

THE SPIRIT OF SKYKOMISH

by Fred Black

Skykomish, Washington is a railroad town. More specifically, it is a Great Northern Railway town. The Great Northern Railway main line from Minneapolis to Seattle, completed in 1893, ran through Skykomish then, just as its successor, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway does today. There are few remnants of the Great Northern remaining in Skykomish. The original 1890's depot is still here. The BN green snow dozer based in Sky was built by the GN in 1961. Perhaps the most iconic remnant of the GN is restored 1942 wood caboose number X 228 named the Spirit of Skykomish.

Caboose X 228 was home built by the Great Northern in August of 1942 at its car shops in St. Cloud, Minnesota. X 228 is a 30 foot road caboose designed for long haul freight trains. In the 1960's, X 228 was assigned to work train service on the Cascade Division of the Great Northern Railway. Skykomish (known as "Sky" to the railroad people) is an integral part of the Cascade Division. At the time, senior conductors on the GN bid for work train duty so they could be home every night instead of on the road for days on end. At that time the #1 seniority conductor on the GN was Sid Pierce and X 228 was his caboose. Sid worked on X 228 out of Skykomish for several years until the GN decided that old wood caboose had reached the end of its useful life. It was slated for "retirement" in 1969. Sid did not want to see his caboose scrapped and bought it from the GN for \$200. The caboose served as a weekend retreat for the Pierce family for many years. The next owner did not take care for the old caboose. Within a few years it was a rotted out mess.

The next chapter in the story of X 228 began in October 1989 when it was purchased by Fred W. Black of Mill Creek, Washington. Fred was an avid rail fan with a particular interest in the history of the Great Northern Railway. He recognized that there were few opportunities to own an authentic piece of GNR rolling stock – especially one as useful and attractive as a caboose. He also had a strong desire to save and preserve a piece of GN history and Skykomish history. Fred's vision was to restore X 228 to like-new condition in the original 1942 configuration inside and out including the characteristic bright red paint and GNR markings. Fred and his then 20 year old son Doug set out to realize that vision. It took them five years to complete the restoration. In 1993, caboose X 228 was proclaimed "The Spirit of Skykomish" by the town council. Caboose X 228 was also featured in several Everett Herald newspaper articles over the years. One of the articles described the restoration project as a labor of love. The Home and Garden cable TV channel show "If Walls Could Talk" featured Fred and Doug Black and the restoration of caboose X 228 in a 2001 episode. The Great Northern Railway Historical Society returned to tour X 228 as part of their 2008 convention held in Wenatchee, Washington. Over the years hundreds of people have visited caboose X 228. Children young and old have enjoyed

sitting up in the cupola watching for imaginary "hot boxes" on the train.

Caboose X 228 is an integral part of Skykomish where the street signs are in the shape of a Great Northern Railway caboose. Caboose X 228 is The Spirit of Skykomish.

(Photo by Fred Black)

