



OFF THE BUCKET LIST: RECOLLECTIONS OF A ROOKIE RAILCAR RESTORER

BY PETER SANDER
with photos by the author

It's a great feeling to finally cross something off your bucket list. Most bucket list entries are truly one-timers: You do the experience, check it off, and move on to the next one. Sometimes, however, a bucket list challenge can open a whole new world of interest, dedication, loyalty, and commitment.

beautiful Colorado or New Mexico working in the shadow of an operating steam-powered narrow gauge along with others of like mind and interest? I'd like to do that, but could it work for me? It would take some doing; get the time away from work, time away from family along with the financial resources to make something like that happen. It would be at least a nine-day time commitment as well as a financial commitment. Still, when I finally entered semi-retirement with no kids at home and enough of a nest egg to afford a couple of weeks on the road, the die was cast: Yes. I'll do this.

You probably know where I'm headed with this. Since you're reading *C&TS Dispatch*, the magazine of the Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec, you know that the Friends manages some of the most important and in-depth railroad restoration efforts on the planet.

Still, I hesitated. What do I know about rebuilding rail cars or laying track? Can I make things out of iron and steel? Hardly. I've only welded twice in my life to make two small centerpieces for my dining room table. Working in 1:87 scale is about as close as I've come to any real railroad work, perhaps qualifying me in some sense to know what to do, but hardly to know how to do it, especially in 1:1 scale. I had a railroad vocabulary, but I didn't have railroad skills. Watching baseball doesn't enable a fan to play the game; why would it be any different for someone who's spent lots of time watching trains?

Like many of you, I am a longtime train buff. When I was two, my dad, a commercial artist, brought home a popular Kenner "Girder and Panel Building Set" kit, complete with a section of HO scale track and a train, to build for boxtop photo shoots of the kit. I couldn't take my eyes off the HO gauge cars. One, an orange tank car, came to bed with me repeatedly. Don't ask me how I remember that.

Still, I decided that 2019 was the year. Come hell or high altitude, I was going to join a C&TS volunteer session. Perhaps I couldn't do much more than plant petunias around the Antonito depot, but by golly, I was going to do something.

Fast forwarding through the years, I have watched and ridden a lot of trains. In 1964, at age eight, I was introduced to the Durango & Silverton, a long way from my Cincinnati hometown. I love steam, I love the narrow gauge, and I love Colorado. So naturally when the Cumbres & Toltec came to life, I was elated. But it took a move to California, a job, paid vacation, and time to finally ride the C&TS—which I have now done some eight or nine times since the mid-1980s.



At the beginning of Session G, Rotary OY awaits an eager group of volunteers.

Along the way I became aware of the Friends. I signed up and started faithfully sending dues each year as a gesture of support for the organization. With that came the *C&TS Dispatch*, filled with enticing pictures of the Work Sessions.

WHO, ME? REBUILD RAILROAD CARS?

But wait. Work on a real railroad? Spending a week in

My anxiety on the subject of skills, and "would I fit in" rose substantially when I read the *Form R-5 Skill Checklist* on the signup site. On the list: "mechanical maintenance skills" including Railroad Car Trucks, Bearings, Journal Boxes, Air Lines, Wheels and Axles and Brake Systems. Metal work skills, including Drawing, Fabrication, Sheet Metal, Arc Welding, MIG Welding, Gas Welding, Milling, Lathe, and Casting. Sigh. I didn't have experience with any of these. I don't know how to rebuild air brake systems and have no metal work skills. Fortunately, I do possess moderate woodworking skills from years of restoring my house—table saws, jointers, planers, bandsaws and cabinetry are familiar territory—and wood is abundant in most rail cars of this era. And like most folks, I can paint and garden. I

can even mow lawns.

But there was another complication. Four years ago, I was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. Now, it isn't too bad, and is mostly controllable by medication, but it's a bit unpredictable and can severely cut into my stamina, especially if standing for long periods of time. I felt it necessary to disclose this and so wrote a cover letter with my application materials.

I took my anxieties right into the project selection process. The "FIDO" database (Friends Integrated Data Online, a system no doubt conceived by a dog owner) does a beautiful job of laying out all the projects and describing the steps and skills required. As a first choice I picked a flatcar rebuild project: flat cars are pretty simple, right? As a second choice I picked a stock car where my woodworking skills might come in handy; and third, an archiving project. As a professional writer; I thought my skills might work there.

But all things considered, I was perfectly prepared to plant petunias; I just wanted to be there for the experience regardless of the work I did.

And to my surprise, I received an e-mail from John Engs, Project Committee Chair and Session Leader, stating that I was assigned to the Rotary Snowplow OY restoration. Now, I didn't even think to bid for that sexy-but-complex piece of equipment. I thought all the other experienced, skilled guys would jump all over that one!

