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Nature Rails

An old New Hampshire line offers a relaxing glimpse of local wildlife

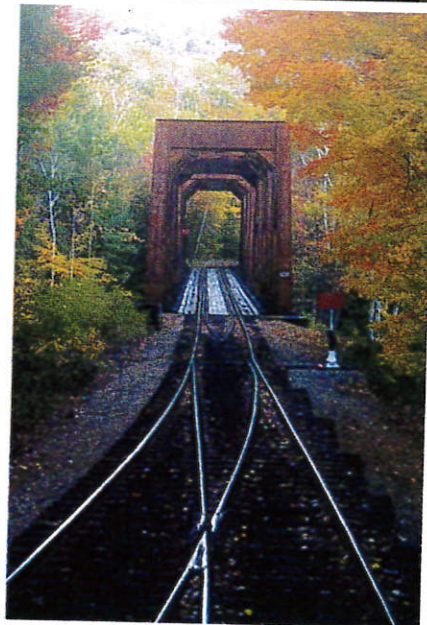
BY KIM FOLEY MACKINNON

My family has always appreciated the timeless allure of riding on a train. We've ridden the rails all over Europe (where you can set your watch by the train schedules), and we even planned last summer's vacation to the Grand Canyon around the historic train from Williams, Arizona, to the South Rim. I especially like how trains can take you back in time to an earlier age of travel, when the journey was almost as exciting as the destination.

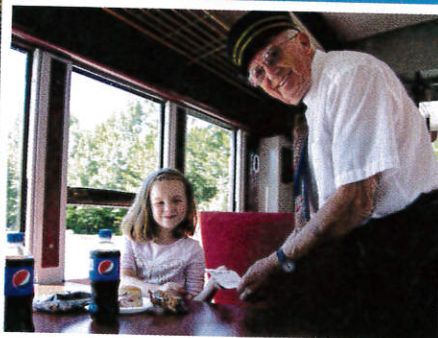
That's one reason I wanted to check out some track closer to home before my husband, Rob, our 15-year-old daughter, Sadie, and I journeyed to the West. So on a gorgeous summer afternoon, we boarded the Hobo Railroad in Lincoln, New Hampshire, along with loads of families taking the 80-minute scenic excursion along the Pemigewasset River.

Watching 3-year-old Will Harding, a huge grin plastered on his face, chat with Hobo Railroad train conductor Austin Tetley was to see what could be the start of someone else's fascination with train travel. No one looking at the young boy, sporting a Red Sox cap and an "I Love My Nana" T-shirt, could fail to smile. Will, from Manchester, New Hampshire, was with his mom and grandmother for his first-ever train ride.

The Hobo Railroad's vintage train cars run along the tracks that were once part of the Boston, Concord,



(Clockwise from top) In Lincoln, New Hampshire, the Hobo Railway's Alco Engine No. 958 prepares to depart along tracks that were laid more than 125 years ago. Along the way, the conductor strolls by to check on passengers. The Swimming Hole bridge is one of several river crossings along the route.



Getting There

>>> **Lincoln, New Hampshire**, is located 80 miles north of Manchester, New Hampshire, on Interstate 93 (and 97 miles northwest of Portland, Maine, on back roads). Use exit 32 from I-93 and follow State Route 112 east. Make an immediate left on to Railroad Street; the Hobo Railroad station is visible from the freeway.

COURTESY HOBO RAILROAD (3)



A naturalist from a nearby nature center displays a peregrine falcon during the line's Nature by Rail program, which is offered on Saturdays through August.

and Montreal Railroad, which built the line in the late 1800s. In its heyday, it brought tourists and vacationers from Boston and New York to the grand hotels in the White Mountains for summer holidays. Later, when automobiles gained primacy, the line mostly carried freight, but that too eventually dwindled out.

In the mid-1980s, a local family established the Hobo Railroad on a section of the old line, reviving the spirit of its original use. Passengers board the train at the Hobo Junction Station in Lincoln and travel south to Woodstock and back on a 14-mile roundtrip. Along the way, the train passes by the Pemigewasset River and over it on a two-span trestle.

"What do those kids have?" asked Sadie, pointing out a group of youngsters in our coach playing with mint-green handkerchiefs tied to poles. I explained that the souvenir bundle sticks included with the prepared box lunches are a traditional hobo symbol. She smirked a little when she received hers, clearly thinking herself too old for such toys. The lunch was nothing fancy—turkey sandwiches for Rob and me, peanut butter and jelly for Sadie, with chips, a drink, and a cookie—but being on a train seemed to make everything taste better. Later, Sadie used the handkerchief to tie her hair back.

Onboard entertainment featured the Nature by Rail program, billed as a "rolling classroom." Naturalists from the Squam Lakes Natural Science Center in Holderness were aboard to describe the environment and animals native to the Pemigewasset River Valley, such as beaver, muskrat, and otter. We learned that several endangered bird species depend on the river and its banks for nesting and feeding. Though we didn't spot any from the train, we saw a peregrine falcon at the station's theater after the ride.

The train also crossed roads and streets, where the conductor rang the bell and sounded the horn to warn vehicles we were coming through. Most of us waved as we went by, adding to the general sense of camaraderie: Strangers chatted with each other and people deployed cell phones only to take photos.

As we disembarked, I spotted the conductor helping Will, still smiling away, down the steps. Will's mom, Michelle, said that he had a blast on the train ride.

"I think his favorite part was when the conductor came by," she said. "Will's face just lit up like he was meeting a huge celebrity or the president or something."

To me, his infectious joy got our vacation off to a rolling start. 🌿

DO Hobo Railroad runs May through October, with a variety of themed excursions, including Nature by Rail (Saturdays, June 27–August 29), Storybook Sundays (July and August), and Harvest Time Express (daily, September 19–October 18). Tickets cost \$12 for children ages 3 to 11 and \$16 for adults. In November and December, a special Santa Express Train is \$20 per person, \$25 for first class. (603) 745-2135; hoborr.com.

STAY Less than a half-mile away from the depot, the **Comfort Inn and Suites** sports a model train in the lobby, an indoor pool, and free full breakfast. Rates start at \$94. (603) 745-6700; comfortinn.com. The historic **Woodstock Inn Station and Brewery** in nearby North Woodstock is a popular place to eat, drink, and sleep. The quirky inn occupies several buildings. Rates start at \$96 (with a shared bath) and \$117 with a private bath. (603) 745-3951; woodstockinnh.com.

EAT The **Hobo Picnic Lunch** costs \$10 for kids and \$12 for adults. No outside food is allowed on the train. It's fitting to enjoy a meal at the **Woodstock Station Restaurant**, which is housed in an original train depot and decorated with all sorts of rail paraphernalia. The enormous menu offers the usual pub fare, such as burgers and sandwiches. Adults might appreciate the products of the restaurant's brewery. (603) 745-3951; woodstockinnh.com.

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