

# On Its Own Steam

WESTERN MARYLAND SCENIC RAILROAD



Written by: **Dan Whetzel**  
PHOTO BY MIKE CALHOUN

## “We had a great 2022.”

Wes Heinz’ news about the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad’s past success is matched only by his excitement for 2023 and beyond. The WMSR Executive Director noted the railroad weathered the Covid years and a weak economy to post record numbers and launch new events for guests.

Propelling the WMSR’s recent success has been the #1309 Baldwin locomotive, a former Chesapeake & Ohio engine that first saw service in 1949 in the coal fields of Kentucky and West Virginia. The massive locomotive is now one of Allegany County’s premier tourist attractions and the largest steam engine in regular service in the United States. Since returning to the rails several years ago, the train has attracted visitors from around the country and world who can experience the 2-6-6-2 up close at the Western Maryland Railway station in Cumberland and at the Cumberland & Pennsylvania Depot in Frostburg. The locomotive is unique in many ways, including its history as the last of the Mallet class steam locomotives to be built for North American railroads by Baldwin Locomotive Works.

The #1309 is complemented by the #501 Western Maryland circus color diesel that has been a steady workhorse on the WMSR since 1995, and the #558 Western Maryland General Electric diesel. All three locomotives saw service

**Facing page: Locomotive #1309, constructed in 1949 by the Baldwin Locomotive Works, Chesapeake & Ohio Railway, was built to handle the railroad’s heaviest coal trains throughout Kentucky and West Virginia until it was retired in 1956.**

**After a meticulous and extensive restoration, #1309’s first season on the WMSR became an outstanding tourist attraction, operating trains between Cumberland and Frostburg, Maryland. The 1309 is now the largest regularly operating steam locomotive in the country.**



**Wes Heinz, WMSR Executive Director**

*PHOTO COURTESY KELLY LYNCH*



as a record setting 60,000 passengers boarded the WMSR in 2022. According to Wes, the trajectory of sales increase puts the railroad on track for 70,000 passengers in 2023 — another record setting year. Contributing to the success is year round service on weekends and expanded private bookings that offer photo shoots and additional events for enthusiasts.

One of the special trains that attracts national attention is the Polar Express. Based on the popular Christmas movie

and book, WMSR guests enjoy the movie soundtrack and hot chocolate when boarding coaches for a trip to the North Pole and a visit from Santa Claus. Wes notes the Polar Express is not just for children, but has also caught the attention of all age groups who return annually to enjoy the ride, festivities, and the silver sleigh bell keepsake. Ridership to the North Pole in 2022 exceeded 26,000 passengers.

The Polar Express caught the attention of NBC’s Today Show in December 2022. The segment brought national attention to the train and was a highlight of the season.

Additional special trains for 2023 include “Moonlight on the Mountain Train,” and “Allegheny Mountain Dinner Train” running in May, the “Ice Cream Train” beginning in June, and “Murder Mystery Trains” in February.

In October, the “Pumpkin Patch Limited” will once again depart Cumberland for a destination at scenic Helmstetter’s Curve. “The fall foliage special is accompanied by spooky



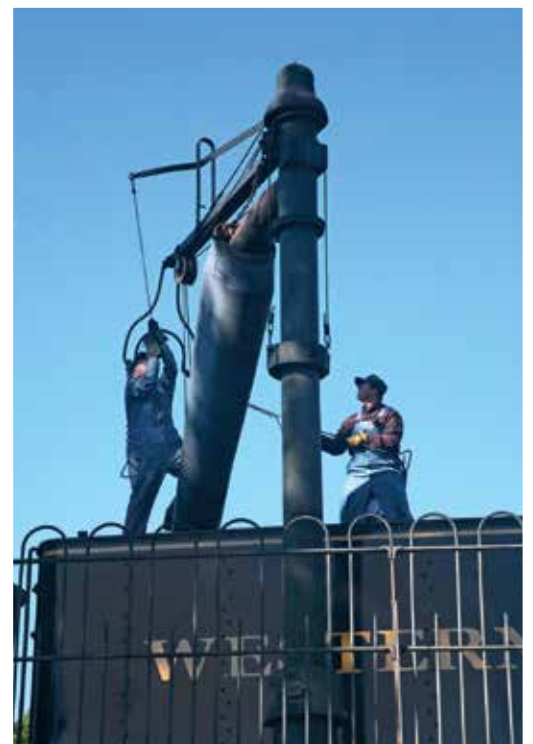


music and pumpkins for all guests,” according to Wes. “We also found that adults enjoy the experience as much as the children. Everyone has a great time.”

The most unique program for rail enthusiasts is “Hands on the Throttle,” an individually scheduled event that allows a guest to ride in the #1309 cab and temporarily take controls under the guidance of a WMSR engineer. The guest engineer leads a freight train toward Frostburg (at designated locations) while also receiving an in depth lesson about the locomotive from WMSR staff. The popular program is typically booked for months into the future, so early contact about availability is suggested.

Photo charters in February 2023 brought visitors and rail enthusiasts from five different countries to capture images of the #1309 in Chesapeake & Ohio lettering. The familiar Western Maryland Railway fireball logo was temporarily covered and then re-lettered to the original C&O livery for the 7 day morning and evening runs featuring freight cars and a caboose. Photographers rode in passenger cars that were pulled separately by a diesel locomotive. Amateur and professional photographers also stationed themselves along scenic passages, including Helmstetter’s Curve in Corriganville. Photo charters continue to be a part of the railroad’s offerings into the summer and fall seasons.

Regular passenger service is provided by the “Frostburg Flyer,” a four hour round trip that departs the WMSR station at Canal Place



**Above: Passengers board the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad at Cumberland’s Western Maryland Station for their excursion to Frostburg.**

**Inset: WMSR crew members prepare for departure after filling tanks in the tender (a special car containing water and fuel).**

*BOTH PHOTOS BY MIKE CALHOUN*





**Above: Children enjoy a photo op with #1309.**  
*PHOTO BY BRETT BODENSCHATZ*

**Above right: The popular Polar Express — a magical, family-friendly event that's fun for all ages, complete with hot chocolate and cookies served aboard the train.**  
*PHOTO BY DAN FOYE*

**Right: In October, the Pumpkin Patch Limited, with spooky music and decoration, travels to Helmstetter's Curve where all guests receive a pumpkin.** *PHOTO BY MIKE CALHOUN*



in Cumberland and works its way to Frostburg, Maryland, a distance of 16 miles. The Frostburg Flyer is alternately powered by diesels and the #1309 steam engine depending on days of the week, so check the schedule for specific assignments.

Long time WMSR enthusiasts recall the #734, a 2-8-0 locomotive named "Mountain Thunder" that resembled the Western Maryland engines of the steam era. Purchased in 1991 and returned to service in 1993, the workhorse provided power until 2016 when federal requirements necessitated that it be taken out of service pending an overhaul. According to Wes, plans to rebuild the #734 and bring it back to regular service on the WMSR are contingent on funding.

Wes is quick to credit the WMSR's success to a skilled and dedicated staff. "We now have a staff for complete service, so we can focus on putting money into our equipment.

Our lounge car and other equipment received a complete refurbishing over the winter and are now premiere offerings."

"We are also proud of the fact that our staff receives a living wage and an education package for tuition and supplies. All the staff lives locally, so the money stays here. Our operation makes a 17 million dollar impact on the local economy, and we expect to grow that number."

The Western Maryland Scenic Railroad boards passengers at the former Western Maryland Railway station at 13 Canal Place in Cumberland, Maryland. For further information on events and scheduled service, contact the WMSR office at **301-759-4400** or website <https://wmsr.com>.