

Full steam ahead, at a very patient pace

COURTESY OF WESTERN RAILWAY MUSEUM ARCHIVES



MARLA BROSE/JOURNAL

ABOVE: Michael Hartshorne, right, president of the New Mexico Steam Locomotive & Railroad Historical Society, shakes hands with Dan Rivera on Saturday before society members start the day's work on restoring steam locomotive Santa Fe 2926. **TOP:** Santa Fe steam locomotive 2926 is pictured in service in California.

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Everything about the effort to restore steam locomotive Santa Fe 2926 to working order is immense — the locomotive itself, the complexity of the project and, most of all, the commitment of the volunteers who keep at it year after year.

"We are in the 13th year of a two-year project," said Frank Gerstle, board member and past president of the New Mexico Steam Locomotive & Railroad Historical Society.

The Albuquerque-based nonprofit was formed in the mid-1990s for the sole purpose of getting the locomotive up and running.

Santa Fe 2926, a 1944 Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway steam locomotive, is located at the society's world headquarters, in a fenced-off section of side track on Eighth Street, a few blocks south of Interstate 40. Every Wednesday and Saturday, 30 or so members of the society turn out to put in a day's work on resurrecting the old locomotive.

So far, the project has soaked up \$2 million, all donated, and 125,000 volunteer hours.

Michael Hartshorne, a physician and University of New

Mexico professor emeritus who serves as the society's president, said that for years whenever anyone asked how long the project was going to take, members would say six years more.

The truth is no one knew for sure.

The society has 350 members worldwide who help support the work with their annual dues and some 60 members actively engaged in the renovation. That core group of 60 includes people of all ages — although most are in their 60s — and is made up of teachers, preachers, physicians, machinists, plumbers, school kids, carpenters and engineers of all kinds.

But no one who had ever rebuilt a steam locomotive.

Hartshorne, 67, said members had to resurrect a body of knowledge that had all but died out with the old steam engine railroad shops. Sometimes they had to build the tools — mammoth wrenches, for example — from scratch just to be able to get on with the rebuilding of the locomotive. Sometimes they had to commission the building of parts that were no longer available. Sometimes they had to track down parts available only in other countries.

"Our intimate knowledge of this type of engine is not

great," said Gerstle, 73, a mechanical and materials science engineer who is retired from Sandia National Laboratories. "Our first project was the tender or fuel car, which rides right behind the engine. That took four years, which is much more time than we thought."

But now, they think they are really close.

"Unless a dinosaur we don't know about rears its head, we'll be done in a year," said Rick Kirby, 66, a former mechanical contractor who is the society's chief mechanical officer.

The locomotive stands 18 feet tall and weighs in at 510,150 pounds. It has a bearing that weighs 375 pounds. It has eight driving wheels, each 80 inches in diameter, and three miles of steel tubing in the boiler. You can get dizzy just trying to comprehend its size and intricacy.

Even so, the society's goal is to put the locomotive back on the tracks, to use it for excursions to places such as Las Vegas, N.M., to make it available as a Christmas train for kids, for railroad employee parties, for veterans appreciation parties and maybe even trips to the Grand Canyon.

It all started 20 years ago last month, when Ed Bukove, who had worked as a fire-

Complex project to restore Santa Fe locomotive is getting close to completion

All aboard

The New Mexico Steam Locomotive & Railroad Historical Society will celebrate its ongoing restoration of Santa Fe 2926 with an open house from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 26, at 1833 Eighth NW. Admission is free.

It will feature live music, model trains, free hot dogs, popcorn and soft drinks, and Santa Fe 2926 art and gifts.

To learn more, visit www.2926.us.

man on Santa Fe 2926, called a meeting of train enthusiasts to explore the idea of restoring the locomotive. It had been sitting in Albuquerque's Coronado Park, on Second Street just south of I-40, since 1956, when it was donated to the city in recognition of Albuquerque's 250th anniversary.

The years at Coronado Park were not kind. It had been abused by the elements and used by the homeless as a shelter and as a toilet. The meetings initiated by Bukove gave birth to the society, which bought the locomotive and its caboose from the city for \$1 in July 1999. In June 2000, the society moved the locomotive to side tracks at Second and Menaul. It stayed there until 2002, when it was moved to the Eighth Street site.

"Volunteers are down here busting their butts, getting dirty, ticking off their wives because they are not running errands," Hartshorne said. "We have the most talented group of volunteers working on a locomotive project anywhere in the world."

And they are not all men. Kirby's wife, Gail, who worked 30 years in the insurance business, not only serves as the society's secretary but pitches in on the restoration work, too. She is reputedly as good at wielding a wrench as she is at taking minutes at meetings.

"I'm not afraid to get dirty," she said.

Santa Fe 2926 worked from 1944 to 1953, carrying both freight and passengers from Kansas City through Albuquerque to Los Angeles and San Diego. It was shopped at one time or the other at Kansas City, Topeka, Albuquerque and Clovis.