

If you rebuild it, they will come

Volunteers with the 557 Restoration Co. still "think they can"

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Submitted by Erin Shaver | 1 comment

WASILLA, AK - Every boy is interested in trains, quips Jerry Cunnington, volunteer for the Engine No. 557 Restoration Company, "I'm out here playing with a toy train. This one just happens to be on a one-to-one scale."

At the old Kenai Supply building just off the railroad tracks in Wasilla, volunteers are there most days, cleaning, building, learning and storytelling their way through the restoration of Alaska's last steam locomotive.

If there were a proverbial hump, halfway, or middle point in restoring an old steam engine, the 557 Restoration Company is at that juncture. But don't tell them that. They are just a bunch of old boys having a little fun.

"Most of the people I see are regular. Some of them come in almost every day," said Doug VanWingerden, retired machinist and regular volunteer. "It's amazing. Some have a real affinity to railroads, they build models, and it's a natural fit. Others just like to come down here and be part of something."

It's been more than two years since the 557 Restoration Company began the formidable task of deconstructing and reconstructing a 70-year-old steam engine. And two summers from now, they hope to see it running passenger service on the Alaska Railroad once more.

Volunteers have logged a massive 10,000 hours in the first two years of the project.

Many are retired. Most keep regular hours. Some arrive as early as 7:30 a.m. and clock a full day.

"When I walk in here in the morning by myself and I just look at the project, it could become very overpowering," says Pat Durand, volunteer and president of the 557

Restoration Company. "But the first volunteer who walks through the door changes the whole dynamic. I am now sharing the opportunity to make progress, and that gives me direction."

When George Fellers first read about the 557 restoration last fall, he stopped by to check it out on a Thursday and, by Friday, had basically started working. He has been coming in regularly ever since.

As a retired boiler technician in the U.S. Navy, he had some proficiency when it came to dealing with steam.

"I really like the other guys here, teaching them things," said Feller, hands too dirty to shake from hours spent scraping the tender's trucks with a needle gun. "There's also a lot I did not know. It's all ongoing knowledge; gotta learn something new every day."

The 557 was the last steam engine to run on the Alaska Railroad, taking its final trip in 1962 before resting at a museum in Moses Lake for the past several decades. It returned to Alaska in 2012 and restoring it has been every bit as complicated as it might seem. There were no plans or directions. Volunteers had to break down the engine entirely and clean off 70 years worth of soot and grime on nearly every piece before they could really even begin.

"It had been operated without much maintenance. You wouldn't imagine how much silt was still on there from when they drove it into the overflow of the Nenana River over 50 years ago," says Jim Keene, a retired pharmacist. He adds with a chuckle: "I don't have a lot of skills in terms of welding or machining, so I typically do a lot of cleaning."

Volunteers rattle off stories of dirt and grime like a rite of passage, noting with reverence the days the soot and dust were so bad you could only see the whites of their eyes. And they laugh about taking out all those stay bolts, the bolts that hold the inner and outer firebox together, 1,042 in total that had to come out of the boiler.

Tasks have ranged from tracking original manufacturer's plans from museums all over the world to noting the exact ultrasound measurements of steel thickness on thousands of spots on the boiler. The engine was manufactured in a war era, when corners were cut to save metal, and now it's getting its much-needed modern upgrades.

"We had some naysayers, they said, why in the world did you tear it down that far?" Durand recalled. "Seventy years of abuse and misuse. Things rotted away; lots of little things. We had to."

The volunteer who has given perhaps the most of all, Durand, is the exact same age as the engine.

His commitment to the project is so steadfast he usually works seven days a week, cultivating donors, managing volunteers, promoting and networking, and doing manual

labor, too (during our interview he popped out to pick up a propane tank for a forklift that ran out of juice). His dedication is firm, albeit droll at times, even jibing, after I proposed writing a profile about him, "Profile? Does that mean I have to turn sideways? I'll crawl into a hot firebox if it will further the cause."

The ardor of the all-volunteer staff is a testament to both the cause and his leadership skills.

Volunteer Ken Elmore, who has worked on several nostalgic engine restorations in Portland, has been coming in two days a week since the beginning to offer his experience in both restorations and industrial electrics.

"I knew Pat through model railroading and he is a very astute historian for the Alaska Railroad," Elmore said. "I think he's a pretty good leader to get people motivated, give job assignments, and just gets things done."

Durand, for his part, relies in turn on the technical skills and steam experience of the 557 chief mechanical officer Jeff DeBroeck. While holding a full-time job in the Alaska Railroad shop force, DeBroeck still finds time to volunteer and direct the scope of work on 557. The company also has hired Robert Franzen, president of Steam Services of America, to meet the exacting requirements of the Federal Railroad Administration in completing the task. In addition to the 22 regular volunteers on the mechanical side, the 557 team also features volunteer secretary/treasurer Dick Morris and grant writer Maria Keefer. And yes, there are a few ladies who get filthy in the shop on a regular basis.

Next on the horizon for these volunteers? In the immediate, it's crunch time on trying to get a new firebox in before winter hits. In the long run, it's figuring out the route details with the Alaska Railroad. On the table is also becoming a 501c3 nonprofit, right now 557 uses the Alaska Community Foundation as a fiscal sponsor.

Fundraising is always ongoing and definitely the hardest part, Durand said, although in-kind business donations and grants have been numerous and appreciated. The Rasmuson Foundation kicked things off with a \$350,000 matching grant, and the Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm Heritage Area, National Railway Historical Society and Atwood Foundation have awarded grants.

And so long as those volunteers keep coming in, the dream of seeing a piece of Alaska's history come back to life endures.

"You get to the point in life where you'd like to have done something that's permanent, and this has the chance at doing that," said volunteer Lynn Willis, retired from FedEx, who has been with the project since day 1. "We're leaving a bit of a legacy, to have touched something important. And, it's a nice way to spend time."

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