughter was right. All the adults were saying how the camera would never be there, someone probably took it etc... and she piped up from the back seat that there are nice people in the world.

Thank you again for your help and kindness. I hope to have the opportunity to travel through your state again!

Benefits open enrollment until Nov. 28

During the enrollment and change period, you can accomplish the following:

- review your family’s health, dental and life insurance needs;
- change your health insurance carrier;
- enroll in Dependent Care Flexible Spending; and
- enroll in Health Flexible Spending.

Take advantage of this month-long change period, as this may be the only time you can sign up for certain benefit programs. Changes will be effective Jan. 1, 2006.

Contact the benefits coordinator in the Office of Employee Services at 515-239-1239 for further information.