The Crossbuck

THE OSWEGO VALLEY RAILROAD ASSOCIATION

Newsletter, July 2026, Volume 4, #3, Kent Dristle editor

PO. Box 205, New Haven, New York 13121-0205

OVRRA Spring Time Express Train Show

On May 2nd and 3rd, OVRRA held our most recent edition of the Spring Time Express Train Show at the Volney Fire House. We sold a record number of table space for the show—that is 73 tables. In response to vendors' concerns, we moved the vendors that we used to place at the end of the truck bay forward (into the space our own layout traditionally occupied) so that show patrons would see them immediately upon entering the truck bay. Our own club layout was moved further down and was oriented across the room's axis instead of along it. This made more efficient use of the space and was a factor in making it possible to locate the record number of tables for vendors.

A total of 374 people passed through the doors for the two days combined. All were paid admissions except for 34 children under the age of 6. Gross receipts for the club amounted to $3220. After deducting for expenses which included the firehall rental, cleanup, and food, we netted $2125 for the show. This helps us pay our utility bills at the Grange club house as well as insurance costs and maintenance items.

A big thank you goes out to all club members whose cooperation made this possible. It's our willingness to work together and pitch in whenever needed that makes this all possible. The next show that we host at the Volney Firehouse will be coming up on November 7th and 8th.■

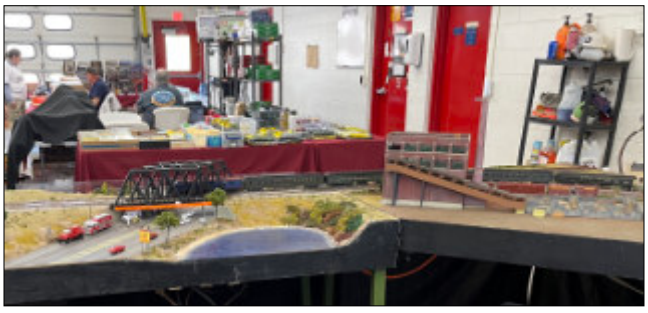
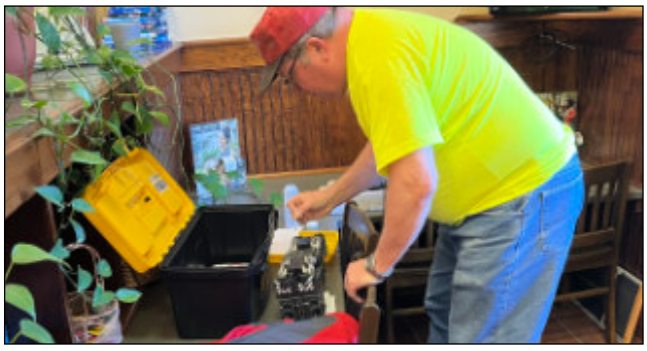


Figure 1: OVRRA traveling layout in the truck bay, Volney Firehouse Spring Show '26

OVRRA Lends a Hand to the Oswego County Credit Union

The former New York Central Railroad station in Mexico, NY has been beautifully restored and now houses the Mexico office of the Oswego County Credit Union. Much of the original décor of the building has been preserved both inside and out. Once inside the lobby a visitor can see a number of historic photographs including one from 1910 that features Teddy Roosevelt stoping at the Mexico train station on a whistle-stop tour. Visitors as well as credit union customers can also step onto the original freight scale and view a G scale model train on a track suspended from the ceiling of the lobby.

