

Speeders Ready for Fun!



A speeder (also known as railway motor car, putt-putt, track-maintenance car, crew car, jigger, trike, quad, trolley or inspection car), is a maintenance of way motorized vehicle formerly used on railroads around the world by track inspectors and work crews to move quickly to and from work sites.

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Speeders were spotted along the Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad in August! That's right, speeders. Unlike the highly anticipated sightings of American Bald Eagles along the South Branch of the Potomac River near Romney, WV, these unexpected sightings involved the operators of small track inspection vehicles that were guests of Appalachian Rail Excursions LLC, and the scenic railroad.

The small motor railcars were operated by enthusiasts who traveled from all parts of the country to enjoy camaraderie and scenic views of the South Branch Valley. Two day-trips highlighted the event and created an interest in the hobby and railcars. So, where did these unique vehicles originate and who operates them?

Railroads needed specialized vehicles to assist crews in inspecting and maintaining track, so workers operated small hand pump cars. A motorized version became available by the late 19th century that enabled the vehicles to "speed" on the rails and carry heavier loads. While the cars only traveled at 15 mph, they were faster than hand operated models and welcomed by crews. A few of the early models featuring distinctive "hit and miss" engines are still around, but most enthusiasts operate later model motors that deliver smoother and more efficient performance, similar to those found on large lawn mowers.

Speeders began to lose their niche in the railroad business by the 1980s when maintenance crews were provided with pickup trucks outfitted with flanged wheels that could be lowered for on-rail use. The new vehicles were referred to as road-rail or hy-rail cars. Rail companies began selling or donating the out-of-date speeders, and in the process a new hobby was born.

Rail enthusiasts quickly sought ownership of the speeders and formed a nonprofit group called NARCOA (North America Railcar Operators Association) in 1980. The group is dedicated to the preservation and legal safe operation of railroad equipment used for maintenance of way. The group has grown over the decades and now includes 1,800 members who enjoy operating their equipment on privately owned railroads.

Operators typically own speeders manufactured by one of two companies, Fairmont Railway Motors or Railcar Company and its successor Woodings Railcar Limited. The Canadian models by Woodings featured enclosed cabs to protect workers from the harsh northern winters. The Fairmont cars, originating in Fairmont, Minnesota, date to the early 1900s and are far more popular.

There are similarities between speeder and classic automobile enthusiasts because members personalize their vehicles—customized interiors and special paint schemes are typical. Speeder operators often adopt the paint scheme of their favorite railroad, past or present. And just as antique car owners treasure originality, visitors to events will see speeders that appear the same as they did on the last day of railroad service. The variety of railcars makes for a colorful and interesting display of historical images.

The local affiliate of NARCOA, Appalachian Railcar Excursions LLC, was formed by three partners, Eric Clark, John Gonder, and Chuck Badger. Their purpose is to promote the hobby and organize rail excursions in Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. The August 2018 excursion held at the Potomac Eagle's home is a recent example that attracted 35 speeders and operators who enjoyed 102 rail miles of sightseeing.

According to Eric Clark, the local members enjoy the experience of operating their cars and seeing landscape that may only be viewed by rail. Eric is quick to credit local railroad owners for permitting the excursions, including the West Virginia Rail Authority and Western Maryland Scenic Railroad. "The railroad owners are great to work with. They only charge a small fee and do whatever they can to help us organize events."

John Gonder agrees. "We do this for fun. And it is special to me because I come from a railroading family starting with my great-great grandfather in the 1800s."

The speeders are a close knit group that is eager to help fellow club members. "We recently had trouble with burned out points



Above: The Speeders look like toys next to their brother; a full size engine.

Below: An "all original" speeder.

Bottom: Owners and operators gather to review safety requirements and plans for their day of sightseeing.



in one of the cars, and within a short time we had friends offering assistance,” stated Clark.

Clark also notes that some of the fun filled events support local charities. “We have a Toys for Happiness excursion along the Southwest Penn Railroad route. Folks set toys along the tracks and we pick them up. Last year we collected around \$2,500 in donations and 275 toys.”

To become a member of NARCOA one must pass a written exam and be mentored by club members. “Safety is our number one concern when we are on the rails. Our cars must be equipped with alarms, lights, radios and other equipment.” Members are always eager to explain the railcars, upcoming events, and related information to perspective members and curious onlookers.

Appalachian Railcar Excursion is busy preparing for its fall event and welcomes inquiries. *For more information on local events and contacts, see ARExcursions.com*




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