

# Trama-Lama-Ding-Dong

Contributed by Kevin Corbett

The State Fair tram presents a different view from the outside looking in

The best ride at the New York State Fair is the longest, cheapest and most scenic. Although the tram system that circles the grounds hauling weary customers lacks the thrill power of the midway, those wagon-like, tractor-towed passenger trams certainly make the Fair experience better for thousands of riders every day. Each stop on the two-mile circuit delivers passengers to another Fair adventure, while the ride itself offers a fresh look at the action and a respite from all that exhausting walking.

"It's a good way to see the whole perimeter of the Fair," pitches Brenda Canniff, who worked her ninth year as a tram conductor in 2008. "A lot of folks like to get on first thing in the morning, take a trip or two around and then they can kind of plan out their day at the Fair and decide what to visit first."

Tram staff—typically a driver and two conductors—act as Fair ambassadors by representing it to visitors by announcing attractions at each stop, giving out directions and answering questions. "It's important that we try to be friendly, informative and helpful," Canniff emphasizes. "That's the big thing." Brenda, a state Department of Transportation employee the rest of the year, and her husband Fred, who drives the tram, come up annually from Castle Creek, just north of Binghamton, to work 11 of the Fair's 12 days while living in a camper on the grounds.

Once patrons pay the \$2 daily fare, they get hand stamps allowing them to hop on or off any of the eight trams in operation whenever they need a lift between 9 a.m. and 8 p.m. Tram crews are paid by the Fair. Future Farmers of America or 4H Club members sometimes work on the trolleys to earn money for their organizations.

Tram stop 1, near the main gate, services a major intersection, where action abounds in every direction. The Science and Industry Building, the Pride of New York Marketplace and Chevrolet Court keep the corner lively throughout the day. Nearby, at the foot of the ramp to the S&I Building, lies a frequent staging area for performances by Michael Hilby, whose colorful costumes, German accent and amazing juggling stunts have been a Fair highlight for a decade.

It's also home base to the tram operation coordinated by 20-year Fair veteran Jean Boyce. "We do daily reports on tickets paid and money taken in," Boyce says. "An average day is around \$3,000, which would be 1,500 people, paid people. That doesn't include children under 3, which are free."

Sponsorship provides free rides for everyone available on the two senior citizen days each year, making those very busy events for tram operators. "We are usually very full on those days," Boyce acknowledges. "One of our highest days was between 2,000 and 2,500 people. We've had days in the past where it's been over 100,000 people {in Fair attendance} and we've ended up shutting them down a half-hour or 45 minutes early."

## One Sweet Ride

The tram lurches past the Center of Progress Building to tram stop 2, where passengers step off hearing drumbeats

calling them to the nearby Pan African Village. The Hirambe Youth Tent is well-stocked with traditional drums and a welcoming staff of colorfully attired percussionists. Bare hands pat conga-style instruments while hammers pound the steel drums, all imported from Africa.

Visitors can jump into the drum circle and pick up the beat whenever the spirit moves them. "They want to play some drums, too," Nii Armah Oblie of Syracuse smiles. "Anybody can stop by and we start teaching them to play the drums and we play together. Most of the rhythm we play is from Ghana, West Africa."

Just up the road, there's a large, fully enclosed shelter at tram stop 3, where travelers can enter the back door of the Horticulture Building, a few steps from the famed buck-a-spud potato window. The Pride of New York Showcase stands just inside, with huge pumpkins and gourds, peppers, tomatoes, onions, potatoes, lettuce, cabbages, cucumbers, corn and garlic forming a mini-farm market showing off Empire State produce.

Riding to stop 3 is also the easiest way to get treatment for bee stings, twisted ankles or more ominous health problems at the Fair infirmary. Tram staff are part of the health care team as they keep their roving eyes alert for incidents, injuries and emergencies that they can report by radio.

Brenda Canniff says it's not unusual for passengers to switch sides to get the preferred view that lies to the starboard side of the trams, toward the center of the Fair. That practice pays off as the route approaches the historic train exhibit where some riders can't avoid the view of an unsightly scrap yard that lies just beyond the chain link fence that surrounds the grounds.

Open 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily, the former Strates Shows passenger train parked at stop number 4 offers free admission to the popular attraction staffed by volunteers from the Central New York Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society, a group that has been part of the Fair since 1975. "Each car has some significant historical value," says Donald Herb of Syracuse, financial adviser for the local chapter. "People who have never been on a train are surprised at what they see in here, especially the cars used by the Strates family when they were on the road, with the bedrooms, living room and kitchenette. Our attendance runs about 40,000 in total on average for the whole Fair."