The credit union's manager recently contacted OVRRA asking if we could help them restore the model train to proper working order. OVRRA officers replied that we would be more than happy to help them out. On April 9, Steve Rogers, Tina Rogers, Bill Dexter, Charlie Hewlett, and Kent Dristle stopped in to the office to begin work on the model train and its track. Grime and oxidation was removed from the wheels of one of the engines and from several of the freight cars. The most easily accessed portions of the track were also cleaned. After this initial cleaning, the train was already observed to be running much better. OVRRA members revisited the credit union on June 25 for further track cleaning and routine maintenance of the model train display. As a way of showing her appreciation for our work, the credit union manager presented OVRRA with a very generous monetary donation.■

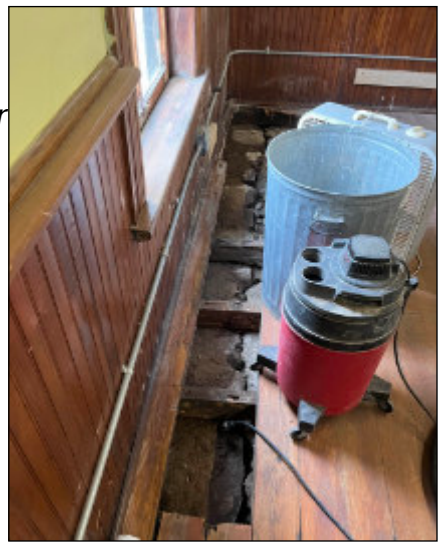


Updates on the Grange

OVRRA members were expecting a relatively quiet summer season of work at the Grange with the bulk of our renovation work behind us. We were finally making progress on getting insulation installed in the attic now that the bat problem was out of the way (A big thank you to Steve and Tina Rogers for this effort). Unfortunately, the bats have now returned which has stalled further efforts in the attic. Down below, there were a few perimeter ceiling tiles in the big room that were either falling out or buckling in place. We've glued the sagging tiles to foam backing that has stiffened them up and should hold them in proper place. Then we began work on removing the old furnace enclosure and boxed in duct work from the south wall of the downstairs dining room and with that came a very unwelcome discovery: Extensive rot in the floor boards and floor joists underneath within a foot or two of the wall. The worst was in the southwest corner where the old furnace had been located. Work is now underway to sister on new wood to the rotted floor joists, replace rotted portions of the sill, properly insulate the wall, and replace the crumbling plaster with new drywall. Moisture has been getting in from the outside and that will also be addressed. This work will continue in a way that does not inconvenience the waffle breakfast schedule any more than necessary. As per OVRRA's agreement with the Grange, the Grange will supply the materials for the reconstruction and OVRRA will assist with the labor.■

Figure 2:

Evidence of rot in sill under south wall of Grange dining room. Rot also found in ends of floor joists and in some floor boards.



Layout Planning Committee Update

The Layout Planning Committee most recently met on Sunday, April 12, 2026. We had heard that there might be an issue with long rolling stock striking the tunnel portal on the curve on the outside mainline on the HO layout. Shawn assured us that longest cars he had tried out, which were over 80 scale feet long were able to clear the tunnel with no problem. Since we couldn't reproduce the problem, no action was taken at this time.

It was also brought up that there was a hump in the outside mainline track where a re-railer connecting track joined two of the large yard modules together on the Grange HO scale layout. It was claimed that the hump was so bad it was uncoupling cars in a moving train. The problem with the hump was repaired by Kent the following Wednesday during a work session. There are a few other miscellaneous items to be repaired, none of them affecting operations. Those would include such things as missing road signs, a detached sign on a structure, a toppled gravestone (actually, that's realistic!). These have been addressed.

Next, the committee discussed options for train control. We now have alternative wiring harnesses made up so that DCC power can be brought to the mainline tracks in place of the standard DC power supplies. Kent is working on a deadrail (battery powered) installation in a pair of HO scale locomotives and hopes to have it operational soon. [Yes, it is operational. Please check out the article on page 4.] Committee members agreed that it should be our goal to try to accommodate members who wished to use a variety of methods to power their locomotives and be able to run them on our club layout.

