

Locomotive restorers hope to steam ahead

By [Ollie Reed Jr. / Journal Staff Writer](#)

Saturday, January 20th, 2018 at 11:43pm



Bill Wilhelm of Placitas checks the fitting of a metal jacketing piece during restoration work on steam locomotive Santa Fe 2926. Members of the New Mexico Steam Locomotive & Railroad Historical Society have been working on the locomotive for more than 15 years. (Greg Sorber/Albuquerque Journal)

Copyright © 2018 Albuquerque Journal

Volunteers have been putting steam locomotive Santa Fe 2926 back together for more than 15 years, and it looks as if the old engine will soon be rewarded with some fire in the belly.

“A few more months and we will probably be able to make steam in the boiler for the first time since 1953,” said Michael Hartshorne, president of the New Mexico Steam Locomotive & Railroad Historical Society, the organization dedicated to bringing the locomotive back to life.

“We are getting excited about firing up the boiler. Once that is done, we’ll put in the pistons. There are better and better signs of getting an operating engine before the end of the year.”

He said it is possible Santa Fe 2926 might be ready to make runs to Las Vegas, N.M., some time in 2019.

It has been a long haul, but, of course, long hauls are nothing new to old steam engines. Santa Fe 2926 worked from 1944 to 1953, carrying both freight and passengers from Kansas City through Albuquerque to Los Angeles and San Diego.



Henry Roberts of Albuquerque talks about the controls in the cab of Santa Fe 2926. The old steam locomotive may be ready to ride the rails again some time in 2019. (Greg Sorber/Albuquerque Journal)

The members of the Steam Locomotive & Railroad Historical Society are getting accustomed to long hauls as well. Working mostly on Wednesdays and Saturdays, society members have put 166,000 volunteer hours and more than \$2.8 million – garnered from society dues, fundraising drives and donations – into helping Santa Fe 2926 make tracks again.

“I don’t think I will ever get rid of that thing,” said Hartshorne, 69, a physician who has been president of the organization since 2002. “I’ve got one leg chained to that locomotive.”

Not that he would have it any other way. All you have to do is listen to him talk about flue tubes, steam pipes and brake systems for a few minutes to figure that out. It’s like that for most of the society’s volunteers.

About 400 people are dues-paying members of the society, but only about 100 of those are trained to do the renovation work, and an average of 25 to 35 turn out for the twice-weekly work sessions at the society's headquarters on Eighth Street, just south of I-40.



Scott Attenbach of Albuquerque loosens bolts under the cab of steam locomotive Santa Fe 2926 during a recent work session. Workers have put 166,000 volunteer hours into restoring the locomotive so far. (Greg Sorber/Albuquerque Journal)

Volunteers include teachers, machinists, physicians, plumbers, carpenters and engineers of all kinds. Hartshorne said a mechanical engineer and a nuclear engineer, both retired from Sandia National Laboratories, are preparing an extensive checklist to be used in the countdown to firing up the boiler. A semi-retired electrical engineer is leading the charge to replace the locomotive's electrical system.

Occasionally, someone with actual railroad experience shows up.

“We needed a modern brake system because the old No. 8 brake system was not going to cut it on a major (railway) line,” Hartshorne said. “We got this problem and a guy who lives in Española and used to work on brake systems for BNSF Railway walks through the door with a solution to the problem. That has happened to us a couple of times. The right guy walks through the door when we were in trouble.”

More than 20 years ago, Santa Fe 2926, which stands 18 feet tall and weighs 510,150 pounds, was in plenty of trouble.

Donated to Albuquerque in 1956 in celebration of the city's 250th anniversary, it had been an immense yard ornament in Albuquerque's Coronado Park, on Second Street just south of I-40, since that year. Savaged by the weather and used by the homeless as a shelter and a toilet, it was a rusting hulk and a health hazard.

The New Mexico Steam Locomotive & Railroad Historical Society was formed to rescue the locomotive. In 1999, the society bought the locomotive from the city for \$1 and moved it the following year to side tracks at Second and Menaul. In 2002, the locomotive was moved to its present home on Eighth Street.

Renovation has been an intimidating task. Some of the parts and even some of the tools needed for the job were no longer available and had to be made. Four separate sections of the boiler, one as big as a dinner table, had to be removed and replaced because they were too thin to hold up under pressure.

One of the big triumphs of 2017, Hartshorne said, was that the boiler passed a crucial hydrostatic test overseen by a Federal Railway Administration inspector in July.

"We filled the boiler with water and pressurized it to 25 percent over working pressure," Hartshorne said. "There are an enormous number of things that can fail. There are 2,500 staybolts on either side that can leak. But we passed with flying colors. That's one of the biggest things because if you don't pass, you are back to square one and you've got a lot of rebuilding to do."

But now, there may soon be steam in the boiler again. And next year, perhaps it'll be "all aboard" for an excursion to the old railroad town of Las Vegas, N.M.

Hartshorne is planning to be along for the ride.

"I expect to keep burning and churning," he said. "And I don't expect to get rid of this project."