GETTING STARTED

Fast forward to September 22, 2019, the Sunday afternoon before Work Session G in Antonito, Colorado. I arrived on time and on schedule, none the worse for the wear, and ready to go. That afternoon I walked into the Car Shop. I was greeted by Mary Jane Smith and Patty Hanscom, two of the ladies who would be taking care of sign-in, meals, snacks and logistics. They were a hoot! Immediately Mary Jane set out to sell me a C&TS wall calendar for the special volunteer price of \$15. I don't usually buy wall calendars; what little need I have is usually met by the freebie I get every year from my insurance agent. However, with the eyes of dozens of seasoned railroaders upon me, not to mention the hopeful gaze of Mary Jane, how could I say no? So, I got \$15 out of my pocket, took the calendar, signed in, got my name badge, shook a few hands, learned a few names—promptly forgetting them all—and started to look around the shop a little. The Antonito Car Repair Facility is pretty amazing for those of you who haven't seen it. And it's pretty amazing for those of you who have.

I soon shook hands with John Engs whom I corresponded with prior to arrival. He personally welcomed me to the team. He pulled me aside to ask me about my

Parkinson's and assured me that if I needed to take breaks, that would not be a problem. We chatted for a bit about my work experiences and some of the Session G projects. I also spoke with a few more folks, then walked up to the nearby Narrow Gauge Inn motel that, for good reason, is known to locals as the Cinder Block Palace.

That night I went to dinner at the Dos Hermanas Mexican and American Steakhouse, one of the two dinner houses in Antonito. Now, when a group of thirty volunteers converges in a small town like Antonito, and there are only

two restaurants, your odds of meeting others on your team are pretty high. Immediately, Dan Pyzel and Ken Halterman saw my familiar face and asked me to sit down at their table. Ironically, Dan was the project leader on the stock car project I had originally signed up for.

It was obvious they had done many work sessions together and were talking shop in some detail that I couldn't really follow. They were very friendly, but I didn't know quite where to start a conversation. I wanted to ask Dan how he knew in advance what to do on these

projects and plan time and material resources, a challenging task as there is no Home Depot in Antonito. If there was, it wouldn't sell much in the way of railroad-car sized materials. I didn't feel like making them backtrack on their conversation to accommodate the newbie, so I just listened politely and contentedly.

Next morning at 7:30 sharp I reported to the Car Shop.

Almost immediately, John Engs took me under his wing and showed me around the shop and some of the projects, including an exquisitely-milled and machined reproduction of a passenger car truck and wheelset, complete with vintage square-head black iron bolts. He explained that restoration standards mandated the use of these special bolts "anywhere where you can see them." He then showed me the tool room where the square-head black iron bolts, and everything else, was stored.

He introduced me to Marshall Smith, Mary Jane's husband and the king of the tool room, who explained how to check out tools and equipment. Throughout the session I came to enjoy and benefit from Marshall's suggestions, common sense and sense of humor; he always helped me find the right tool, screw or "what not," with plenty of good advice on solving tricky problems. It's hard to imagine how these volunteer sessions would work without the kind help and humor of Marshall and Mary Jane. Husband-and-wife teams like Marshall and Mary Jane are encouraged and work well in the sessions. There are a number of family teams—husband and wife, father and son, mother and daughter, granddad and grandkids—throughout each season of Friends' Work Sessions.



Keith Anderson taps roof boards into place.

As we spoke, most of the other volunteers were in conversation with each other, mainly about past projects. Everyone knew everyone else and had plenty to talk about.

At about 8:30, John called the session to order and promptly introduced me as the only newbie in the session! Wow, all of these folks had done this before? The pressure was on! I was sure I would make a fool of myself for not having real railroad experience.

After a short safety pitch by John Engs, the Site Leader and Safety Coordinator of the Antonito crews and an ex-fire chief, we divvied up into teams and got to work.

OY, WHAT A MACHINE!

Sitting just outside the Antonito Car Shop was the rather larger-than-life Rotary Snowplow OY. Now I had seen pictures of the OY, but I was struck by just how big this 95-year-old machine really was. The tarp covering the roof would have covered a passenger liner, so big that it took several people to get it off.

Don Atkinson, the OY project lead, gave us a little history of the restoration to date and described some of the tasks to be performed during the coming week. The carbody and tender needed to be sanded and prepped for paint, as well as the rotary plow mechanism itself, which had to be stripped of its gray paint with a needle gun. And the carbody roof had to be replaced. Three of us, Keith Anderson, Bryce Templeton and I were assigned to the roof. Minnesota, Texas, and California: a nice geographic mix.

In previous sessions, a team had removed the old roof and replaced some of the gently-curved supporting joists. Our job was to take new 1x6 tongue-and-groove material, specially milled for this project at a facility up in La Jara, Colorado, cut it to length, fit it together and nail it down,



Bryce Templeton, Don Atkinson, and Keith Anderson work on the roof from the scissor lift.