The committee also brainstormed some ideas for new modules to become part of the traveling layout. Shawn would like to create a module that features an intermodal terminal. Shawn also liked the idea of a module that showed the tunnel under the courthouse in Oswego. Long-time members of OVRRA will recall that the original historic layout that the club built did have such a module in it. Most of the historic layout was scrapped at the time the museum closed, including that particular module. Committee members agreed that it would be a good idea now to recreate some familiar scenes from railroading in the Oswego county area. A suggestion we particularly liked was to create a module that featured a winter scene characteristic of the village of Mexico and feature it when we display each December for the Christmas in Mexico festivities. The New York Central station and freight house came to mind along with Grandma Brown's Baked Beans that could be shown on that module. Although we have not yet established a timeline for the construction of any of these new modules, we all agreed that they were great ideas to be pursued.

The discussion then turned to N scale. Shawn has donated an N scale display layout he picked up when a store was closing. The wiring appears to be intact. A small

section of trackwork needs repair, but otherwise, it's in good shape. Next we turned our attention to what to do with the existing N scale layout. It was decided to place the existing N scale corner modules outside the door of the Volney fire house, during our May train show and see if we can sell them. [Yes, we tried but the corner modules didn't sell. The OVRRA board met on Saturday, June 6 and decided to salvage several items off them that would be easier to sell separately, such as the turntable, and then scrap the rest of the old N scale modules that we had not already sold.]■

Largest Operating Steam Locomotive on a National Tour
Union Pacific's Big Boy #4014

To mark the 250th Anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Union Pacific's Big Boy steam locomotive is making a coast to coast tour of the United States. Behind the behemoth steam locomotive is it's original tender which carries both water and No. 5 fuel, followed by two auxiliary water tenders, two commemorative diesels (the America250 #1776 and the Abraham Lincoln Heritage unit) followed by an assortment of restored vintage passenger cars lettered for the Union Pacific, Norfolk Southern, and a Pullman. According to the train's schedule, it first entered New York State at Ripley, NY on June 9, then over the next several days journeyed through Buffalo, Hornell, Corning, Owego, Binghamton, and then over the Pennsylvania state line on to Scranton for display and servicing at Steamtown USA beginning June 15. OVRRA members Shawn Connelly, Bill Dexter, Jim Souva, Paul Natoli, Dominic Natoli, Kent Dristle, Todd Spencer, Steve Rogers, and Tina Rogers had the opportunity to see the Big Boy up close and in person in various locations in New York State ranging from Hornell to Addison to Owego. Additionally, Kent Dristle, Bill Dexter, and Shawn Connelly visited the Steamtown National Historical Site to view #4014 undergoing maintenance in preparation for its return trip across the nation, side by side with Steamtown's own #4012 non-operational Big Boy, which is part of their own locomotive collection.

Numbers 4014 and 4012 are two out of 25 Big Boy locomotives built and delivered in 1941 by the American Locomotive Company in Schenectady, NY to handle the mountainous grades of Union Pacific's line from Ogden, Utah and Cheyenne, Wyoming without the use of any helper engines. Each Big Boy could develop the 7000 horsepower needed for this effort. But in time, modern diesels made the high-maintenance steam locomotives obsolete and so the Big Boys were retired in 1961, #4014 going to the RailGiants Train Museum in Pomona, California where it sat on display for decades. Then, in 2013, Union Pacific bought it back and restored it to operating condition. As part of that restoration, it was converted from coal to oil. By 2919 it was ready for its first restoration tour which was the 150th anniversary of the completion of the transcontinental railroad. As #4014 makes its present grand tour of the USA, it is drawing large crowds everywhere it goes. A large part of the allure of the steam engine is its characteristic huffing and puffing coupled with its periodic release of clouds of steam. The Big Boy #4014 does not disappoint in that department. It seems to be truly alive. Little wonder that so many folks now describe it as a piece of living history.

