

Visit Lackawanna Railfest

Event will be held Nov. 2 through Nov. 4

By Natalie Gelb Solfanelli

Steamtown National Historic Site opened to the public in July 1995. Every year, this national park in downtown Scranton attracts tens of thousands of people from all over the world. Both Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority (LHVA) and Steamtown rely on major funding from the National Park Service.

LHVA is a state and national heritage area. As a state heritage area, its other major funder is the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). Each year, our federal and state congressmen and senators advocate for money for LHVA to fulfill its mission.

It takes a lot of money to do all the things LHVA does, including trail building, environmental fairs and conservation programs, educational programs for children and adults, facilitation and technical support for regional historic, cultural and recreational organizations as well as community and economic development.

While LHVA relies on support from the county, state and federal governments, Steamtown's only funder is the National Park Service. Steamtown is mandated to operate as an interpretive and educational site, but it also must maintain several large shops, administrative offices, a roundtable, museum and theater, as well as the numerous locomotives, cars and machinery that must be kept in running order. The repair and upkeep of these historic cars and engines is a daunting and expensive task.

Steamtown and LHVA work together as teammates to provide authentic experiences that create a sense of place and appreciation for the great industrial history of the region. In 2004, the two entities were recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation for their outstanding federal partnership.

This collaborative partnership continues to thrive. Just recently, LHVA sponsored the Heritage Explorer train to Carbondale's Pioneer Days. More than 300 children and adults rode the train from Steamtown National Historic Site through the towns of the Mid Valley to the Pioneer City.

It was a family day with musicians and storytellers as well as an activity book to keep the young folks busy. The book presented stories about historic personalities as well as puzzles and a scavenger hunt based on vocabulary and events portrayed in the stories.

The Lackawanna County Library System also was a key player in this event, distributing free tickets for the day to children who participated in its Summer Reading Program.

The train was sold out and the kids learned about what life was like when the railroads were the main mode of transportation for moving people and goods from place to place.

LHVA and Steamtown co-sponsor many special trips, events and presentations.

Members of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas visited LHVA in October of 2006 and enjoyed breakfast and a ride on the VIP car of a steam train through the valley to Carbondale, site of the first coal mine in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The Santa Train has become an annual tradition, bringing Santa to greet children in stations along the line to Carbondale.

The mainstay of the partnership, however, has been the Saturday trips to Tobyhanna, coordinated by Dominic Keating and his troop of faithful LHVA volunteers. On Saturdays throughout the year, Dominic, a regional businessman, historian, railroad buff and member of the Lackawanna/Monroe Transportation Authority, volunteers to escort scores of passengers on the ride from Steamtown, through the tunnel along Roaring Brook, past the Moscow Reservoir to Tobyhanna. At Tobyhanna, he arranges various activities ranging from a tour of the town to visits to the Historical Society and the Ice House on Tobyhanna Pond as well as the annual Ice Cutting event in January.

If anyone doubts there is a subculture of railroad aficionados, just ride the train one Saturday and observe the people who follow the train along the route in their cars, jumping out to take pictures at each clearing. Or talk to passengers from distant places who plan these excursions as a family treat for birthdays anniversaries and other special occasions.

On Friday, Nov. 2 through Sunday, Nov. 4, Steamtown will host "Lackawanna Railfest 2007." This promises to be the biggest event since the grand opening of Steamtown 12 years ago. Excursions, slides and video programs and dozens of visiting locomotives and passenger cars will make this weekend colorful, educational and entertaining. The Lackawanna Trolley Museum will be a major part of this celebration, hosting various special events.

LHVA is proud to support and facilitate collaborations that enhance the life of the community, interpret our heritage, and provide economic benefit for the region.

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