

Alissa Fleming and Janice Bauer here reporting on our weeklong adventure to Ely, Nevada for Railcamp at Nevada Northern Railway.

Yes, we are two teenage girls interested in trains and railroading. The Bucksgahuda and Western Railroad is where we got our start at a very young age. The B&W is a two-foot gauge railroad operated by family and friends. Most of our Saturday afternoons are spent there where we can be found performing various tasks, assisting in preserving the history of railroading. Prior to attending Railcamp in Nevada, both of us attended the program at Steamtown in Scranton, PA. We found out about the camp in Nevada and wanted to go after having a blast at Steamtown.

Our journey started on Friday, July 25th. We drove from our hometown of St. Marys, PA to the Harrisburg area, where we stayed the night at Gary Yanko's house; he would be one of our counselors during the upcoming week. We left early Saturday morning and drove to the Philadelphia airport. There we met up with other Railcampers and boarded our plane to Atlanta. Once in Atlanta, we switched planes and continued on to Las Vegas. When we arrived in Las Vegas, we checked into our hotel, went out to dinner, and then took a drive to see downtown Las Vegas.

On Sunday, we ate breakfast at the hotel and then had a four-hour drive up to Ely. It was an entertaining ride up and the scenery was great. We arrived around 1: 30 p.m. We checked into our "home" for the next week. After, we ventured down to the museum and walked around for the opportunity to take pictures without anyone around. Then we stopped at the Hotel Nevada for a quick bite to eat before heading back to the hotel.

Finally, the other van of railcampers arrived after having some car problems. We then all traveled together to go back to the museum for dinner as well as a general safety briefing for the week with the staff of Nevada Northern. After the meeting, we knew we were in for an exciting week with our fellow Railcampers and the staff.

On Monday, our day started out with breakfast at the Hotel Nevada. After arriving at the East Ely Depot, Mark Bassett, the director of the museum, took us on the "Death March" around the property. It has been nicknamed the "Death March" for the length of the tour and the amount of walking involved. However, we found it rather enjoyable to see the property and hear the history of the railway.

After lunch, we toured the Quada Copper Mine. We were given the opportunity to look down into the mine as well as actually going down into the mine ourselves. We also had the experience of go inside where they actually refine the copper. We saw the conveyor belts with the ore going into the mine, the ball mills where they crush the ore into smaller pieces, and the tubs where they float all possible copper out of the ore. The day ended with dinner at the Big Apple restaurant. After eating, a movie was shown further explaining the copper process. At the end of the movie, we were all tired and ready to relax at the hotel.

On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, all railcampers were split into three groups and rotated each day to another activity. The three activities were working in the shops, locomotive operations, and track inspection/track work. The whole day was spent working and experiencing some of the different aspects of railroading with Nevada Northern personnel. While in the shops, we had many hands-on opportunities. We got to experience using a torch to cut and bend metal, welding with a stick welder, and working at the lathe. Later in the day, the railcampers had the privilege of helping in the repair of Engine #93. Some campers scraped off excess grease and dirt under the engine, and other campers had a chance to brighten up the frame of #93 with a new coat of black paint. (We asked, but they wouldn't let us paint it purple.☺) Following painting, we each had an opportunity to get up close and personal with the engines in the shop. Some went in the firebox, smokebox, and the tender of the engine(s) that were in the shop. We learned about the layout of the firebox and how to build the most efficient fire.

When in the operations part of the week, we learned about the jobs that the conductor and brakeman perform. Campers had the opportunity to inspect the train before the morning excursion. On the train, we “job-shadowed” the conductor and the engineer to better understand the importance of each position. This included punching tickets, watching for journal box malfunctions, and learning the ropes in the cab. Upon returning to the station, we took the exam that all Nevada Northern Railway volunteers/employees must take. It focuses on the rules and regulations of the railway, with safety being the most important.

After lunch, we used our knowledge of hand signals to couple cars in the yard. Following that, we visited Joan Bassett in the Dispatcher's Office to learn about the paperwork needed to document the happenings of the railway and avoid collisions. The Dispatcher's Office still had many artifacts that were originally used such as a switchboard and train order hoop. It was a day that we learned much about the railroading that the public sees.

