

Rio Ranchoan gets kicks working on old 2926

By GARY HERRON
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With the resurging interest in trains, primarily because of the Rail Runner Express that runs several times daily through Sandoval County, *The Observer* decided it was time to visit a place in Albuquerque where a steam locomotive is being restored by members of the New Mexico Steam Locomotive and Railroad Historical Society (nmslrhs.org).

And, guess what? There are some volunteers on the project who hail from Rio Rancho.

Ed Strebe, 77, is one of them — and one with a title: toolmeister.

Strebe heads to the project site every Wednesday and Saturday morning, often stopping along the way to pick up a needed tool.

When someone needs a “left-handed monkey wrench,” then Strebe gets the call.

Restoring a 65-year-old steam locomotive is quite a bit different than restoring an old Corvette. Strebe can't find what he needs at NAPA or even on eBay, he said, “I have purchased \$10,000 worth of tools and supplies in the last two years.”

Like most of the volunteers, Strebe traces his fascination for steam locomotives back to his childhood.

He still remembers gazing out the window of his algebra classroom, watching New York Central trains rolling past.

Later, needing money to go to college, Strebe worked on the railroad as a “gandy dancer,” meaning he did a lot of heavy lifting to replace rails and ties along the line. The next summer, he had one of the most boring jobs of his life, as a crossing watchman. He'd sit in a small shack at a highway



OBSERVER — GARY HERRON PHOTO

Rio Ranchoan Ed Strebe, right, and chief mechanical officer Bob DeGroft of Albuquerque pose for a photo near where the replaced cab will be after it's been restored. All volunteers at the site must wear hard hats.

crossing and when he'd hear the oncoming locomotive blow its whistle, he'd go outside with a stop sign to warn approaching drivers of a train about to pass by.

A half century later, Strebe is a retired minister who moved to

Rio Rancho with his wife Betty in 2001.

It seems locomotives aren't his only interest: Strebe loves antique fire engines — he's been a firefighter — and pipe organs. He looked for people here with the same passion, but found none.

Then he found the NMSLRHS and got hooked again.

Instead of seeing a locomotive through a classroom window or stopping traffic to let one pass, Strebe stays busy working on ol' 2926, which now sits on tracks just south of I-40 and west of 8th Street NW.

“This is restoring living history,” he said. “Any ‘kid’ under 40 has never seen a steam engine run. A steam engine is a forgotten thing.”

Old 2926 was among the last group of steam locomotives purchased by the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe Railway. It had been specifically designed for passenger and high-speed freight service and logged more than a million miles by the time it was taken out of service.

Its last run was in the early 1950s, after diesels ultimately replaced the coal- and wood-burning locomotives. The ATSF later donated 2926 to the City of Albuquerque, and it was placed on display in Coronado Park (2nd and I-40).

Through the years, the ele-

ments, vandals and collectors took their toll on the locomotive and tender.

But lately, and hopefully in time for the state's centennial in 2012, 2926 is undergoing a restoration.

Delivered by the Baldwin Locomotive Works in 1944, it's one of the largest 4-8-4 locomotives ever built — and definitely the heaviest. The original price: \$252,335.

When fully loaded with 24,500 gallons of water and 7,000 gallons of fuel oil, 2926 weighs over one million pounds. Despite the heft, its maximum speed is 110 mph.

If and when 2926 is back on the rails, it'll be thanks to Strebe and the 20 or so volunteers you'll find working on the site twice weekly. The volunteers come from all walks of life, he said: retired cops, a radiologist, mailman, Sandia Labs engineers, and even an engineer who drives the Rail Runner Express.

“The only thing we have in common is that locomotive,” he said.