As the tractor engine revs up, pulling the tram into motion, Brenda calls out directions to a disembarking passenger. "Not that way, sir," she hollers. "Yup, that way. You've got it." She then points out the Banana Derby, last year's show with monkeys riding dogs around a track, to others. Helping fairgoers find their way requires that conductors keep current on attractions. "Most days are the same as the last, Brenda concedes. "Although occasionally there are new wrinkles, some shows come and go. I'm not always certain about where to find certain things because they move them around, but I learn quickly. They moved the circus this year. Usually you find out the first day."

Generally, fewer passengers get off at tram stop 5 than at any other as there's not much nearby. You could catch a lift to the grandstand or take a closer look at the racing stables or the Country Max Arena, but there's little happening there otherwise. A sharp left turn leads to the infield, with the tram bumping over the track.

The infield amusement area is the big draw at stop No. 6. It's an exciting neighborhood, where some people drive go-carts to the blare of loud rock music, others scream from the bungee jump and Spider Man-inspired athletes challenge the rock climbing adventure. Last year the Coronas Circus was moved from the Family Fun Center into the infield, where its neighbor was the pig racing show, in its first year. Fans of these events can really benefit from taking the tram rather than expend a lot of energy walking over from the midway.

Last year was Fred Canniff's 10th year steering trams, a trip his wife estimates they typically make in 30 minutes. Although the trams take a break shortly before 6 p.m., evacuating the streets for the daily parade, the 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. work schedule gives crews little time to enjoy the Fair. "Once in a while we come out at night," Brenda says. "We get one day off. That's when we do the Fair. We just take it as we see it. Sometimes we want to see the horse show. Sometimes we want to see the cattle show. It just depends on what's available that day."

Pulling out of the infield, the tram encounters a busy intersection at stop 7. Here, patrons can head off under the banner

to some thrill rides, cross over to the antique tractor tent or tour the beef cattle barn. Dairy cows get all the glamour, but the big, muscular steers differ sharply from Holsteins and Guernseys. If you look beyond their imposing size, you'll find that gazing into their soulful eyes may ruin your taste for hamburger. The barn itself is one of the newer structures on the grounds, with paved walkways between stalls and a center ring with bleachers.

Fred, a semi-retired truck driver during the year, waits for a trooper to wave him through before he wheels down the paved road. He's cautious negotiating the crowded avenues and conscious of daredevil pedestrians who resist yielding the right of way. "People will walk right up to it, see you coming and just get as close as they can," Fred rants. "I come right up to them and stop and they just stand there and look at you."

Strolling from stop No. 8, the Talent Showcase stage stands nearby, but the main attraction is Kiddieland, the fair's mini-midway for kids in the 3-to-8 range. There are plenty of little rides for pint-sized thrill seekers as well as a scaled-down bungee and a petting zoo. Kiddieland is one popular destination that's a long walk from the main gate, but it's only a few steps from a tram stop.

Those who stay on to tram stop 9 are dropped off close to one of the Fair's hidden jewels, the shack inhabited by Iroquois Village artist Larry Jones. The Onondaga craftsman's specialty is carving wood, especially beautifully detailed walking sticks with animal heads; last year included a fish, wolf, bear, mallard and a stunning milk snake that was carved the entire length of a wooden branch. Jones' wife, Robin, makes knives with bone handles and the couple has a variety of other handmade items on display.

Jones, a retired police officer, served as foreman of the crew that built the original Iroquois Village longhouse in 2000. He's not currently involved in the stalled project to construct its successor. "I don't know what's happening with it," Jones admits. "I know it's not getting done. That's all I know. It would be nice if it got done."

## Welcome to Mooville

Around the corner, the tram pulls up at stop No. 10, near Gate 4. Here, there's plenty to draw attention, from the main entrance of the Iroquois Village to the back door of the Youth Building and a dizzying array of vendors selling souvenirs or food. Nearby, a small but scrupulously clean, odor-free and beautifully decorated barn, hosted by Morrisville State College, welcomes visitors.

In the center of the barn is a handmade canoe with a colorful display of potted plants and flowers, while a variety of horse breeds, including a very cute, 4-month-old quarterhorse foal named Jack, fill the roomy stalls, each displaying signs with names, ages, heights and weights. "This is our second year in this barn," notes Lisa Parrington of the Morrisville admissions office. "It was donated to us by the Bartlett family. We've had a very good turnout, a lot of people in and out. We have a lot of traffic flow."

While the horses attract most of the attention, a video display, wall-sized mural and photos illustrating Morrisville's academic programs promote the college. "We always have someone here to talk to visitors," Parrington points out.

Several riders hop off and a few jump on as Brenda announces the stop and some of the nearby attractions. She blows a silver whistle that dangles from a cord around her neck to signal Fred that they're ready to roll and the tram lurches forward.

