

SAGEBRUSH HEADLIGHT

Vol. 30, No. 3, 108th Ed.

THE NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM
An Agency of the Division of Museums and History
Nevada Department of Cultural Affairs

Fall 2009

THE LAST AMERICAN: A Personal Odyssey *Apple Pies*

By Dan Markoff; Photos by George Sapp

Every so often something comes into a life that leaves memories that will last a lifetime. These events seem to come out of nowhere when least expected. In their wake, every time you think about the happiness they left, a smile comes to your face.

I think it was in 1995 that the apparition came into my life.

That year we took *Eureka* back to the Durango & Silverton. It was fairly late in the year. The rains were coming, but not the thunderstorms of summer, nor had the snows started to fall. We were invited back to do some filming for Pentrex, a video company that specializes in railroad subjects. It was also Ditty's and my tenth wedding anniversary. We had plans not only to film with Pentrex, but to have a unique anniversary celebration.

I can't remember how long we'd been running *Eureka*. Maybe four days; perhaps a week. With all the activity I lose track of time. It's up in the morning before sunrise to get the locomotive cleaned up and ready. We build the fire, inspect the engine and tender, get wood, oil around, then pick up our train. We had quite a contingent of Nevada folks showing up to help. Among them were Chris DeWitt, Lee Hobold, and Kyle Wyatt of the Nevada State Railroad Museum, Pierce Powell from Virginia City, Terry Ward from Carson City, and of course Ron Bunker and his family who transport *Eureka*. There were others, I know, but I can't remember everyone there. It was sort of a blur.

Unfortunately, while in Durango *Eureka's* air pump started giving me fits. For some reason, the shuttle piston on top of the pump didn't want to cycle. I pulled the small piston out, saw no obvious problem, and lubricated and reassembled it. It still didn't cycle. I was getting frustrated. Chris took a look, and was unable to decipher the mysteries of the air pump either. In the



Bill and Nancee Billingsley with Eureka at Tacoma, Colorado, on the Durango & Silverton Railroad.

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**NEVADA STATE
RAILROAD MUSEUM**

2180 South Carson Street
Carson City, NV 89701-5999
775-687-6953

www.nevadaculture.org

Open 8:30 to 4:30 Fridays through
Mondays except Dec. 25 and Jan. 1

Admission: Adult \$4, Senior \$3
Children under 18 and members of
the Friends of the Nevada State
Railroad Museum are admitted FREE



The museum is an agency of the
State of Nevada

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The Nevada State Railroad Museum
publishes the *Sagebrush Headlight*
newsletter each quarter. The Friends of
the Nevada State Railroad Museum
distribute it as a membership benefit.

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*We regret the delay of this issue of the Sagebrush Headlight.
To help us get back on schedule, please submit materials for
the Winter issue by Monday, December 14, 2009.*

NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM

Forthcoming STEAM-UPS

Saturday, October 31: Nevada Day

Friday/Saturday, November 27 & 28: Thanksgiving

Trains depart daily from the historic Wabuska Depot,
10:00 am till 4:00 pm

Fares: Adults- \$5.00; seniors (65 and above) - \$4.00;

Children 6-11- \$3.00; Five and under FREE;

FNSRM Members, with membership card, HALF FARE.

Saturday/Sunday, December 12 & 13: Santa Train

Trains depart from Wabuska Depot, 9:00 am till 4:00 pm.

ALL SEATS \$2.00

New Exhibit Development Begins

Work on new permanent exhibits for the Jacobsen Interpretive Center (JIC) at the Nevada State Railroad Museum has begun. Taylor Studios, a museum exhibit design-and-fabrication firm located in Rantoul, Illinois, received a \$629,900 contract for production of these exhibits, based on a plan prepared by museum staff in 2005. MAD Systems of Orange, California, has sub-contracted to plan and produce audio-visual media.

Physical changes in the Interpretive Center will be extensive. The exhibits are expected to include graphics, artifacts, constructed environments, and interactive and audio-visual features. The contractor expects to complete design development in November.