On this page and pages 7 & 8 you will find a collection of photos of the Big Boy taken by OVRRA members, their friends, relatives, and acquaintances. ■

Dead-railing for HO scale Trains

by Kent Dristle

Figure 3: a dead rail consist

So what is dead-railing? Basically, it's operating your model trains on unpowered (electrically dead) rails. So where do they get their power from? In one word—**batteries**. In larger scales, especially G scale, this is nothing new. In fact, many garden railroad enthusiasts have discovered that running trains outdoors on batteries gives them far more reliable operation than using track power where the weather and burrowing animals can wreak havoc with electrical connections. And, there's plenty of room to be found within large scale models to hide the batteries. Problem was, those older style batteries just wouldn't fit inside HO scale or smaller models. But battery technology has evolved along with the cell phone and robotics industries and it is now possible to fit batteries that give useful run times inside HO scale equipment. There are several ways to make this work.

In the case of steam engines, batteries can be installed in the tender. For HO scale diesel locomotives, it makes good sense to create a consist with the powered unit up front and an appropriate dummy unit behind it that contains the batteries. A-B unit consists work quite well in this regard. Another alternative is to install the batteries in a boxcar behind the engine. This configuration would permit HO scale switch engines to run on dead rails. So dead-railing in HO scale is now a viable possibility. If you've read this far, you probably already can envision what some of the **advantages** of dead-railing might be. Let's spell them all out.

- First of all: No more track cleaning. No more pick up wheel cleaning. No more worries about dead frogs, rail gaps at crossovers, and polarity switching on reverse loops. Now it's still true that you need good track work. You don't want derailments due to misaligned rails. You don't want uncouplings due to humps in the track. These things are still important no matter what kind of power source you are using.
- You can have all the advantages of DCC including independent train control, sound, horns, and lights without having to install a DCC track power source. Your dead rail engines are controlled with a phone app. Yes, you will have to spend some money to buy the decoder for your engine (we'll discuss what kind later), the batteries, and an appropriate battery charger. In the end, it's still less expensive than most DCC systems such as Digitrax.
- You can run your battery powered train on anyone's layout regardless of what kind of track power they are using, whether it be standard DC or DCC. You are not using track power anyway, so track power is irrelevant. Again, the track work needs to be in good shape on any layout you want to run your train on so there's no derailments. You can even run your train while someone else runs their standard DC train on the same layout, even on the same track. You have independent throttle control through your phone app. The other operator has control of their train through track power from their DC or DCC throttle, which of course, has no effect on your train.

Caveats and **disadvantages**:

- When the batteries run down, you will have to recharge them. Now you could have a spare battery car handy with another set of fully charged batteries in them ready to go, but the run time for a battery powered HO scale train can be anywhere from one to as much as two hours at a time and that should be plenty. Most people are going to take a break anyway after that amount of time. Recharge time is typically one hour per volt. And while you're at it, make sure the battery in your phone is fully charged. You don't want for your phone to die in the middle of an operating session.
- You still need to be vigilant and make sure switch points are set correctly and there are no obstructions on the track. It's true that if your engine derails it's not going to fry your decoder because there's no electrical connection between your decoder and the track. However, if the track is powered for someone else's train, the short circuit could cause damage their equipment. Also be aware that if your engine jumps the track it will not automatically stop like a track powered engine would. You will need to stop its wheels from turning with your phone app.

Here's how I got started with dead-railing: I did some searching on the internet. I focused on three options. One was S-cab system. It does not use a phone app. It has its own dedicated controller that in many ways resembles those you find with many DCC systems. It also uses a small battery mounted within your rolling stock that is continuously recharged through track power. My reaction to this was that if you were going to need track power anyway to recharge the battery, then that seemed to negate the main advantage of using batteries in the first place which was to *dispense* with hassles of track power. Next, I turned my attention to the LocoFi system. When using LocoFi, you have independent train control, just like you do with DCC. In fact the LocoFi circuit board you install in your locomotive is actually a combination basic DCC decoder along with a Wifi receiver. In a standard DCC system, you send operational commands to your locomotive (speed up, slow down, stop, reverse direction, etc) via a modulated signal sent over the rails. With LocoFi, the commands are sent via a Wifi signal to the locomotive. You still need electrical power to run the

