
2926

Right On Track

A 70-year-old steam locomotive—AT&SF 2926—will soon return to the rails, thanks to the New Mexico Steam Locomotive and Railroad Historical Society.

Mike Hartshorne may be a decorated doctor of radiology and a professor at the University of New Mexico, but he's had a passion for trains for decades, too.

If you do happen to drop the "T" word around him, prepare yourself for a pep talk on the restoration of one of Albuquerque's most lauded steam trains—a Baldwin 4-8-4 Steam Locomotive known as AT&SF 2926. As the president of the New Mexico Steam Locomotive and Railroad Historical Society, Hartshorne can't help but gush about the project's impending success.

"Half the fun is just working on this thing. When I was a kid, I knew they were cool, I knew they were big, and I knew I liked them, but now I know what's inside them," Hartshorne says from within the train's cavernous firebox. "This is industrial archaeology. We're finding out how people solved mechanical problems 70 and 80 years ago."

But he's not the only one with locomotives on his mind. The society has more than 300 members—20 to 25 of whom work on the train in teams every day.

On this brisk morning, the train's "World Headquarters"—near the intersection of Eighth and Haines Streets in Albuquerque's Sawmill district, is buzzing with bustling volunteers donning bright-orange vests and yellow hard hats. The locomotive—a railway relic that was considered cutting-edge technology when it was built in 1944—is at the center.

"We're all small donors and volunteers—we don't have anybody down here making any money off of us," Hartshorne says as he climbs into the narrow opening that leads into the train's firebox from the engineer's cab. Here, oil will be burned through atomization to create the heat and the steam that powers the train.

Although AT&SF 2926 is anything but modern by today's standards, Hartshorne says it was an engineering marvel in the early1940s, when it was produced.

"Some of the brightest engineers in the business worked to design steam locomotives," he says. "Nowadays, that type of engineer might make space shuttles and 787s."

When AT&SF 2926 was built, it was one of 30 similar trains Baldwin constructed as part of its 2900 series. It was the 26th train in the series and was sold to the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway for $236,000.

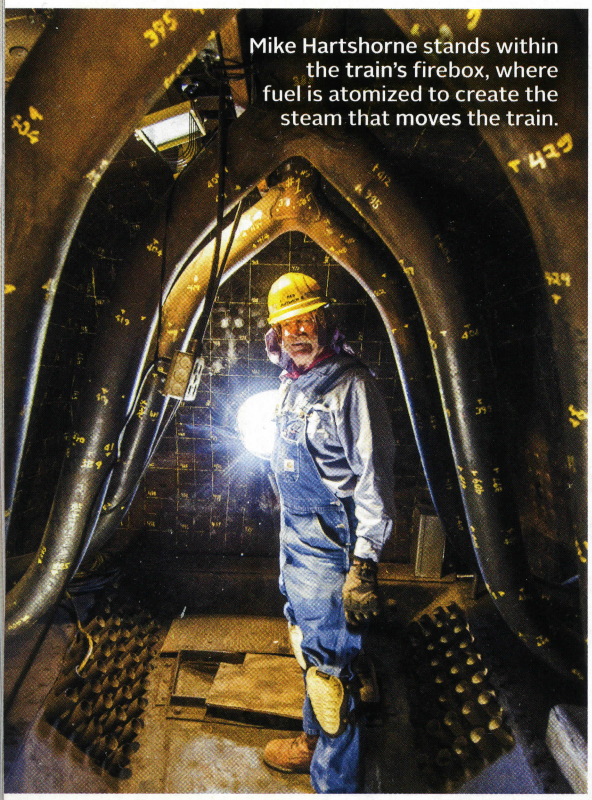
But over time, the number of AT&SF 2926's brethren has whittled.

The five other 2900 series trains still in existence are on display in public parks or mothballed as rusting hulks. The rest of the trains from the original fleet are either in scattered pieces or became scrap.

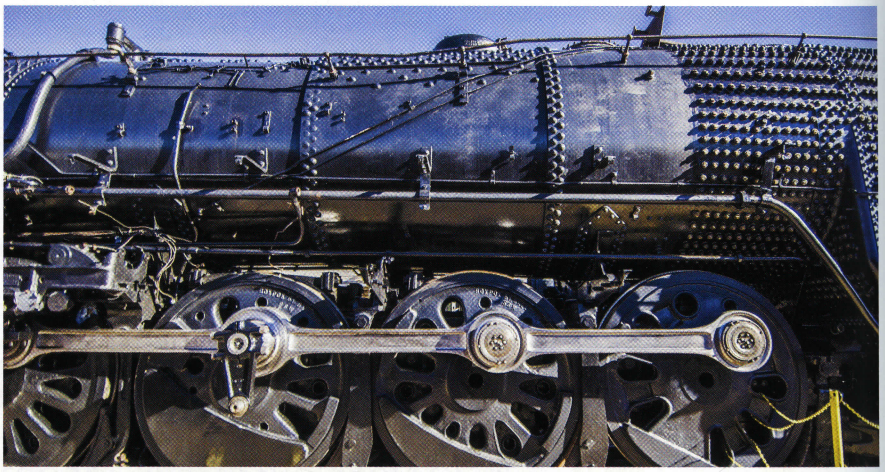
Or, as Hartshorne put it, "the other 24 of them are Chevys and razor blades."

