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Horseshoe Curve's 150th year to be marked by light show

Sunday, July 04, 2004

By Paula Reed Ward, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

ALTOONA -- Dick Heiler was approaching middle age when he snapped a picture -- three, actually -- of the 100th anniversary celebration at Horseshoe Curve.

There were fireworks, and about a thousand people crowded onto a platform to watch, but that's not what made it special. What did were the 6,000 Sylvania Blue Dot flashbulbs that had been wired individually to 6,000 small wooden stakes, with another 12,000 aluminum pie plates attached as reflectors, all connected with 31 miles of wiring.

The flashbulbs were stretched the entire length of the 2,375-foot Horseshoe Curve to set up what would become the largest area ever captured in a flash photograph, 2 million square feet.

Heiler's personal photograph of the event was one of probably hundreds snapped along with the official picture, all of which were taken just before 11 p.m. Oct. 20, 1954. The whole event, memorialized by the famous Sylvania Big Shot photo, lasted exactly 1/15 of a second.

Tonight, the folks at the Horseshoe Curve and Osram Sylvania, as the company is now known, will try to make their lights stay on a bit longer

Update



David Boe, Associated Press

A lighted train serves as a platform for a rolling light show as it travels through Horseshoe Curve near Altoona during yesterday's 150th anniversary celebration of the groundbreaking engineering that produced the curve and the 1954 Sylvania Big Shot photo, below, that helped make it famous. The Big Shot image was produced by firing more than 6,500 Sylvania Blue Dot flashbulbs simultaneously to light a 1/2-mile of the curve and expose a single frame of film as three trains traveled along the tracks.

Click photo for larger image.



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to celebrate the curve's 150th anniversary.

Osram Sylvania

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They plan an Independence Day spectacle like no other in the region. They have trucked in 45 huge 7,000-watt searchlights to illuminate the mountainside. They have outfitted 31 brand-new-for-the-occasion train cars with 575-watt theatrical lights and 99 strobe lights. Red light-emitting diodes will glow from the locomotive pulling the train as it enters the curve, throwing up columns of light into the night sky.

As the train crosses center-stage, the three mountains behind it will be lighted red, white and blue. All of that will be followed by a 30-minute fireworks display.

"It's going to be really, really something to see," said Scott Cessna, executive director of the Railroaders Memorial Museum, who had the idea to re-create the 1954 event for the sesquicentennial. "It's going to be such a piece of history."

Horseshoe Curve, now a national historic landmark, was opened in 1854 to speed trains across the Allegheny Mountains. Hundreds of laborers spent two years moving earth to build the land bridge through two valleys, opening rail traffic between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and cutting travel time from days to 15 hours.

Ruth Umbauer Burke, who visited the curve last week, grew up in the coal town of Onnalinda, Cambria County. She remembers, as a young girl, going with her Uncle Bill to watch passenger trains as the sun set around Horseshoe Curve.

"We just sat and watched and talked," Burke recalled. "We had a beautiful view."

Now 67, Burke has lived in Michigan for more than 40 years, but she returns to the area every summer and stops at the curve every few years. She hopes to bring her grandchildren here in the fall.

"It's something to see," she said, as the fourth freight train in about 20 minutes passed through the curve behind her, blowing its horn all the way around.



V.W.H. Campbell Jr., Post-Gazette

Joe Bettwy, of Altoona, helped position a 7,000-watt light Wednesday in the bottom of a train car that would hold four of the giant lights along with other lights for the 150th anniversary of the Horseshoe Curve.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

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It was something for Roberta and Willard Block, too. They have separate memories of the curve as children, and then a shared experience after they married.

In September 1949, Roberta Block was taking the train to her first semester at Antioch College. She remembers the conductor telling her to get to the back of the train to look out.

"It was so much fun to see all the lights going around," she said. "I'll never forget."

As a child, Willard Block took a train around Horseshoe Curve with his father.

After they were married, Willard and Roberta took the train together with their daughters, then 3 and 5 years old.

"We woke the girls up," said Roberta, 72.

"It didn't mean anything to them, but to us, it was part of the folklore we grew up with," said Willard, 74.

The Blocks, who live in Sands Point, N.Y., were driving through the area Thursday after Roberta's 50th college reunion.

"We looked at each other. How could we pass by so close and not stop?" Willard Block asked.

The Blocks won't be around for tonight's celebration, but they inquired about buying a copy of the aerial video that will be made of the event.

Between the upper and lower levels of the curve, the museum's Cessna expects about 4,000 people to attend tonight's show.

Tickets for the upper level have been sold out for weeks, but there are still a few hundred spots left for the lower level. They cost \$25 a piece, and though they are less expensive than the upper level, they might be the better ticket. The man who designed the light show told Cessna the best view would be from the middle of the road beneath the curve.

"This event, unlike 1954, isn't about seeing the train, it's seeing the light show above the train," Cessna said.

Tickets will be available up until the last bus leaves the Railroaders Memorial Museum to go to the curve. Call the museum at 814-946-0834 to reserve a ticket.

Roads leading to the site will be closed, and private vehicles won't be allowed to enter. Besides typical security for the event, policing will be

Update



even tighter, as Vice President Dick Cheney and several other state and federal politicians are slated to attend.

Heiler, who's been having trouble with his knee, will not make tonight's light show.

At 89, the retired PennDOT employee who's had a lifelong love of photography, still keeps prints of the picture he made in 1954.

He describes the events as if they'd happened yesterday.

"That was quite a show, all right," he recalled fondly.

Dressed in a brown leather vest over a blue flannel shirt, jeans and cowboy boots, Heiler walked into his Altoona living room one afternoon last week, proudly pulling out a copy of the black-and-white print he created five decades ago.

Heiler said he made his photo in three steps. First, he snapped a picture as the flash bulbs went off. The fireworks followed separately, so he took a photo of those, too.

Then, the next day, he went back to the tower where he had set up his camera the night before and took a picture of the scenery -- the mountains, the railroad tracks and the skyline.

He then sandwiched the three negatives together and came out with a photo unlike the famous Big Shot.

"I was up above everybody else," he said. "I got a shot of the entire curve."

As the moment neared to light the curve, Heiler recalled, the organizers were so strict about it having to be pitch dark that people weren't even allowed to smoke.

"As far as I know from the picture I took, every one of them went off," Heiler said of the flash bulbs. "You were putting a shot of juice in there. That lamp didn't dare not go off.

"I was standing right near one of those generators, and boy, it almost stalled that thing out."

To power the lights for tonight's events, there will be eight generators, four with 50,000 watts of power and four with 100,000.

"I've wondered how they're going to do it," Heiler said. "I still don't think they're going to light it like they did in 1954. [At least], I hope not."



Steve Manuel, Associated Press

This is the light show as it appeared last night as a 1/2-mile train rounded the famous Horseshoe Curve during the 150th anniversary of its construction.

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(Paula Reed Ward can be reached at pward@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1601.)

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