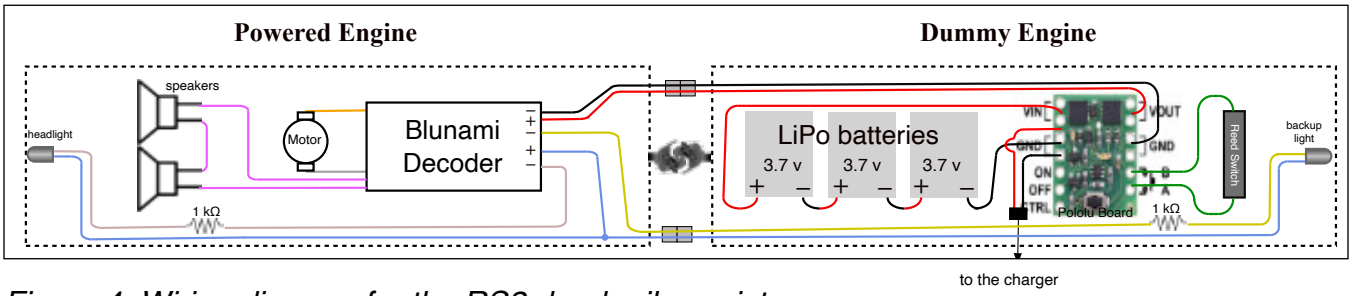


Figure 4: Wiring diagram for the RS2 dead rail consist.

motor in the locomotive and that can come via the rails (a steady DC current) or from on-board batteries.

The third system, and this is the one I settled upon, is the Blue Rail system. Like LocoFi, the Blue Rail system sends wireless commands to the decoder you've installed in your loco but uses Bluetooth rather than Wifi. Both LocoFi and Blue Rail have phone apps that you use to send those commands to the train. If you were happy with using a very basic decoder, you could buy the Blue Rail board which had that basic decoder built into it along with the bluetooth receiver. But if you wanted all the "bells and whistles" you could send the output of the Blue Rail board to another standard decoder with all the extra features you wanted. In this way you could use any manufacturer's decoder with the Blue Rail board. The problem was that you were putting two decoder boards inside your engine, if you could make them both fit. That problem was solved when Soundtraxx acquired the rights to the bluetooth receiver technology. Soundtraxx combined their very successful Tsunami decoder with the bluetooth receiver all into one compact decoder package and they called that Blunami. The Blunami decoder can get its power from steady DC track voltage or DCC track voltage or even ***batteries***. For me, this was the way to go!

Now I needed to find a source for the batteries. After doing some more research on the internet, I came upon Nick Bulgarino and his Bulgarino Locomotive Works in Maryland. Nick in the business of doing dead rail installs for model railroaders, working primarily in O gauge and larger, but he has done some work in HO as well. After several emails and an hour long phone conversation, Nick agreed to send me the materials I would need to correctly and safely install LiPo batteries in a dummy engine behind a powered locomotive with a Blunami decoder installed in it. One important fact that Nick emphasized was that I should NOT consider using RC (radio control) batteries in model trains. They are not designed for the extended output we need for model railroading and many do not have the protective circuitry packaged with them. Nick and I discussed available space under the hood of the dummy engine and battery sizes until we found a good match. I already had on hand the Blunami decoder I wished to use as well as some LEDs and resistors to go with them and the "sugar cube" speakers that would bring the engine's sounds to life. Here are the additional items Nick sent me to make this a true dead rail operation:

- Three, 3.7 volt Lithium Ion Polymer batteries, each rated at 350 mAh which I would wire in series to give me effectively 11.1 volts at 1050 mAh to power the Blunami decoder, the engine's motor, and lights,
- a magnetic reed switch for turning the decoder on and off,
- a Pololu circuit board which acts like a latching relay between the reed switch and the leads from the batteries to the decoder,
- a small magnet to be used to trigger the reed switch,
- some header pins, connectors, and
- a battery charger.