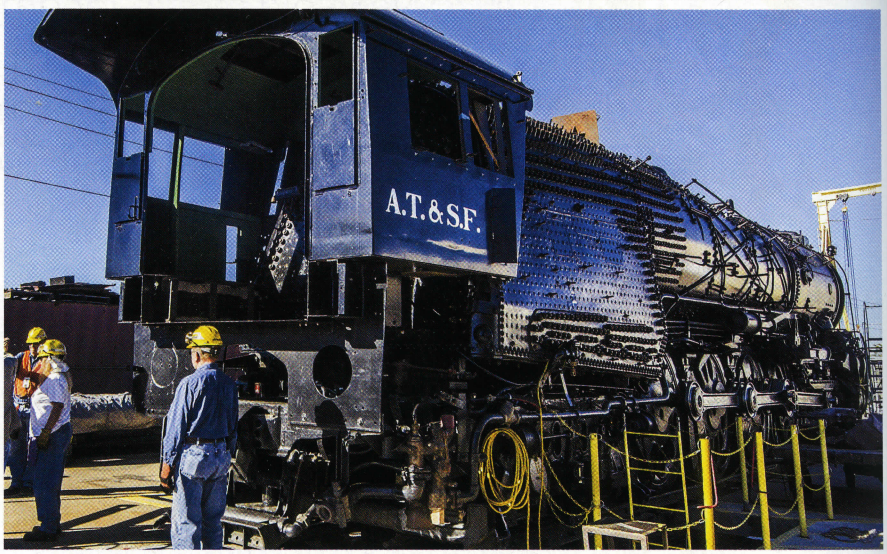
Of all of the trains, he says AT&SF 2926 will be the only one that will ever move on its own again.

The trains were built during World War II, during a time when steel was in short supply and building passenger



Mike Hartshorne stands within the train's firebox, where fuel is atomized to create the steam that moves the train.





trains was outlawed.

Baldwin built and classified its 2900 series as "fast freight" trains capable of reaching speeds of up to 110 miles per hour. From there, AT&SF 2926 spent its service years running freight, commercial passengers, and even transported troops returning from California during the war.

It remained in service for almost a decade, performing helper service for diesel engines from Belen to Abo Canyon, says volunteer and historian John Taylor. The engine left active service in 1953, and was donated to the City of Albuquerque in 1956.

For more than 40 years it sat on display in Coronado Park, until the New Mexico Steam Locomotive and Railroad Historical Society offered to purchase it in 1999. But it took a bit of persuading.

"The thing that sealed the deal was when we told the city that it was full of asbestos and was a gigantic liability," Hartshorne says. "And they said, 'Ok, you can have it.'"

A year later and at a cost of $163,000, the Society laid temporary track down the street and pulled the train out of the park with heavy equipment. In 2002, Rep. Heather Wilson helped the society secure its world-headquarters construction site: an antiquated rail spur owned by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Government Service Administration.

"The spur used to handle freight that arrived in boxcars, but it comes in on trucks now," Hartshorne says. "It was overgrown and full of weeds, but there was a rail track and a sheet of concrete."

It was exactly what they needed. Twelve years and $1.6 million later, the project has progressed nicely, thanks to the band of volunteers like Henry Roberts, a recent graduate from Eldorado High School.

Roberts joined the project four years ago after riding a similar train in Colorado. When he heard of the restoration of AT&SF 2926, he and his father joined immediately. He plans on attending New Mexico Tech for a degree in mechanical engineering, but already gets his mechanical fix while wrenching on the train.

"I'd love to be the driver of 2926 one day," Roberts says. "I've always loved steam locomotives and mechanical things that move like them. Really, the history is amazing."

Taylor says the train should be fully restored and ready for operation in a little over a year. Once it gets back on the tracks, it'll take passengers on nostalgic trips to the north and the south, out of the way of commercial freight.

"It's just so exciting to see the thing come back together and come to life," Taylor says.

Others, though—like Hartshorne—are just as excited about the process of getting there.

"Everything around here is big, dirty, and cool, and everyone enjoys it in their own way," he says. "No more steam trains been designed since this one. It's as good as it gets." —TOM SANDFORD