

Kirpal Singh Sandhu

by Kevin Patience

m w i s h o w e

I first met Kirpal in 1974 at the Mombasa loco shed, as he oiled his pride and joy, a large maroon articulated steam locomotive, in preparation for a run to Nairobi. I had heard tales of engine 5918 and the legendary immaculate footplate of polished brass and copper. I clambered up to the footplate of this 252-ton giant and met Walter Pinto, Kirpal's co driver. They each had an African fireman and the crews drove the loco in eight-hour shifts, leaving Mombasa or Nairobi and arriving the following day having covered the 300 miles in around 24 hours hauling 1,100 tons of freight. There was no mistaking the engine, the only one fitted with twin whistles, giving it a very distinctive sound.

5918 was one of a class of 34 Beyer Garratt locomotives ordered for the then East African Railways and Harbours in the early 1950s and saw

In 1980, 5918 was allocated to the railway museum in Nairobi and Kirpal delivered it under its own power from Mombasa. The oil burners were turned off and the fire went out for what Kirpal thought was the last time. But eight years later the railway took 5918 and its sister engine 5930 and ran a number of steam safaris to Naivasha. I wrote a small book entitled **Steam Twilight – The last years of**



Above: Kirpal Singh driving 5918 to Mombasa in 2001. Left: Engine 5918, a Garratt class steam locomotive.

service hauling both passenger and freight trains until the end of steam in 1980. They were the largest class of engine ever built for the metre gauge railway. All were named after mountains in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, and 5918 was named Mount Gelai after an extinct volcano in Tanzania.

Kirpal joined the railways in January 1950 as a 17-year-old fireman. In 1964 he was allocated 5918 and forged a 16-year relationship. They took works overhauls and holidays at the same time and remained together until they both retired in 1980. His lavish attention to detail in the running and maintenance of the engine ensured it never had a failure while in service and completed very high mileages between overhauls. I had a number of memorable trips on the footplate and was allowed to drive the loco out of Kilindini Docks a few times. Kirpal's 'in-flight meals' were delicious curries prepared by his wife and kept hot on the firebox door that had a special brass rail around it. Sitting in the caboose or sleeping carriage with Kirpal and sharing his lunch and drinking tea was a great privilege.

steam on Kenya Railways, and stated it was highly unlikely there would ever be a Garratt in steam again. But in 2001 I heard of plans to resurrect 5918 and flew into Nairobi to find out. The loco had been moved into the workshop and there it lay with its faded paintwork and dirty tarnished footplate, a far cry from its heyday. Under the guiding hands of Joe Kamau and his team of skilled artisans, 5918 was fired up once more, thirteen years since it last ran.

Kenya Railways organized a memorable trip to Mombasa. They invited Kirpal and his wife and Charan Singh Kundi, his cousin, also an ex-Garratt driver, who joined Graham Kelsey, Nick Lera and me. It was soon obvious the master was needed in the driving seat and Kirpal once again took the controls. Twenty-one years after he had last driven his favourite engine, he skilfully read the track and brought us into Mombasa, a triumph in his autumn years. Nick captured the trip on film, while Graham and I helped with the running maintenance. 5918 now stands dust covered and in need of attention in the engine shed, while Kirpal has taken his final farewell. He passed away in Nairobi on February 4, 2010, aged 76, a true gentleman of the rails.