The batteries, the backup light LED, the Pololu board, and the reed switch are installed in the dummy engine. The Blunami decoder, speakers, and the headlight LED are installed in the powered engine. I also ordered some TCS connectors to electrically join the dummy engine to the powered engine.

Making everything fit inside the two engines was a challenge that required some careful planning. After wiring the batteries in series, I stacked them like pancakes and then stood them up vertically on edge to fit under the long

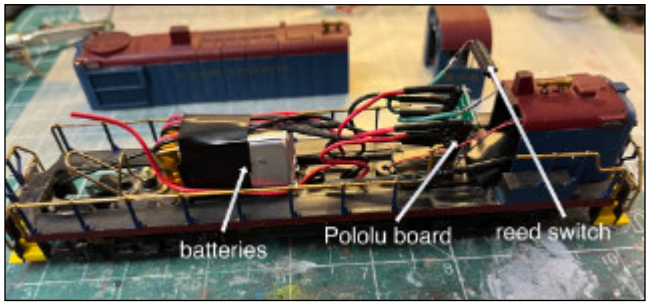


Figure 5: Inside the dummy engine

hood of the dummy engine. Inside the cab, I placed the Pololu board with the reed switch just under the cab's roof. I installed the backup light LED in the short hood, remembering to wire a 1 kΩ resistor in series with it.

Next, I turned to the powered engine. In order to make room for the decoder, I first needed to remove a circuit board above the motor whose function was routing

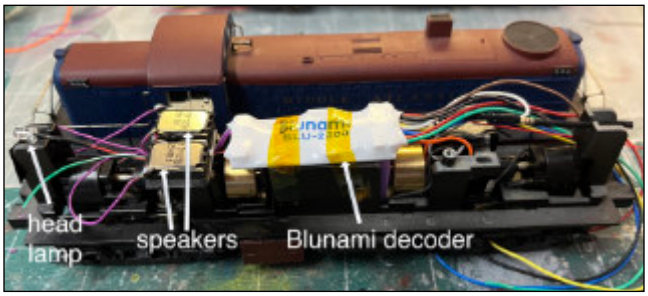
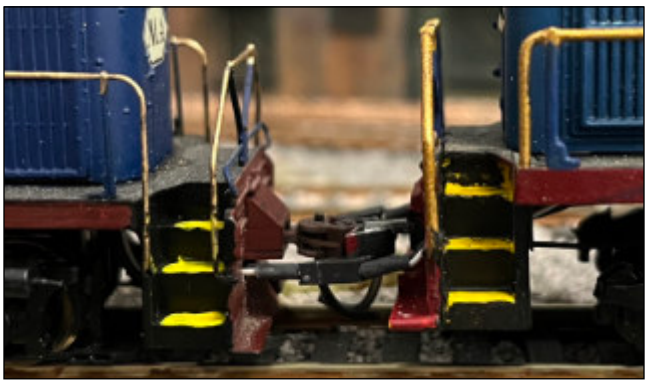


Figure 6: Inside the powered engine

power from the trucks to the motor and lights. I cut off the leads from the trucks as they were no longer needed. My plan was to replace the incandescent light bulbs with LEDs so I removed those as well. The decoder would now take over the job of routing power to the motor and the (new) lights so the old circuit board will not be missed. I checked to make sure the motor was isolated from the frame, (it was). Since my Blunami decoder was rated for 2 watts of audio output, I needed to use two 1 watt speakers in series. I found room for those speakers in the cab of the engine, however there was a lip of plastic at the base of the cab's shell that had to be removed, otherwise I'd never be able to lower the cab shell back over the chassis without snagging the speakers. And finally, I needed to run wires from the dummy engine to the powered engine to carry the electric current from the batteries to the decoder (and then on to the motor and lights). I also needed to run wires from the decoder back to the dummy engine for the rear facing light. I used small TCS connectors which are visible next to the couplers between the two engines. These wires look somewhat like MU cables. I left some slack in them so they wouldn't be stressed when the engines follow curves in the track.

