

people to know

RIDING THE RAILS

The train is the way to go for an Omaha area fabricator.

CARTER LAKE, IOWA, is somewhat of a geographical oddity.

If you look at a map of the Missouri River where it creates the border between Iowa and Nebraska, you'll notice how it meanders and bows quite a bit. If you focus in on a small area on the northern edge of Omaha, you'll notice that a small portion on the Nebraska (west) side of the river is actually part of Iowa. That's Carter Lake. The small town used to be on the Iowa (east) side of the Missouri, but a flood in 1877 redirected the river's course. Nebraska wanted the new land to be part of its state, Iowa wanted to keep it, and the Supreme Court eventually ruled in Iowa's favor.

The town is home to Paxton and Vierling Steel Company, a division of Owen Industries, Inc. (an AISC/NSBA member and AISC Certified fabricator). The steel fabrication company, which began as a foundry in 1885, has been run by the Owen family for three generations. Bob Owen, the current chair and CEO (and a former AISC Chair/Ex-Officio Board member, as well as a Robert P. Stupp Award winner), has spent his whole life in both states, being born and raised in Omaha and earning a civil engineering degree from Iowa State University in Ames, as well as running the company's Sioux City, Iowa, facility for a number of years (he also was stationed in Japan during his time in the U.S. Navy). Staying in the family business was a pretty easy choice for Owen.

"I was the oldest son, we had a family company and I've always had an interest in engineering—and I like numbers," says Owen, noting that his grandfather, who started with the company in 1925, taught him trigonometry during high school. "Steel fabrication seemed like a logical choice." His son, Tyler, currently the vice president of fabrication, represents the fourth generation of Owen leadership at the company.

All Aboard

Owen has also always had an interest in passenger trains and recalls taking many trips via train when he was younger, many of them to Sun Valley, Utah.

"Paxton and Vierling fabricated all of the steel for the Sun Valley ski area," he says. "We always took the Union Pacific,

which is based here in Omaha, out there." (The company also fabricated and erected 8,500 tons of structural steel for UP's headquarters building.)

Being a train enthusiast, one might guess that Owen would be interested in model trains—but that's not the case.

"I just want to ride them, not build them," he laughs.

So instead of buying a train set, he bought an actual train—or at least a part of one. Three years ago, he and a partner purchased an 85-ft-long functioning passenger car, which they store in west Omaha when they're not using it.

The car was originally built in 1928 for the president of the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad. And it's called "Suitsme."

"The rumor is—and we like to believe it—that once the train was finished and the president walked through it, they asked him what he thought of it," explains Owen. "His answer was, 'Well, it suits me!' So that's what they called it, and the name has survived all these years through all of the owners."

When Owen and his partner first purchased the car from its most recent owner (who lives in New Hampshire), the interior was in pristine condition, though they had to upgrade the mechanical and electrical systems as well as the undercarriage. The train has three sleeping compartments, a sitting room, a dining room and a kitchen, and employs a crew of two—a chef and a steward—during trips.

Since getting it up and running, he's taken the train on several trips and also uses it to host dinners for friends, family and business associates. He's also joined an organization called the American Association of Private Railroad Car Owners (AAPRCO), which "promotes the operation, ownership and enjoyment of the private passenger railcar."

"There are only 70 or so cars in the organization and maybe 200 or so private cars in the country, so it's a pretty small group," he says.

The group organizes trips where several cars join together and hire locomotives to carry them across the country. Suitsme is also certified to couple with Amtrak trains, so it can go wherever Amtrak goes. Owen's most recent trip in Suitsme, earlier this fall, was an AAPRCO trip from Seattle to Los Angeles, by way of Napa Valley (the car was transported to Seattle via Amtrak, and Owen met up with it there). The 10-day trip involved 28 private cars and four locomotives, then Owen rode his car from L.A. to Chicago, then back to Omaha. It's a long trip—but then, that's the point.

"You get to see so much of the country and it's a good way to catch up with friends," he says, noting that he's already got a built-in hotel room.

"It's not just about getting somewhere but rather the experience of getting there. This is how travel used to be. We don't take the time to enjoy the trip anymore."

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◀ Bob Owen (middle) in front of Suitsme in Chattanooga, Tenn., with Ron Shaw of Cives Steel Company (left) and Dave Henegar of SDI, Inc.