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Here's Where To Go To Learn About Steam Power

If you want to learn how to operate steam engines, the University of Rollag Steam School (URSS) is the place to be. It's the oldest and arguably the best of the 25 steam schools around the country. Getting in is the hard part. Slots for the school open on Thursday evening of Labor Day Weekend for members only. Starting Friday anyone can apply and by Saturday evening slots are often filled and for good reason. The numbers tell the story.

"We are in our 40th year," says Tom Hall, co-founder and long-time instructor. "We started it to educate our members, thinking it would take two or three years. Since then, we've had upwards of 2,200 graduates from 44 states, six Canadian provinces and two students from the U.K."

"Each year we have around 70 students, a dozen instructors, including the only certified

female instructor in the country," adds Hall. "It takes around 200 members/volunteers to put on the two-day course."

While the numbers are impressive, it's what happens at the school that gets men, women and children (as young as 10) lining up to attend. The school is held on Father's Day weekend each year, at Steamers Hill, home of the Western Minnesota Steam Threshers Reunion.

Steamers Hill is the perfect place for the steam school. It's the year-round home to around 60 steam-powered traction engines from 1/3 scale to full size, as well as three steam locomotives and numerous stationary engines, from miniature to full-size. It's also home to five operating cranes, including the largest steam shovel ever made. A number of these engines, including one with a cutaway boiler, are used by the instructors during

class.

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This is where the 200 volunteers come in. They fire up the boilers on a wide variety of steam engines, from small stationary machines up to and including quarter-scale and full-size railroad locomotives. This year the school will also feature a fully operational sawmill running from Friday through Sunday. "About 1/3 of each year's students attend simply to learn about steam engines and to operate some," says Hall. "About 2/3 hope to get licensed. Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio and Manitoba all give credit for our course toward apprenticeship hours they require."

Hall and other instructors from the school have helped establish a dozen other steam schools around the country. "We have shared curriculum and the mechanics of what we do," says Hall. "We've had lots of state boiler inspectors take the course. Their traditional training is in steam power plants, and they

often don't understand steam engines."

The goal of the URSS, as well as other steam schools, is to avoid a boiler explosion such as took place in Ohio in 2001. It took the lives of five people and spread steam and shrapnel as far as 100 yards. Dozens suffered burns and other injuries. An investigator estimated around 28 million pounds of energy were released, including more than a million pounds that lifted the 20-ton Case 110 tractor 10 to 15 ft. in the air.

"Prior to that there was no inspection of steam engines or licensing of operators," says Hall. "Operating a steam engine is like flying a plane. You have to be able to multi-task. We have a lot of complete beginners and others who have run steam engines for years but want to learn more."

Tuition for the school is \$70 (\$35 for youth under 16 and WMSTR members). Tuition includes three books, free camping on-site, and two noon meals.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, WMSTR Secretary, P.O. Box 9337, Fargo, N.D. 58106 (ph 701-212-2034; secretary@rollag.com; www.rollag.com).



Volunteers help to run steam engines during the Steam School two-day course.



Rollag is held on 290 acres with over 50,000 annual visitors.

Ever Been To Rollag On Labor Day?

If you want to learn more about the University of Rollag Steam School, a good place to start is by attending the Western Minnesota Steam Threshers Reunion (WMSTR). Held each Labor Day weekend at the 290-acre WMSTR grounds, it is a four-day extravaganza of past agricultural technology. It features horses, steam and early gas-powered engines, as well as the equipment they powered.

Again, this September, the 2,000-member strong WMSTR will welcome some 54,000 visitors to the annual show. Season tickets of \$25 cover the entire show, while day passes are \$14. Those 14 and under are free if with a paid adult.

Tom Hall, WMSTR secretary, warns that a single day won't begin to be enough to enjoy

the show.

"You can expect to see more than 400 gas tractors, 60 full-size steam traction engines, 15 large stationary engines and numerous large gas-powered stationary engines," says Hall. "That doesn't begin to cover small-scale steam engines or hit and miss gas engines powering pumps, fans and more."

Every engine is fully restored and is operable, with many powering a wide variety of demonstrations from field work and harvest to crafts and trades. Multiple sawmills showcase how lumber used to be made.

One of the unique aspects of the WMSTR is that aside from food (provided for sale by local church groups) and WMSR souvenirs (many made on-site during the show), there



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are no vendors or flea markets allowed.

Things to do go beyond equipment alone. The grounds also host a horse-powered farmstead with barns and a period farmhouse. Horses are used to harvest potatoes and grain, as well as thresh it. On the other side of the grounds, a gas-powered, 1930's era farmstead is complete with a gas-powered light plant.

Main Street includes the general store, mercantile, Downer church, post office and ladies' activity building.

The Pioneer Village includes a log home, blacksmiths and a water-powered woodshop. At no extra charge, visitors can board the WMSR steam-powered train for a two-mile

loop around the grounds.

For a shorter trip, visitors can take a ride on a steam-powered carousel. Some horses on the carousel were carved and others repaired by the Red River Wood Carvers in their building on site.

"The show has something for everyone," says Hall. "It's our main fundraiser for the year and takes every one of our 2,000 members to put it on."

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