Bryce on the ground cutting pieces to order. Strapped in with a safety line, Keith spent most of his time up top, while I worked a little lower standing on the boiler, sometimes in fairly awkward positions, measuring boards and tapping them into place for Keith to drive home with a three-inch framing nailer.

“Parkinson’s?” What Parkinson’s? I climbed like a kid on that boiler. It was hard work, but it was fun. It might even be a good therapy.



View from the roof: The complexity of framing and building around the steam dome and air pump is evident.

just like installing a floor.

Easy, right? Well, not so fast. Unlike installing your living room floor, there is a steam boiler inside that carbody, and any roof structure over a steam boiler is going to have plenty of openings for a smokestack, steam dome, dynamo, air pump, safety valves, ventilation hatches, and OY was no exception. Each of these openings required building a frame to support board ends, and to cut the boards to fit, often for rounded openings.

We got to work with Keith and me up on the roof and

A DAILY ROUTINE

Every day of the Work Session we gathered at 7:30, started at 8:00, took a break at 10:00, first to rubberneck the departure of westbound Chama train—the roof of the OY afforded an excellent view—then to a regular break. The break snacks, chips, fruit, drinks and coffee were all provided by Patty and Mary Jane. Well-supplied with snacks and sustenance, the breaks were a good way to get out of the ever-persistent high desert sun on the plow’s roof. Of course, we could get out of the sun anytime we wanted to. “Management” was very accommodating to that sort of thing. But we were also anxious to “get ‘er done!”

Lunch was at noon, and again Mary Jane and Patty had put out quite a spread. Every day included a hot lunch of enchiladas or similar concoctions, many of which were prepared all morning in a crock pot, sandwiches,

snacks, cookies, desserts and a vast assortment of beverages.

Back on the rotary after lunch, the framing, cutting, laying 1x6 tongue-and-groove continued; no problem for my woodworking skillset. Others who had never used a table saw or a nail gun soon learned how. Heck, all I really had to know was how to use a tape measure! If there was anything I or anyone else was uncomfortable doing, or if anyone needed a short course on using a tool, finding the right screw or some such, Marshall or Don or anyone else working in the session was glad to help.



Session G Rotary Crew (L to R): Keith Anderson, Peter Sander, Bryce Templeton, Greg Coit, Bill James, Craig McMullen and Don Atkinson

Each of the five days of the Work Session was pretty much of a carbon copy of the previous: start at 8:00, work 'til break, watch the 10:00 train depart and get some snacks and rehydration, lunch at noon, break at 2:00, done at 5:00, motel, shower, dinner in town, early to bed. There really was nothing to do after dinner; most everyone was too pooped to socialize and the TV at the Narrow Gauge Inn had only 15 channels. I had brought a good book, plus it was always nice to walk around the yard at night or early in the morning, watching tomorrow's locomotive switch and simmer.

FINISHING UP

By Friday, the roof was taking shape, and we were all nearly done with our respective Antonito projects. We knocked off at about four that afternoon, rested, and said our farewells to our teammates. We were all tired, sun-baked, and oxygen-deprived by Antonito's 7,900-foot elevation, but like a successful summiting of a mountain, it was a contented tired, joined by a sense of accomplishment and a job well done. I was scheduled to ride the Chama train Sunday, and because there wasn't much else to do so on Saturday, a handful of us stayed to help with "must do" wrap-up projects, such as helping Mary Jane and Patty clean out the refrigerators for the winter and putting a primer coat on the new roof. Don Atkinson gave me moral support as he checked off a long list of little things to get OY ready to move and paint.

I was no longer the newbie. I was part of a bigger thing, a large, well-organized and hard-working group of nice folks with varied skills and common interests. Great projects, great planning, great place, great food, great people, great leadership. And a great week that got a lot done!

Like a proud papa, I look forward to seeing the reborn OY clear Cumbres on February 29th and March 1st, 2020. And I look forward to soon joining another Friends project.

When I do, I'll probably buy another calendar.



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Original 483 Builder's Plate Donated to the Friends!

The original Baldwin Locomotive Works Builder's Plate for D&RGW Locomotive 483 was donated to the Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec by Ruth Timberlake, widow of the late John "Jack" E. Timberlake III.

Jack's love for trains led to his railroad career working for the Pennsylvania, New York Central and the Denver and Rio Grande. Beginning as a switchman, moving on to trainmaster, consultant, and various management positions, Jack ended his successful career as the Director of Unit Train Operations.

Upon his passing in November, Ruth Timberlake approached Dave Lippincott, President of the Pikes Peak Trolley Museum, the location of the Friends' Colorado Springs shop, to see if they were interested in receiving the plate as one of Jack's many items that he was donating to the Museum. Knowing that the Friends were restoring Locomotive 483 in Chama and recognizing the importance and value of the builder's plate, Lippincott referred Ruth to Craig McMullen



and John Eng. In an informal ceremony at the Trolley Museum, Craig McMullen officially received the donation from Ruth Timberlake.

The Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec thank Ruth for her generosity.