

# Perspectives on Cooperation between State and Private Societies in Development of Heritage Railways in France

Frédéric Dufetrelle

## 'Tourist Railways' in France

To better understand the scope of this article I should first define a 'tourist railway.' In my opinion, the term tourist railway does not adequately explain a railway's function. After all, most railways have had a tourist dimension since the earliest days. Admittedly, the St. Étienne-Andrézieux line (Loire) was designed for industrial use, but the other end of the scale is represented by the Paris-St. Germain line, which opened in 1838 as the first railway meant almost exclusively for leisure travel and Sunday outings by Parisians.

There are two basic elements underlying the term tourist railway: tourism, and history. Although most passengers on a tourist train are tourists, the history of rail transport—experienced through vintage rolling stock—is another important drawing card.

A tourist railway helps travellers discover a tourist site and experience the vintage rolling stock and period atmosphere. Both aspects are attractions and

maximum impact is achieved when both are present at the same time.

Consequently, in France, there is a necessity to develop terms implying 'vintage railway' or 'museum line,' which exist in other languages.

## Social Initiative with Multiple Goals

Since 1957, volunteers have come to play the major role in promoting tourist and vintage railways. In addition, the role of commercial interests, which was strong right from the beginning of rail travel, has remained strong and has sometimes grown. There is no contradiction between these two interest groups—some operations such as those of le Vivarais have even managed to combine them.

In France, the movement to promote tourist and heritage railways initially focused on vintage rail operations in mountain areas. Volunteers came on the scene around 1960, often in association with the French Federation of Friends of Local Railways (FACS). This was at a time when some secondary railways were

experiencing difficulties—in some cases, the objective of the volunteer groups was to save lines from closure.

The course set around 1960 made change a possibility and this change led to operations resuming as a tourist attraction. In 1982, the regular tracks and secondary network of the French National Railways (SNCF) attracted a new wave of conservationists, some of whom were SNCF personnel who had generally not shown much prior interest in the 'little trains.' Regulations introduced by SNCF requiring the support of local communities also created a wave of 'electoral' railways that met with varying degrees of success. Since the rolling stock belonging to societies operating on SNCF tracks also includes special trains organized by railway preservation groups, I shall also discuss these tourist and heritage railways in this article.

Even today, the majority of excursion and vintage railways are operated by non-profit societies. Their goals are twofold—to help the public discover unusual places, and to preserve vintage rolling stock and equipment. Their efforts make it possible to still travel today on a train hauled by a *Pacific*-class steam loco, or in coaches with side doors.

Tourist trains have a seasonal nature. They are not intended to offer travel from point A to B, but rather to take people on a return journey to some memorable place. Recreation-park trains do not belong in this category, so they are not covered by the newly signed National Charter for Development of Tourist and Historic Railways (see pp. 35–37).

## Economic Data

Although most excursion trains are operated by non-profit societies, some 60 tourist lines employ more than 250 persons on a full-time basis and have created at least as many indirect jobs.



Vermandois Tourist Railway excursion train composed of North Express vintage coaches hauled by 140 C 314 (2-8-0) on SNCF tracks at Villers-Cotterets between St-Quentin and Paris (Author)

During the tourist season, almost 3000 people (including volunteers) are engaged in service of tourist trains. The 57 tourist and heritage lines in France carry more than 2 million people a year and enjoy sales totalling nearly €10 million. They play an important role in development of local tourism.

Within the national railway network owned by Réseau ferré de France (RFF), tourist trains run on ordinary passenger lines, freight lines, and tracks that are not used for commercial traffic. A total of 17 tourist trains use the RFF network in 15 French departments.

Other tourist trains use lines that are not part of the national rail network, such as secondary lines belonging to:

- RFF, but not operated by SNCF
- The state (La Mure Railway)
- Local communities still operating lines under the system promoting Railway Lines of Local Interest, such as cog railway lines (La Rhune, etc.)
- Local communities that have made their lines available or granted them to societies (Connerré-Beillé-Bonnetable, tourist tramway of Ile d'Oléron, etc.), or port railway lines (Le Verdon).
- Societies or associations (Anduze-St. Jean du Gard, Tournon-Lamastre, etc.)

---

### **Safeguarding Heritage and Transportation Knowledge**

---

Tourist and heritage trains operate on tracks of all gauges using rolling stock sometimes dating from the 19th century (1870 for the oldest French locomotive). Track lengths run from 1.5 to 70 km and carry steam locomotives, coaches, railcars, gang cars, etc.