Final design and permits are expected in January 2010. The exhibits will be fabricated in Illinois and shipped to the Museum for installation in summer 2010. Closure of the Interpretive Center for several weeks is likely to be necessary. We will provide you with updates in future issues of the *Sagebrush Headlight*.

**Each year, the Nevada Appeal
newspaper polls its readers
to decide the "Best of Carson City"
in each of several categories. Voted
"No. 1 Tourist Attraction" for 2009:
NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM!**

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

As I write this, the 38th Annual Nevada Railroad History Symposium is days away. This year's symposium theme is *Notable Nevada Passenger Trains*, and as usual NSRM Curator of Education/Acting Director Frank Ackerman recruited a spectacular lineup of speakers. If you haven't been to a symposium, make plans to attend next year. You'll leave with a better understanding and appreciation of railroad history. At NSRM, the symposium signals the transition from the hectic pace of summer, to a supposedly slower fall pace. In theory, museum staff has more time for projects and to get to maintenance work off the back burner. This year's staffing cutbacks make that less true than usual, but so does a more positive factor.

Museum Director Peter Barton has made the most of opportunities to apply for project funds to upgrade the museum's infrastructure. ADA retrofits, annex re-roofing, McKeen car grants, and the new railroad doors for the Jacobsen Interpretive Center exemplify Peter's efforts. This year museum buildings received exterior painting, and in September electricity was shut off for four days so that NV Energy and a contractor could install a larger-capacity transformer and new switching gear. That's a precursor to new exhibits for the Interpretive Center (see page 2), a project that will keep museum staff, especially Frank Ackerman and Buildings & Grounds Supervisor Brian Sheldon, busy this winter.

School is back in session and volunteer tour guides are dusting off their skills to interpret the rich history of Nevada's railroads for class field trips. With the museum's reduced schedule, school trips are can take place Mondays and Fridays only. I hope we can still reach as many children as possible on those days.

As fall turns into winter the museum will host the year's most popular event. Santa Train delights passengers young and old. Cool days enhance the steam from the locomotive and the smell of coal smoke from the stoves in the cars transports riders to a time long ago. And Santa himself will greet all good boys and girls with a tasty treat. It's hard to believe that Christmas is just around the corner, and, with the economy a long way from recovery it's important that the Friends do all we can to support to the museum. This Holiday Season, take advantage of the many attractive member opportunities that benefit NSRM. For your holiday shopping list please consider a Friends membership, Motorcar Training, or Your Hand is on the Throttle. The museum store (see page 7) is an excellent source for books about Nevada history and railroading, apparel, and a wide variety of other items in every price range. I'll be looking forward to seeing you on Santa Train and please encourage your family and friends to visit the museum as well.

—Bill Kohler

Spotlight on Nicole Littlefield

A third-generation native of Carson City, Nicole graduated from Carson High School in 2007.

In order to get work experience, she began volunteering at the Nevada State Railroad Museum in March of 2009.

Since then, Nicole has had a weekly shift in the museum store and very capably has assisted with a variety of administrative and clerical work.

Nicole collects knives. She made one from scratch as her senior project at Carson High. She may decide to pursue a career in law, but, for now she's still considering her options.

—Lara Mather



Continued from Page 1

meantime, the film crew decided that a bunch of guys cursing and wrenching on a hundred-year-old Westinghouse pump would be a good subject to record for posterity.

I wasn't thrilled with the idea, but what the heck. Pentrex was there to get images of what it was like to run a locomotive from 1875, and here was something not everyone got to see. The camera rolled as we scratched our heads, trying everything we could think of.

At last we got the thing back together. I turned on the steam valve to the pump and . . . nothing. What! How could that be? We tried everything and the pump stayed as silent as the sphinx. Lee Hobold had been standing next to the pump pondering its mysteries. In his hand he had a lead hammer that I keep in the tool box for checking security on various parts of the locomotive: the lead doesn't damage any metal that it strikes. At some point Lee reached up with the hammer and tapped the pump with it. All of a sudden the pump started cycling with that familiar heartbeat rhythm. God! What a relief. We could get underway.

