

JOURNEY FIT FOR A PRESIDENT

Chugging through the redwoods

Roaring Camp's rainforest tours unique glimpse of history

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FELTON — It was a scene that could have fit President Teddy Roosevelt's era nearly 100 years ago.

The Dixiana, a two-ton steam engine huffed and puffed its way up the narrow-gauge grade through the towering redwoods to the summit of Bear Mountain. Halfway up, it let out a high-pitched steam "roar."

"Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, this is what a steam engine sounds like," said conductor Kent Jefferys, every inch the showman.

On a beautiful rainless President's Day, Roaring Camp's Rain Forest tour offered unique perspective of the Santa Cruz redwoods to more than 200 people. In the one and a half-hour journey, seniors, parents and children listened in rapture

Grove. Jefferys, surrounded by a circle of eager listeners, moved seamlessly from history to biology.

The centerpiece of his attention was a 3,000-year-old, 75-ton redwood that towered above the other giants. This tree, said Jefferys, was the grandmother.

"Check her out. She goes right up to the top floor," Jefferys said.

Drawing an arc around this statuesque wonder, Jefferys pointed out the grandmother's descendants: trees a mere 250 feet tall and 775 years old.

The immense stature of the grove is in part due to the conservation efforts of Joseph Welch, a prosperous San Francisco businessman who bought the land in 1867 to protect it from loggers.

His efforts mean the grove is "virgin": forest that hasn't been logged, Jefferys said.

After the brief interlude, the party embarked, and the



MELISSA CERESA/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
The Dixiana lets off steam as it pulls into the station.

to Jefferys' narrative of the mountain, the Dixiana paused awhile, and its history of the ancient redwood cargo spilled into the now-woods.

At the summit of the tranquil glades of Cathedral

train assumed its journey over trestles and the winding tracks. Jefferys' conversation turned to the locomotive itself.

"She is cantankerous in the morning. She like's her coffee," Jefferys said. "Stubborn? Yes — she's a female."

In the 1880s, the steam locomotives were used to haul redwood logs out of the mountains. The Roaring Camp's steam locomotives now carry only passengers.

As the Dixiana pulls out of the shadows of the forest into the clear light of day, it lets out a huge belch of steam. Cameras click to capture the moment.

Jefferys is in his element.

"Twenty-five years ago, I gave up a three-piece suit and a computer table," Jefferys said. "I wanted to stretch out my childhood as long as I could."