The best examples of rolling stock on tourist lines have been classified by the government as historic properties since 1981. The diversity and large number of existing vintage rolling stock encouraged



SNCF's meter-gauge Cerdagne Line in the Pyrénées with famous suspension bridge designed by Albert Giscard. (EJRCE)

official support that reflected a willingness to provide vintage operations with the means to meet future challenges. Buildings and infrastructure (stations, sheds, bridges, etc.) have also been classified as historic properties, because a railway is a complete system. Just designating a locomotive as a historic property would be a half measure, and would only show how a steam engine is stoked to pull a train. France even proposed designating the Cerdagne Line in the Pyrénées as a Cultural Property on UNESCO's World Heritage List! Maintaining infrastructure and rolling stock in working order makes it possible to preserve old but exceptional expertise and techniques, some of which go back to the earliest days of rail travel. These assets can help us understand today's technologies.

---

### **Steps for Future Success**

---

#### **Current limits on tourist railway movement**

Tourist and heritage railways can often

be used to promote local development, because they encourage development of infrastructure and stimulate local economies. There is no doubt that they also enhance the ability of many rural areas to attract tourists. Tourist and heritage trains are strong tourism products, satisfying the growing demand of tourists for an authentic experience. However, to ensure the continuity of tourist operations, we must settle the following issues:

- Right of employees to continue working whether or not employment subsidies received
- Indirect taxation of taxes on added value
- Taxation of tourist railway companies run by societies (The government has recently made them liable to taxation if total sales exceed €49,000 in 2002.)
- Commercial restructuring of tourist products (Customers have a wide range of tourism choices, so have naturally become more demanding.)
- Training for youths who have not seen commercial steam trains



Decauville 020 (0-4-0) steam engine with home-made tender on narrow-gauge ARVO Railway in Burgundy rebuilt on abandoned standard gauge railway (Author)

- Aging membership (Many youthful enthusiasts from the 1970s are now older than 50 and new young members must be attracted.)
- Authority of associated managers (This question is far from being resolved.)

We must guarantee a strong future for all activities of tourist railways, ensuring that they continue to enjoy the legitimacy and recognition patiently acquired during 40 years of operation. Partnership with local communities is inescapable for development and for longevity. These development conditions have led FACS and the Union of Tourist Railway Operators (UNECTO) to seek new members from among decision-makers and government authorities, and to develop a win-win partnership with them. Of course, these goals can only be accomplished if transportation safety standards are consistently high. Transportation safety is an area in which agreements and arbitrary decisions do not provide the best background for long-term development.

### What does the future hold?

The French government and SNCF fully understand the message. Moreover, the issue of structured activities and an infrastructure control regime has already been raised. To avoid the possibility of abuses of power through unilateralism, which could prevent granting of operation permits, we prefer to see the following entities included in the framework of the Charter:

- Ministry of Public Works, Transport and Housing
- Secretary of State for Tourism
- Ministry of Culture and Communications
- SNCF
- RFF
- FACS-UNECTO

By adopting this Charter, one aim of which is to professionalize tourist railways' activities (about which we are very serious) to ensure service quality, tourist and vintage trains will provide even greater opportunities for development of tourism and employment in many rural areas.

## Charter Objectives

The Charter signed on 15 February 2001 promotes the development of tourist railways in France, the world's most popular tourist destination and a country with an extensive railway network. It clarifies the relationships between the diverse partners who have committed themselves to the following goals:

- To promote and highlight tourist lines through advertising campaigns in France and overseas
- To ensure the quality of proposed services
- To ensure rail safety and proper control of infrastructure
- To preserve railway staff expertise
- To develop local economies

However, the Charter does not cover excursion trains with vintage steam engines on national lines, although many pieces of rolling stock competing for the same tourist trade on the national network have already been classified as historic properties and are in use in regular tourist operations. SNCF and FACS-UNECTO signed a supplementary agreement in this regard in April 2001. Nor does the Charter cover so-called 'marginal' activities, such as those of trains operated by recreation parks, and museums that do not have lines in operation.

## Clarification of Relationships between Partners

The start of tourist train operations has been done on a case-by-case basis since the end of the 1950s. Each request was dealt with according to the conditions of the time and location of the proposed service. This case-by-case approval has led to a great disparity in operating methods, although safety has never been called into question. One objective of

the Charter is to progressively codify relationships between SNCF, RFF and tourist railway operators.

### Increased professionalism for better services

FACS-UNETO, which represents 46 operations on 573 km of line in 2002, has taken up the challenge of enhancing the service quality and professionalism of its members. If requested, FACS-UNETO will offer assistance and guidance to groups that wish to start a new service.

