

RIDING THE MOUNT WASHINGTON COG RAILROAD

Charles H. Bogart

In September 2016, I had to go to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for a workshop. Mary Ann tagged along, and we added a few extra days to our stay to tour the area. One place we wanted to visit was the Mount Washington Cog Railroad. We had ridden it many years ago when its locomotives were all steam. Our locomotive power for this year's ride would be diesel. Yes, they do operate one steam locomotive, but the seats for its one daily trip up and down the mountain were sold out.

The Mount Washington Cog Railway Company started operations in 1869. Mt. Washington is the highest mountain east of the Mississippi River, being 6,288 feet high. The railroad, when built, operated wood fired steam locomotives but in 1900 began switching to coal fired steam locomotives. Then in 2008, the railroad began to operate home built biodiesel powered locomotives. At present, the railroad operates two steam locomotives: #2 Ammonoosuc and #9 Waumbek, and five diesel locomotives, M1 to M5. We rode behind M4 Agiococohook, built in 2010, for our trip up the mountain. Our train crew consisted of engineer and brakeman. The brakeman also served as narrator during the journey to and from the top of Mt. Washington.

A train on the Mount Washington Cog Railroad consists of a coach and a locomotive. The coach and locomotive are not coupled to each other but are held together by gravity. The railroad, from base station to the top of the mountain, is 3-miles long and climbs 2,700 feet. The trip at 10 MPH takes roughly 50-minutes. Technically speaking, the Mount Washington Cog Railroad is a narrow gauge operation as its rail gauge is 4-feet 8-inches. During its climb of Mt. Washington, the train ascends a grade of 35 percent at Cold Spring Hill and 37.4 percent at Jacob's Ladder. Half way up the mountain a passing track allows the descending and ascending trains to pass each other. Located in the center of this passing track is a water tank to re-water the steam locomotive. Due to the grade, it is located on an optical illusion making the tank look like it is not level. At the top of the passing track is located Halfway House. The passing track's upper and lower switches are hydraulic switches powered by solar power and controlled by radio command from the locomotive.

As for our ride up and down Mt Washington, all I can say is that after ascending 100 feet from the base station, we were in clouds all the way to the top. At the top, it was 40 degrees with rain and wind blowing at 35 MPH. It was just cold and wet, and we were not dressed for it. Mary Ann almost blew away. Inside the Summit Building, we toured the museum and bought some postcards to be mailed and cancelled with a special cancellation mark. A computer simulation in the museum at the Summit Building allows one to see what the view is from Mt. Washington when it is not trapped in the clouds. What blew me away, while drinking some coffee at the Summit Building, was the arrival of ten French men and woman who had hiked up the mountain. Hike! When you can ride a train to the same location.

The ride back down Mt. Washington started with a struggle against wind and rain to walk the 100 feet from the Summit Building to the train. The trip back down the hill was a repeat of the up journey run, fog and more fog. At the base station we took some time to visit the railroad's

own museum and gift shop. Being on my best behavior, I did not purchase a book. This fact shocked Mary Ann and she asked if I was OK. By the way, my VFW hat got me a steep discount for our tickets and a very nice “Thank You” for my service from the staff at the ticket counter.



Locomotive #10, “Col. Teague,” is located at the junction of US 302 and Base Station Road.



Left to right locomotives #3 Algonquin and #4 Abenaki sitting at Base Station



Algonquin starting up the grade from the Base Station



Encountering the steam locomotive Waumbek as she descends to the Base Station



The upper hydraulic switch in the the passing track is seen swinging into place. The solar panel power house is to the right.



The water tank may look like it is crooked, but it is dead level.



A view of the locomotive's cog wheel engaged in the cog track.



Note the small bumpers between the locomotive and coach; no coupler to hold the two together, just gravity at work.