I remember Lee standing there with that wonderful, toothy grin of his, hammer in hand, saying to the camera, "Now, there will be all kinds of people out there who think that the way to fix an air pump is to wack it with a hammer." As fate would have it, that is exactly how it showed up in the final cut of the video. There wasn't a second of film of all the hours of work we spent taking that pump apart, cleaning it, lubricating it; and cursing the damn thing. But, the image of Lee rapping on it with that lead hammer shows the steam mechanics of the world just how to get the job done. With that problem out of our hair, we went over and got our train, track orders, and the rest of the crew. We were soon heading into the Rocky Mountains.

I can't begin to describe the thrill of taking a steam locomotive that was running before Custer's Last Stand into such beautiful country. It's beyond magical. It's a time machine that not even Jules Verne or H.G. Wells could imagine, because it's the real thing. The same equipment, the same sounds, smells, steam, cinders—everything, in fact, exactly as our forefathers experienced it. The only difference is that *we* were running the engine, and not the crews of 125 years ago. It was my hand on the throttle and my fireman's feeding the boiler that brought *Eureka* to life. Hundreds of people watched from the highway; and, from the most unlikely places, filmed for themselves *Eureka's* working up

into the mountains. She was no stuffed-and-mounted piece of equipment, cold as a corpse. She was out there hot, making steam and motion: doing what she was built to do and doing it just as well as the day she was made.

We ran *Eureka* up to Silverton, spotting her in numerous locations for run-by scenes. We tried different configurations of cylinder cocks open or closed, with smoke and without, whistling and silent. We often passed the ancient AC generating plant at Tacoma. We took note of Tacoma because there's a siding there, it's fairly level, and it looked like a good place to hang out. After days of charging up and down the line, we could use a little rest. Tacoma was a place we wanted to be. At the end of filming, the railroad gave permission for us to take our train and camping gear and head up to Tacoma for some partying and relaxation.

Although we were through with filming, we still had to live with the schedule. It isn't a cool thing for a 22-ton locomotive to have a cornfield meet with a leviathan of more than 100 tons. Schedules are good things. The problem was that we had to leave in such a rush that some of our guys got left in Durango. Nonetheless, we had our sleeping bags and other camping gear, so off we went.

If you aren't familiar with the Durango & Silverton, Tacoma is on the north side of the high line, a few miles from the high bridge. Rockwood to Tacoma is several miles, but walkable. While we climbed the grade from Hermosa to Rockwood the weather was getting gloomy. By the time we went over the high line, crossed the bridge and got to Tacoma it was downright saturated. We put *Eureka* and her train on the siding, tied her down for the night, and started preparing for dinner. It was definitely not going to be one of those starlit, crystal-clear nights.

By and by we got something to eat, cooking on the caboose stove, heating food on the locomotive backhead; and trying to stay dry. As evening came on, the rain let up and fog set in. Ditty had brought a bottle of champagne to celebrate our tenth anniversary. So, we headed up to the front of the locomotive, sat down with our friends on the crew and toasted ourselves. It was a hauntingly beautiful fog that made everything quiet and muffled. You could hear things, but couldn't see them through the grey blanket holding us.

After sitting awhile up by the pilot and contemplating our cozy spot in the mountains, I heard footsteps, but couldn't see anyone. I peered into the fog wondering who might be approaching. After all, weren't we way up in the mountains and

not near a soul? Soon, I could see two figures getting closer. I didn't recognize them, but as soon as they were upon us they asked if they could join our little group. They had brought brandy and wild-apple pies.

They introduced themselves as Bill and Nancee Billingsley. They lived on the other side of the river in a little white house and took care of the power plant year-round. All week they'd watched *Eureka* charge up and down the railroad and admired the form and beauty of a 19th Century 4-4-0 locomotive. It was nothing like those black monsters of brute force that usually ply the railroad. When they saw us pull into Tacoma siding they couldn't believe it.

