

An echo of history as Locomotive 4141 carries George H.W. Bush to his final resting place

By **Brittney Martin** Washington Post | DECEMBER 2, 2018 — 10:09PM

HOUSTON - When the curtain parted in College Station, Texas, revealing a two-toned blue locomotive standing nearly 16 feet tall and bearing the number 4141 in his honor, former President George H.W. Bush looked around excitedly, his face breaking into a smile.

One word left his lips: “Wow.”

Thirteen years later, that same Union Pacific locomotive will escort the 41st president to his final resting place in College Station on Thursday after funeral ceremonies in Washington and Houston.

The train carrying his remains will leave a Union Pacific Railroad yard in Spring, a town north of Houston, and travel the 70 miles to College Station. Bush will be buried there, alongside his wife, Barbara, and daughter Robin on the site of his presidential library at Texas A&M University.

The locomotive, painted the same blue colors that adorned Air Force One during Bush's presidency, was unveiled by the company in October 2005. At the time, Bush was fascinated by the train's mechanics and asked whether he could take it for a spin, according to Mike Iden, a retired Union Pacific general director of car and locomotive engineering.

After some brief training and under the supervision of an engineer, “the former president operated the locomotive for about 2 miles,” Iden said.

An Associated Press article at the time said the unveiling stirred memories in Bush of his childhood travels with his family. “We just rode on the railroads all the time, and I've never forgotten it,” Bush said.

Presidential funeral trains

During previous centuries, trains carried numerous presidents to their funerals. Abraham Lincoln's body — with that of his son, Willie, who had died three years earlier — was carried by train more than 1,600 miles from Washington to Springfield, Ill. The slain leader's portrait was affixed to the front of the engine for the entirety of the trip.

Ulysses Grant, James Garfield, William McKinley, Warren Harding and Franklin D. Roosevelt also took their final journeys by rail. The last such cortège, for Dwight Eisenhower in 1969, involved a specially prepared baggage car. The train traveled through seven states — Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Missouri — before reaching its final destination in Abilene, Kan.

“It's an opportunity for a large swath of the population to pay their final respects to someone who has done so much for our country,” Scott Moore, a Union Pacific senior vice president, noted Saturday about the plans for Bush's funeral week. “Having a train like this pulled by a locomotive specifically about this man is just really unprecedented.”

The route from Spring to College Station will pass through several towns, including Hufsmith, Pinehurst, Magnolia and Navasota. Hufsmith is barely a dot on the map these days. But 2 miles away, the mayor of Tomball fondly remembers Bush's visit for the city's centennial celebration in 2007. It was the first time a president, past or present, had been there.

GALLERY

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Gallery: In May 2008, former President George H.W. Bush arrived on the South Lawn of White House in Washington. Bush died at the age of 94 on Friday. Pacific locomotive 4141 at its 2005 unveiling in College Station, Texas.

“He came out, and we presented him with a key to the city, and he actually kissed me on the cheek,” Mayor Gretchen Fagan said. “My mother-in-law said that when she got home, there were messages on her voice mail saying, ‘Oh my gosh, the president of the United States just kissed your daughter-in-law!’”

Bush took pictures with people for over an hour after the event. “It was such a pleasure,” Fagan recalled. “The people of Tomball were just so excited.”

Navasota Mayor Bert Miller said he’s not sure whether Bush ever visited the city, but he has memories campaigning for him in 1980.

“I remember — with my grandfather — doing some politicking for him back when he was [campaigning for] vice president with President Reagan,” Miller said Saturday. “I was real young at the time.”

Navasota is about 20 miles from Bush’s presidential library at Texas A&M, where the former president was a regular fixture after his library opened there in 1997. He occasionally dropped in on classes at the Bush School of Government and Public Service and was even spotted at the rec center when in good health.

By car, the ride from Houston to College Station typically takes 90 minutes, but the announced schedule for Locomotive 4141 will be twice as long. The university said Saturday that the president’s casket will be unloaded at a railroad stop near campus. The funeral procession will then travel down George Bush Drive, with a brief arrival ceremony followed by a private interment. The campus will be closed Thursday.

At the locomotive’s unveiling, Bush stuck his head out of a window and flashed Texas A&M’s familiar “gig ’em” sign: A thumbs up.
