

Project Hy-Rail

By Stan Conyer

I have owned several different motor cars in the years I have enjoyed this hobby. From a M9 to a Beaver car, they are all fun to own, operate, and work on in their own way. My stable now includes a Fairmont M9, M19, and a MT 19. I have seen several members who have chosen to travel the rails in a different way—in a hy-rail. For years I thought, “How much fun can it be to ride down the railroad at 20mph in a pick up truck?” Well I have finally found out.

A few years ago at a meet in Illinois I saw a Ford Ranger pick up, standard cab, short bed, Hy-Rail belonging to Fred Lonnes of Chicago. I liked it better than the full-sized, three-quarter or one-ton trucks I had seen most railroads use for hy-rails. Fred liked the little truck, but it did not have air conditioning, had a lot of miles on it, and he wanted something a little larger. He later found a 1989 Dodge Dakota, standard cab, long bed with air conditioning at the same dealer from whom he had bought the Ranger, so he bought it and sold the Ranger. Both trucks were ex-Burlington Northern Railroad trucks and had way over 100,000 miles on them. The Dodge was a little larger and nicer, but the high mileage had taken its toll on this truck also. I had a full-sized Dodge pickup which I really liked, but since Lionel was the only company putting hy-rail gear on the late model Dodge, I would have to trade for a Dakota if I wanted to ride the rails.

I did not want a high-mileage truck and the associated maintenance problems, so I decided to find a truck in better condition and put hy-rail gear on it. I found a nice 1992 Dodge Dakota, extended cab, short bed with all the nice accessories on a used car lot in my hometown with only 57,000 miles—perfect. Next I needed to find the hy-rail gear to put on the truck. Either Fairmont 0305 or HR1000 gear can be applied to the Dakota. Fred’s Dakota had Fairmont HR1000 gear applied to it. This is a type of gear that Fairmont designed especially for down-sized trucks in light service. This gear is mostly aluminum and only adds about 500 pounds to the weight of the truck. After search-

ing the Internet for hy-rail dealers, I found one in Texas that had some used HR1000 gear. My son and I made a quick trip from Southern Indiana to Texas over a weekend and brought back two nice sets of gear. I sold the second set to Fred which he installed on a 1996 four-by-four Dakota.

The next step was to order a mounting kit from Fairmont. The nice thing about applying hy-rail to a Dakota is that no special wheels are required. To sit properly on the railhead, full-sized vehicles require the gauge of the truck be made narrower with special wheels. Compact trucks require wheels which make their gauge wider. The tall, oversized, wheels I had seen on full-sized trucks were one thing I did not like about the full-sized trucks. A four-wheel drive Dakota sits perfectly on the track with stock wheels. To widen the front gauge to match the rear, my two-wheel drive truck only required half-inch spacers on each front hub which were included in the mounting kit along with longer lug bolts.

Mounting the gear was the easiest project I have ever attempted. The front and rear bumpers were removed, and the mounts bolted onto the frame in existing holes. Only minor cutting was required to the front tip of the frame and the front and rear fender wells to allow the guide wheels to fold up. The hy-rail gear was raised up and bolted to the mounts with the help of a floor jack. The bumpers were mounted next, and the last thing to go on was the steering wheel lock. All parts fit just like the instructions said they would.

A trip to an authorized Fairmont service center in Louisville, Kentucky, for alignment and wheel loading was the final step. Before I went, I had the truck four-wheel aligned. This is important, as the rest of the alignment uses the truck wheels as a reference. After the alignment is completed the guide wheel loading is set. This places the proper amount of down

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pressure on the guide wheels. Too much pressure, and traction and braking are reduced; too little, and the truck may not stay on the rails. This alignment, done by people familiar with hy-rail equipment, is essential for safe and trouble-free operation. Improper alignment cannot only cause a derailment, it can also wear out the guide wheels which sometimes cost over \$300 a piece. The \$220 I paid for this work was a bargain.

My total project cost me about \$10,000 including the cost of the truck, HR1000 hy-rail gear, mounting kit, and alignment. If you consider the cost of a nice motor car, the trailer, and a truck to pull it with, I think it was quite a bargain. Getting 20-plus miles per gallon on the highway is also a real plus. I can still use the truck for anything else I need a pickup truck for. I have even used it to tow a trailer with my motor car on it to a meet, if I want to travel the rails that way. Since I host several motor car meets each year, the extra cargo space for first aid kits, tools, and gas comes in handy. Last year Fred and I used our Dakotas on the Algoma Central trip to carry extra gas which worked out real well.

NARCOA rules require that hy-rails be placed on either end of a group of motor cars because they differ in weight and size when compared with motor cars. Extra care needs to be exercised when traveling through switches and other track structures; putting a derailed hy-rail truck back on the track can be a lot harder than rerailing a motor-car.

How much fun is it to ride in a pickup truck down the railroad at 20mph? Still not as much as riding in a motor car, but the air conditioning or heat, added cargo space, comfort and CD player make it more tolerable.



Matt Ahlbran follows Stan Conyer's hy-rail across the 180-foot tall Tulip Trestle near Bloomfield, Indiana, as buzzards circle underneath.

Stan Conyer's 1992 Dodge Dakota hy-rail on the Wisconsin & Southern Railroad.