The third group rotation was track work. The day started out with track inspection. Campers took the HiRailer and looked for broken track bolts and things like cracked rails. While doing part of the track inspection on foot, each group managed to find at least one cracked angle bar and replaced it. Also, while doing track inspection on foot, we were shown the importance of guide rails when a switch is being used.

In the afternoon, campers were given the opportunity to replace as many joint ties as possible, which in our case, never meant more than two. We were told the process of replacing ties by the staff from Nevada Northern that were helping us, but had to do most of the actual labor ourselves. The first step was to dig around the tie, remove the spikes and tie plates, and pull the tie out from underneath the rails using tie tongs. (Sometimes this required using jacks to elevate the rail. We had to be careful not to disturb the other ties, though.) The next step was to put a new tie under the rails, situate the tie plates back, and spike the tie. Before spiking, however, we had to drill a hole where the spike would be driven in because the ties were oak and very hard. After the tie was spiked down, we hand-tamped the tie, making sure it wasn't going anywhere.

By far our favorite day in the rotation was working in the shops. Not only did we gain hands-on experience, we also had the opportunity to come back filthy! And let us say that we were so dirty, they covered the van seats with plastic to transport us back to the hotel.

Friday was our last full day at camp. We were actually on time in the morning, the first and only time that happened the whole entire week! Upon arriving, some campers went with Joan Bassett to relocate wood from the carpenter's shop. By doing this, Joan is now able to move forward with plans to open up the building to the public. Our group was the first to the Ore Yard to work with the Nevada Northern Staff and take turns being the conductor, brakeman, and engineer. Our goal was to move a car successfully between tracks while practicing coupling, switching, and using hand signals. This experience gave us the opportunity to see how much trust and accuracy is needed when moving this equipment and how important safety is.

After lunch, the other campers had the chance to complete the exercise in the Ore Yard. While waiting, other campers were given the task of removing a cracked rail from a siding. However, the lure of the shops was too strong for us, and we ventured back over there. We were given the opportunity to operate the shop crane, and then we painted more of the frame of #93. After about two hours, it was time for the Operation Lifesaver presentation given by Anthony LaNotte, who was one of the counselors from the past week. The presentation was informative and interesting. At the conclusion of the program, we returned to the hotel to wash up for the chicken barbeque.

After returning to the East Ely Depot, dinner was served picnic style, and we enjoyed it with the staff from the past week. Presentations of our certificates of completion came after dinner. We also received a year membership to the NRHS and a copper coin from the Nevada Northern Railway that celebrated #93 and their volunteers.

Now it was time for some fun. The velocipede was brought out from the museum and each camper had the chance to ride it back and forth in the yard. Even Barry (the head honcho) took a turn! We headed back to the hotel for one last time to hang out with our new friends.

Saturday morning came with the chance to ride the "Railcamp Express" - a special train, just for railcampers and counselors. Following the ride we were given the opportunity to ride the speeder (after a few minor adjustments). Then it was time for good-byes and the four-hour ride back to Vegas.

Sunday morning we caught a flight back to the East Coast and back to Eastern Time. We met with camper's parents in Atlanta and Philadelphia. We were sad to see them go, as it had been an awesome week, however, we still had another day of travel before we would be home. That night we stayed with Gary Yanko again after the ride from Philadelphia to Harrisburg. The next morning we were given a tour of Harris Tower before returning back to St. Marys. It was a super week, but we were glad to be back in our own beds.

We had a great time, it was an awesome learning experience, and a great place for hands-on activities. The week would not have been possible without the hard work of many individuals. We would like to thank Barry Smith, Joan and Mark Bassett, Gary Yanko, Joe Virgona, Bill Chapman, Anthony LaNotte, the staff at the mine, and the entire Nevada Northern staff. The staff there was very friendly and worked with us patiently the whole week. (Thanks for putting up with us.☺) We would also like to thank the Blackhawk (Alissa) and Washington, D.C. (Janice) chapters of the NRHS for sponsoring us. We also have to thank our parents and our fellow railcampers for one of the best weeks ever. We hope that this program continues for many years to come, and that more people will have this excellent experience.

We can't wait to go back someday soon! Janice and Alissa signing off.