We sat together in the fog, having a pleasant conversation and some antifreeze. Then Nancee pulled out the pies she made from the apples that grow wild along the railroad.

I cannot find words to describe how great those pies were. You can go to the finest bakery and never find an apple pie that can come close to those made from nature's wild bounty. They were warm and sweet and had a natural taste that had to be experienced to be appreciated. We couldn't have had a more welcome gift.

Bill told us about his work with the power plant and how it was the oldest operating AC power plant in the country. He was very proud of the restoration he did to keep operating the huge Pelton-wheel turbines that were themselves about a century old. The plant itself was a combination of modern computer electronics, powered by equipment that, although in perfect shape, would have looked more at home in Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory. There were large, oil-filled transformers, and insulators that carried wires that looked like antennae on gigantic insects. It was absolutely amazing to see. We were then invited into their cabin across the river. It was warm, cozy and comfortable. Bill and Nancee had opened their little home to perfect strangers and made us feel like family.

Eventually, we returned to the train to get some sleep. As we were getting ready to bed down in the caboose, or the passenger car, or wherever a dry spot was found, I saw through the blackness the shadow of a man. But this man looked like Buffalo Bill Cody himself, with flowing white hair, goatee, buffalo-robe coat, and slouch hat. Slung over his shoulder was a 45-70 Springfield rifle.

Right, above: *Nancee Billingsley looks on as the author admires two of her pies.*

Right: *Nancee picks apples with help from Bill.*



As he got closer I recognized him as Pierce Powell from Virginia City, Nevada. Pierce had missed the train when we left Durango, and hiked in following the railroad. He didn't want to miss our final trip!

Next morning we got the locomotive and train ready to head back, but first we would have to go to Cascade to turn on the wye. Bill and Nancee came by to see us off. I invited them to ride with me in *Eureka* up to Cascade and back to Tacoma, or to Durango, if they liked. They were ecstatic to join us. After turning at Cascade, I had to let Bill off at Tacoma. After all, he had a power plant to run. But Nancee stayed with us for the ride back to Durango. I have to say, I have never seen two happier people on board *Eureka*.

In the next few days we had to go back to Las Vegas, but we agreed we'd be back the following year. We said goodbye to Nancee and the rest of the folks in Durango. But what came in the future began in that foggy Tacoma evening in 1995. For every year from then until 2004, as we passed Tacoma on our runs, Nancee and Bill would be trackside with freshly baked wild-apple pies. But that was not all.

Every year after we finished our runs for the public, we always returned with *Eureka* to Tacoma, took the siding, and went over to their humble cottage where Nancee and Bill each year prepared a feast fit for royalty. And we had not just her apple pies, but Elk steaks, venison, beef, potatoes and all kinds of other vegetables, desserts, fine wines, brandy, and whatever our hearts could desire.

We partied with them, told stories about everything, frolicked in the mountains, ran mountain bikes, did target shooting, and probably told more tall tales than Mark Twain. We learned the lore of building the power plants, and how Tesla had brought forth AC power from this little power station. We lounged on the deep green grass in the evening next to a roaring fire in a pit built especially for our visits.

Bill cleared trees from the river so he could have a clear view of *Eureka* during our stays. We learned where the big fish hid, and heard stories about everything from the bears to the hummingbirds that populated this little paradise. At night we slept in fine feather beds in their cozy home that, with all their generosity and friendship, showed us that a humble house in the mountains can be infinitely more of a pleasure to be at than the finest mansion. A home truly is in the heart. Bill and Nancee opened their hearts and home to us for years, and it all started with a couple of apple pies.

This year we returned to the D&S. Five years had passed due to the FRA-waiver issue *Eureka* had faced under the new boiler code. Unfortunately, we learned that Bill and Nancee had had to leave their little paradise because of health issues. They now live in Denver, far from the magnificent solitude of their home in Tacoma. We had our annual get-together at the little white house. Although it was



Bill Billingsley aboard a D&S coach.

pleasant enough, and the plant's new operator was cordial and hospitable, something was definitely missing. It was sad, but I have their memories with me and I'll always smile when I think of them.