Here's how all of this works in operation. After making sure the two engines are railed properly, I open the Blunami app on my phone. Then I pass a small magnet



over the cab roof of the dummy engine to trigger the reed switch. That switch sends a pulse to the Pololu board which, in turn, sends current from the batteries to the decoder. The powered engine comes to life and I hear its motor idling. The Blunami app on my phone detects the engine's decoder. I touch "connect" on my phone's screen. Now, with my phone app, I can throttle the engine up, ring the bell, sound the horn, turn the lights on or off, or even reverse direction as needed. I can now go anywhere the rails will take me as long as the track is clear. It doesn't matter if there's electrical power in the rails or not. This is true dead railing! When I'm done, I can park the engines on a siding and disconnect them from the app. Then I pass the magnet over the cab roof of the dummy engine to shut down the decoder. When it's time to recharge the batteries, I connect the charger to a connector on the bottom of the dummy engine.

In conclusion, the installation of batteries and decoder for dead rail operation does not require significantly more skill than simply installing a DCC decoder in a standard DC engine. There are more steps involved and it does take more time, but in the end, it's well worth it in my opinion. I want to give credit to Nick Bulgarino at Bulgarino Locomotive Works for the assistance he gave me. Here's the link: https://blwloco.com. Now that you know what's involved, you just might want to give dead railing a try. You can obtain the parts (Nick will help you), and do it yourself, or you can contact Nick and have him do the installation for you. Either way, I think you'll be very happy with the result.■

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Or Scan the QR code to the right

OVRRA also has a facebook page

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Contributors to this issue:

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Find us on the web at OVRRA.org

A Big Boy Photo Gallery

Figure 7: Big Boy north of Hornell
photo--Bill Dexter

Figure 8: Big Boy at Owego
photo-- Steve and Tina Rogers

Big Boy facts:

- Built by the American Locomotive Company in Schenectady, NY
- Boiler Pressure: 300 psi
- Tractive effort: 135,375 pounds
- Drive wheels: 68"
- Classification: 4-8-8-4 articulated, heavy freight locomotive
- 19 axles with 7 of them on the tender
- Total weight: 1.2 million pounds

Figure 9: Big Boy 40414 at Steamtown-
photo---Kent Dristle

More Big Boy facts:

- Tender could hold 28 tons coal and 24,000 gallons water
- #4014 converted from coal to No. 5 fuel oil during restoration in 2017 to 2019.
- Original Big Boys could travel about 150 miles on coal but as little as 30 miles on a load of water when under heavy load.
- Restored #4014 can travel about 200 miles at a time with the help of the two auxiliary water tenders and the assiting diesel locomotives.

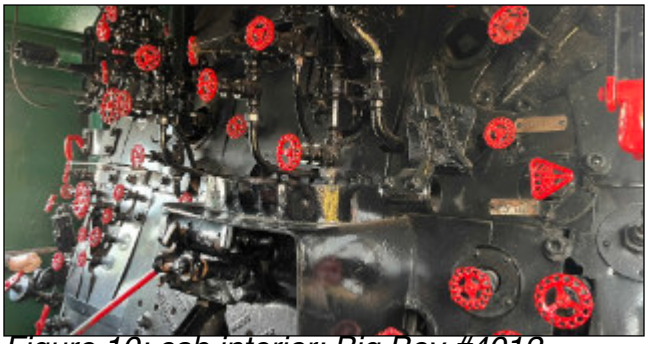

Figure 10: cab interior: Big Boy #4012

Figure 11: A Big Boy pair →
photos--Kent Dristle

More Big Boy Photos

Figure 12: Big Boy on the steel arch bridge at Lechworth State Park

---photo Laurel Artz

↑ *Figure 13: Big Boy in Owego*

--photo Steve and Tina Rogers

←*Figure:14: Big Boy in Grand Island, NE*

---photo Phylis Sullivan

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