A guide will be prepared in collaboration with the partners and will explain the procedures to establish a tourist railway or modify an existing line.

It will specify conditions for making certain sections of line available; safety regulations; expert evaluation and control methods; the role of each intervening party; and the responsibilities of the operators and local communities. The guide will also list the national and regional intermediaries to be contacted.

### Preservation of vintage knowledge

A study commission will examine measures to assure the longevity of tourist railways and their technical and cultural heritage. It is especially important to ensure the continuance of specialized work expertise, without which we cannot



Meter-gauge 030T Corpet steam loco returned to mint condition at Valmondois Railway Museum near Paris (Musée des Tramways à Vapeur et Secondaires)

understand, preserve, restore, maintain and operate vintage rolling stock and its infrastructure.

---

## Safety

---

The safety of railway users and personnel is always a priority.

Written SNCF guidelines have existed since 1982 to provide a framework of safety regulations for groups using the national rail network. Since the previous SNCF guidelines were incomplete and technically questionable, new guidelines will be issued for groups operating

outside the national rail network.

The national government has the power to establish safety regulations and control technical aspects of the transportation industry. Similarly, it is responsible for monitoring the implementation of these regulations and controlling their application. Tourist trains running on the national rail network are subject to SNCF operating and safety regulations that have been approved by the Minister of Public Works, Transport and Housing, Mr Jean-Claude Gayssot.

Trains running on rail lines belonging to local communities fall under the jurisdiction of departmental prefects who



Diesel railcars or locos also work trains on the Seudre Tourist Railway on the scenic French Atlantic coast (Author)



Unusual 50-cm gauge Tarn Tourist Railway with Decauville 030 T (0-6-0 T) rebuilt on site of abandoned local 60-cm gauge railway (Chemin de fer touristique du Tarn)



Splendid wooden electric loco on La Rhune meter-gauge rack-and-pinion track near Biarritz (Author)

are also responsible for taking measures to ensure traffic safety on private lines by issuing edicts. Specifically, inspections cover level crossings, infrastructure, track, and implementation of operating and maintenance regulations for infrastructure and rolling stock.

The Charter allows the government to determine safety guidelines for tourist railway operations on sections of the national rail network based on proposals by RFF and SNCF after consultation with FACS-UNETO.

The guidelines cover infrastructure, rolling stock and operating conditions, as well as certification procedures to be followed by all operators, whether or not they are members of FACS-UNETO.

### Promotion and Improvement of Lines

Tourist information will be improved both in France and overseas. A brochure will be compiled and made available overseas through the French Government Tourist Office, established to promote France as a destination for travellers from other countries. The Office has an Economic Interest Group to achieve the aims of the national government, local communities and tourism professionals

working together as partners. SNCF and RFF will play an essential role in promotion and development of tourist services. If a request for line availability is made from a non-profit society, RFF is committed to examining the request favourably and to consider setting advantageous fee conditions.

During the tourist season, SNCF will form partnerships with relevant communities in order to inform travellers of services to important tourist and cultural sites. In addition, SNCF, RFF, FACS-UNETO and the French Government Tourist Office will create links between their Internet sites in order to facilitate access to information on tourist trains.

### Conclusion

The Charter achieves of a common goal between French institutions and FACS-

UNETO, and offers a strong impetus to continue our operations. It commits FACS-UNETO to a new role of adviser and representative, bringing it closer to the status of a professional association. This necessitates establishment of an organization that can prepare and implement action plans.

Success can only be achieved by taking the following new steps:

- Locating internal or external know-how
- Finding ways to co-finance activities
- Lobbying and participating in various institutional workgroups
- Establishing control structures and training programmes for people responsible for operations
- Providing expertise and advice to current and future members
- Developing communication plans

The Charter represents an important step towards preservation of vintage railway technologies and makes it possible to establish bases for increased cooperation between volunteers, decision-makers, and local communities in France.

However, it is not a guarantee of success, because the most important tasks still remain to be done. But the Charter certainly offers a means for strong development of tourist and vintage railways based on transportation safety, which is fundamental to all railway operations. ■

This article was first presented at the international conference 'Slow Train Coming: Heritage Railways in the 21st Century,' held in York in September 2001.



### Frédéric Dufetrelle

Mr Dufetrelle is administrator and treasurer of FACS-UNETO and webmaster of [www.trains-fr.org](http://www.trains-fr.org) and [www.railtourisme.info](http://www.railtourisme.info). He was editor of *Chemins de Fer Régionaux et urbains* from 1993 to 2000. He is Data Processing Division Manager at SNCF.