Once the whistle blows and the vehicle moves, they will stay in motion until the next stop, although people do try to wave them down and hop on in between. "Some people want to jump on or off while we're moving,"

Brenda notes. "They think they're circus acts or something. It's so frightening. I'm so afraid they're going to get hurt. Some fall, but get up and run away, so I don't know if they're really injured or not."

The whole family can find a memorable experience at the last stop, No. 11, if they climb the ramp to the Dairy Cattle Building for a visit to Moo Country. One corner of the building is partitioned off by a simulated barn front as a dairy farm educational adventure. Kids and their parents sit on bales of hay to watch videos, reach into a pen to pet adorable baby farm animals or marvel at a huge scale model of a dairy farm with barns, silos and pastures. Feeding times are posted and youngsters on hand may get a chance to bottle-feed a calf. Adults milk cows that surround the exhibit.

As clouds part on a damp morning, Fred jumps off briefly after setting the parking brake at stop No. 1, to take off the rain jacket that matches the olive color of his John Deere tractor. Just in case, he keeps his red cap on his head. "It's interesting," he says of his temporary career. "You see all kinds of people and meet a lot of friends here. It's the best ride at the Fair, just two bucks to ride all day."

Meanwhile, Brenda takes a breather and contemplates having a meal. "We usually bring our lunch because we can never get off and get something quick enough," she says. "Sometimes we get off and get something. Like today my husband ran over and got breadsticks—just what we needed."

Passengers sway gently as the tram jerks into motion, rolling between the main gate and the Chevy Court building. As they reach cruising speed, musician Bobby Morris hollers to them from under an awning where the State Fair Four welcomes visitors with Dixieland melodies. "Smile," he cheers, trombone in hand. "You're at the Fair!"

Author Kevin Corbett wishes to acknowledge and thank New Times photographer Michael Davis for steering him toward the Canniffs.

"It's going to be a big year for nature and wildlife at the New York State Fair with a lengthy list of new shows, many that feature the wonders of the earth and its fauna.

Several of the first-time attractions will occupy the open-air plaza beneath the columns separating the Dairy Building from the Science and Industry Building, where changes continue following last year's controversial eviction of the wine court. The small vendor cubicles attached to the front of the DEC Building in the center of the area have been removed, as has the gazebo that was vacant in 2008 after overzealous Fair director Dan O'Hara purged it of the sins of selling first cigars and then wine.

One colonnade exhibit, Bwana Jim's Wildlife Show, features a close-up look at such exotic critters as alligators, armadillos and snakes in an educational show liberally laced with humor. In between the three shows daily, several species will be on display for passers-by to enjoy.

Also in that area, an aquarium will be set up to stage the Great American Duck Races, with audience members cheering their favorites quackers to victory.

Kids and families can explore the mysteries of tropical jungles by visiting the Rainforest Experience in the Youth Activity Area, near the Youth Building. There are more rare animals along with puppets, music and magic.

If your preferred animal stars are dogs, don't miss the Extreme Canine Triathlon, a troupe of woofers that have made the leap from shelters to stardom. Their athletic stunts and daring feats having brought them fame through national television appearances and live shows across the country.

The performing pooches will sparkle in the newly named Adventure Zone. It's that parcel of Fair turf bordered by the rear exit of the Horticulture Building and the Grandstand, that had been known as the Family Fun Center. Another good bet in that area is the Wakeboarding Rail Jam, a wet-and-wild stunt show with daredevils careening across twin pools, doing flips and flights on water boards.

Other new attractions include dragon-mounted, stilt-walking knights, a backyard circus and puppet parade, and the Cornell University Solar House. Show times and more information are available on the Fair's Web site, [www.nysfair.org](http://www.nysfair.org).

Fair regulars may notice several changes to structures on the grounds, starting with new restaurant stands replacing a couple that had fallen into disrepair. The new restaurants, under their traditional ownership as Horan's and JJ's, stand side-by-side between Baker's Chicken Coop and Haddock's Paddock, near the horse barn. The new stands join Bosco's and Ale House—both rebuilt last year—with their fresh decor, complete with green metallic-look roofs.

A little east of there, a handsome new kiosk stands in front of the Lottery Pavilion. The wooden tower serves as a focal point of one of the Fair's busiest intersections with a State Police lookout, clocks, advertising billboards and a visitors' information center.

It's looking like there isn't going to be an Iroquois longhouse anytime soon as no progress has been made on the framework that's been at the village entrance for a couple of years. Too bad since the original longhouse was one of the fairgrounds' real gems.

Concert fans should make note that the afternoon performances at Chevrolet Court, staged at 4 p.m. during previous Fairs, are this year slated for an earlier start time, 2 p.m. Perhaps they'll be able to play longer without the looming live news broadcasts at 5 p.m.

—Kevin Corbett