

IRON HORSE IN THE MAT-SU VALLEY

By Shay Sullivan, Engine 557 Restoration



Dick Morris photo.

In Wasilla, Alaska, a piece of Alaskan history is being resurrected. The 557 Restoration Company is a rather unassuming place from the outside, alongside the Alaska Railroad mainline and well into the heart of downtown Wasilla. Inside that little shop, a decades-long effort materializes every week as volunteers work hard to restore the Alaska Railroad #557, a S160 class 2-8-0 locomotive designed by the USATC (United States Army Transportation Corps) and built by Baldwin, Lima, and Alco for service during World War II.

The S160 was the largest class of steam locomotive ever built in America, with 2,120 examples constructed for use in Europe. During the early years of US involvement in the war, Japanese forces attacked Dutch Harbor in Alaska, later occupying parts of the Aleutian Islands, making it the only time US forces would fight on US soil during the war after Pearl Harbor. The need to support and defend Alaska led to eight S160 locomotives getting diverted and modified to support the Alaska Railroad. They were so successful that the railroad would acquire four more (including 557) after the war as army surplus. The 12 Consolidations would quickly become the remote railroad's main mixed traffic engines, hauling goods and passengers up and down their 470-mile mainline until the advent of dieselization in the 1950s.

Today 557 is the soon-to-be living and breathing symbol of American wartime ingenuity and Alaskan railroad memory. On October 8th, 2022, 557 was pulled outside

the workshop and parked outside for a public viewing to celebrate how far the restoration has come. The day included a talk by 557's own Pat Durand, an experienced railway historian and general manager of the project, as well as a brief visit by a passing northbound passenger train where both diesel and steam locomotives blew their whistles (557's used an air compressor.) The celebration was a significant milestone in the project. After surviving earthquakes, pandemics, and no small amount of hurricane-force winds, the project was still going strong. After ten long years, the locomotive is almost complete. As of March 30th, the tubes and flues are in the boiler, and we'll conduct more tests over the next few weeks as we prep for the hydro test. When that's finished, we have to fit the boiler jacket, prepare for the firing test, and assemble the valve gear, among other tasks that we hope will be completed later this year.

As our restoration is coming to a close, we're now faced with a more existential problem. I am the crew's youngest member at 21, but much of our team is well into retirement. We hope once 557 is touring the mainline, more young people will be interested in helping out, but until then, our primary goal is the same. To give life back to 557 so that she may give life back to our heritage. If you want to hear more about 557's story and her near miss at the scrapper's torch, please check out the 557 Restoration Company website (557AlaskaRails.org).