Near the siding where we tie *Eureka* down, there is a rock. Some years ago, Nancee painted a picture of *Eureka* on that rock and had all of us on the crew sign our names to it. That side of the river became known as Eureka Park. The rock is still there, a bit faded now, but it is a tangible reminder to those of us who knew Nancee and Bill, of just how generous these good people have been to *Eureka* and her crew. Thank you for those wonderful memories.

SELECTIONS FROM THE MUSEUM STORE *The store specializes in railroad books for adults and children, Nevada history books, train video and audio recordings, toys, train models, hats and apparel, railroad pins and jewelry, train novelties and souvenirs, note cards, artwork and calendars. We encourage you to visit the store in person. For those of you who won't have the opportunity to visit soon, the merchandise selections below, along with many others, are available by mail-order. Proceeds from sales are used by the Nevada State Railroad Museum to fund a variety of museum projects and public interpretive programs.*

CALENDAR CALL: 2010 calendars are in stock now!

Carson City Community Calendar Item #100069. \$9.99.

From Nils Huxtable and Steamscenes:

Passing Trains Item #211018. \$12.95. NSRM is pictured in this calendar.

World of Steam Item #100299. \$12.95.

Seasons of Steam on Britain's Railways Item #100290. \$12.95.

Union Pacific Item #100296. \$12.95.

Southern Pacific Item #100291. \$12.95.

BNSF and its Heritage Item #100280. \$12.95.

We have several new books on regional and Nevada History.

Quest for Freedom (Delaney). Item #720002. \$21.95.

A new, in-depth study of the saga of the men and women impacted by the murderous 1871 Nevada State prison escape and the resulting gun battle at Convict Lake. 234 pages, Soft cover.

Gun Play at Convict Lake (Delaney) Item #720001. \$12.95.

This shorter version of the *Quest for Freedom* book focuses specifically on the gunfight at Convict Lake. 73 pages. Soft cover.

100 Yars in the Nevada Governor's Mansion (Harpster) Item #212501. \$39.95.

More than 200 pages of text and historic black-and-white and color photographs chronicle the 100 year history of the Governor's Mansion.

Virginia City and the Big Bonanza (James & James) Item #370510. \$21.99.

Arcadia. 126 pages and 200 B&W photographs. A concise, easy to read history of Nevada's historic Comstock Lode. Soft cover.

Bodie: 1859-1962 (Geissinger) Item #370514. \$21.99.

126 pages, 150 B&W photographs. In 1879, the mining town of Bodie was host to more than 10,000 people and was, for a short period of time, California's third largest city. Bodie is today known as the largest un-restored ghost town in the west. Soft cover.

Pre-publication orders are being taken now for:

California's Tidewater Short Lines by Norman Holmes. Item #807001. \$32.95.

This 128 page book will feature 199 photographs (29 in color) and will cover the Tidewater Southern, Stockton Terminal & Eastern, California Central Traction, Alameda Belt, State Belt Ry. of San Francisco, Oakland Terminal, Howard Terminal, and the Port of Oakland.

TO ORDER BY TELEPHONE OR MAIL

Please call 775-687-6953 (9:00am—4:00pm Friday through Monday) or write to: Nevada State Railroad Museum, 2180 South Carson Street, Carson City, NV 89701. Include your name, street address, city/state/zip code, and your daytime telephone number. Members of the Friends of NSRM are entitled to a 15-percent discount off all merchandise. Please add \$5.00 for shipping charges. If paying by either Visa or MasterCard, include your credit card number and expiration date.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Monday Night Programs

- October 12 *Ghost Towns and Railroads of Lyon, Mineral, Esmeralda
and Northern Nye Counties* By Stanley W. Paher
- November 9 *The Western Pacific Centennial: 1909—2009*
By Norman Holmes
- December 14 *To Be Announced*

Evening programs are held in the Museum's Interpretive Center on the second Monday of each month, except July and August. Programs begin promptly at 7:00 pm. Regular Museum admission applies.