

Have you seen one lately? I can't remember last seeing a freight train around Boston. But they're no mystery in the Midwest. At least once a day we were blocked at a crossing on our road trip this summer. When it happens, just turn off your engine. You'll get bored counting the train cars before they all whip by.

We stopped at the Walt Disney Hometown Museum in Marceline, Missouri. Walt would've been thrilled to know it's located in the old Santa Fe Railway depot. His uncle was a railroad engineer on the line and Walt jumped on whenever he had a chance. His first job was hawking newspapers and candy on a train, and Mickey Mouse was an idea that came to him on a cross-country ride.

Thoroughly renovated and developed as a modern museum, the former Marceline depot now houses a permanent collection of childhood and family memorabilia donated by Walt's sister Ruth. You'll want to time your self-guided tour around the train schedule. When they go by and they go by 70 times a day, you can't hear yourself think.

Just up the tracks from the museum is E.P. Ripley Park where Walt played as a child. He named Engine No. 2 at Disneyland after Ripley, the Santa Fe's president in Walt's youth, and the old locomotive now sitting in the park is named for Disneyland. Walt once said: "In one way or another, I have always loved trains." Out of his love for trains and memories of his boyhood in Marcelene grew the idea for the Disney theme parks.

We had a nice chat with the ninety-year old matriarch of the museum. She and her late husband got to know Walt Disney when he returned to Marcelene on a visit. That association shaped much of their lives preserving his memory in Missouri.

What do they do with old trains? Train lovers are passionate. I'm beginning to think old trains all wind up in museums or on display. There are enough train museums and old-time train rides across America's heartland that if you miss one there'll be another along the way. (Visit the South Dakota Railroad Museum and ride behind a historic steam engine on the 1880 Train from Hill City near Mount Rushmore or check out the buffalo herd on a Bison Train Tour at the Terry Bison Ranch outside Cheyenne, Wyoming.)

You won't find a bigger collection of old train cars and engines than at the Illinois Railway Museum (IRM) in Union. The staff was in the process of reopening but graciously allowed us to poke around. Get on the running train that circles the property. Others stretch along tracks waiting to be boarded by passengers going nowhere. And many more train and trolley cars are sorted by type and pretty much wedged into long and high, side-by-side barns.

While the IRM has its roots in train aficionados and restorers, it is presently in the process of building a mock town of shops and restaurants along one side of the property. This will give a little Disney World type attraction to the site and broaden its appeal beyond hardcore train enthusiasts.

If you're looking for a glimpse back at the passengers who rode these old trains and lived along their tracks, stop at the Comanche Crossing Historical Society & Museum in Strasburg, Colorado. It's a train museum and much more.

On August 15, 1870, the last rails were joined in Strasburg making travel by train possible from New York to San Francisco and really opening-up the West. In 1970, the exact location, known by then as the

Comanche Crossing of the Kansas Pacific Railroad, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as being “3,812 feet east of the Strasburg depot”. Inexplicably, the spot was never marked and the Strasburg depot has since been retired and moved a bit up from the tracks to found the museum.

Enter the depot and travel back a hundred years. Step up to the ticket window and then sit on the bench to wait for your train. You’re welcome to be nosy and look around the spacious living quarters of the station master and his family. Equipped to the last detail and furnished as it would have been, you’ll almost hear the train whistle.

Just visiting this most unpretentious museum is a priceless experience, and there’s no admission fee. But the site is only open afternoons from June through August, so time your trip accordingly.

In addition to the depot and a rail car, on the left side of the property there are two transplanted, one-room schoolhouses ready for class, a tiny home with outhouse, and a barn full of old farm equipment.

On the right side, there are three, large metal sheds. Apparently, the people of this community are so frugal that they never throw anything out. They just donate it to the museum. There is a collection of every manner of antique possession you can imagine, right out of the Sears, Roebuck catalogue. With over 8,000 items arranged in display cases, vignettes and neat, organized rows, the sheds form an eclectic warehouse dedicated to the preservation of everyday life gone by. Spend a little time proving that: “They don’t make ‘em like they used to.”

Run by volunteers, we had the pleasure of kibitzing with a group of octogenarian ladies. They sit amidst relics of their past to keep each other company and the museum open on summer afternoons.

Leave a generous donation in the jar!

Steven Glovsky of Wayland can be contacted at stevenglovsky@gmail.com. You can find the itinerary for his trip online (wayland.wickedlocal.com/news/20200813/steven-glovsky-of-wayland-taking-road-trip-during-pandemic).