

enchantment

The Voice of New Mexico's Rural Electric Cooperatives

FRIENDS
WORKIN'
ON THE
RAILROAD





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By Chris James

In bygone days, many a youngster had dreams of railroading. The steam, the whistles, the locomotives, the caboose at the end of every train, all had an allure that was hard to resist.

Fast-forward a century: today's trains are diesel-powered and generally lack the romance of the early days. In Chama, New Mexico and Antonito, Colorado, however, you can still step back in time, as they are the southern and northern ends of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, the longest and highest narrow gauge steam railroad in the country. Not only can you ride the train in Chama and Antonito, you can also be workin' on the railroad by becoming a member of the Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad.

The Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad is the all-volunteer organization tasked with the resto-

ration, preservation and interpretation of the railroad's history. This year marks the 30th Anniversary of the Friends' dedication to keeping the Cumbres & Toltec a historically-accurate, mid-20th century operating railroad, a rolling railroad "museum" of the sights, sounds and smells of a Rocky Mountain narrow gauge railroad.

The railroad itself dates back to 1880 when the Denver & Rio Grande (D&RG) built the San Juan Extension west over Cumbres Pass to Durango and north to the mines in Silverton, Colorado. By 1968, commercial freight traffic had disappeared and the D&RG announced plans to scrap the line. Concerned with losing this historic

treasure, citizens and politicians lobbied the States of New Mexico and Colorado to purchase and preserve the Chama-Antonito portion of the railroad.

One of the proponents for the states' acquisition of the railroad was Carl M. Turner, the first and longest-serving executive manager of the New Mexico Rural Electric Cooperative Association. In 1970, with the assistance of Turner and others, New Mexico and Colorado officials created the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, not only to preserve a piece of the Denver & Rio Grande, but to also bring economic opportunities to this rural corner of New Mexico and Colorado.

Along with the right-of-way over 10,022-foot Cumbres Pass, Turner helped C&TS acquire the steam locomotives, antique rolling stock and a number of historic, but deteriorating, structures from the D&RG that would contribute to a functioning tourist operation.

In the beginning, the C&TS had limited resources for restoration. Despite “saving” the railroad itself, it could not save the railroad cars and buildings from the ravages of the harsh Rocky Mountain climate. In 1981, Bill Lock, an Albuquerque attorney, became concerned about the condition of the railroad’s historic equipment. He and friends began traveling to Chama, volunteering their time to paint some of the rolling stock. Lock’s informal volunteer activities grew as more individuals joined to help. In the spring of 1988, Lock established the all-volunteer Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, dedicated to the preservation of the Cumbres & Toltec’s

annually.” That’s an equivalent to the usage of nearly 75 homes. In and around the Chama yard, the co-op supplies the power that makes much of the Friends’ restoration work possible.

You don’t need to be a skilled craftsperson to be a Friends’ volunteer; all you need is enthusiasm and a love of railroading. While many members are retired or self-employed, others have the summer off or use their vacation time to volunteer. A number of Friends volunteers have professional backgrounds in construction or other trades, but most are not highly skilled laborers. Folks with all levels of carpentry, painting, photography, and general labor skills are welcome. Some prefer the “clean” work selling Friends merchandise or preparing food. There is something for everyone and the easiest projects are the most important, such as stenciling historic lettering onto restored freight cars. The camaraderie is as rewarding as the work at hand.

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rare and valuable inventory. The Friends of the C&TS doesn’t run or maintain the trains; skilled professional railroaders do those tasks. The Friends’ role is the preservation of this unique “living museum.”


What began with several enthusiasts with hammers and paint brushes has grown, 30 years later, into an organization with 2,400 members worldwide, many of whom come to Antonito and Chama every summer for one or more of the Friends’ five-day restoration sessions. In 2017, the Friends’ volunteers provided 22,480 hours of time on over 50 preservation projects of cars, buildings, signage, and interpretive materials, all in the service of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad.

While the Friends’ projects help the railroad, the railroad in turn improves the economic health of Chama and Antonito. Ben Leyba, executive vice president of Chama-based Northern Río Arriba Electric Cooperative, says, “The C&TS is the success it is today because of Carl Turner. The railroad’s visitors and the Friends of the C&TS fill our shops, restaurants and lodging to capacity every summer. The railroad is Chama’s largest employer and is a tremendous asset to the town and Northern Río Arriba County.” Victoria Gonzales, Leyba’s administrative assistant, who also works as a C&TS ticket agent each summer, adds, “The railroads’ shops and office use an average of nearly 15,000 Kwh of co-op electricity

Looking back over the last 30 years, the Friends’ volunteers have made contributions unheard of on most historic tourist railroads. They are the stewards and curators of a piece of history named “Best Scenic Train Ride in America” by *USA Today*, and were instrumental in getting the C&TS designated as a National Historic Landmark and a State Registered Historic Site.

In 2017, the railroad carried nearly 39,000 passengers. When you ride a Cumbres & Toltec train, you are traveling over a railroad that is frozen in time, thanks to the efforts of the Friends of the C&TS. Plus, there is a good chance that one of those cars on your train is the Carl M. Turner Parlor Car. While Carl Turner passed away in 2008, his rolling legacy still highlights his role in the railroad’s place in history.

In this era of digital distractions, it is easy to forget that it was the railroads that built America, helped win two world wars and, in their heyday, carried millions of passengers. For 30 years, the Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec has helped maintain a piece of that history in a remote and beautiful corner of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, preserving the lonesome call of the steam whistle, a whistle that still suggests new frontiers and opportunities just over the horizon.

For more details about volunteering with Friends of the C&TS, visit www.cumbrestoltec.org 



Photos, page 14, clockwise: Fifteen-year-old Remington Templeton of Austin, Texas accompanies his parents to Chama each year to help with restoration projects. Friends maintain the landscaping in both Antonito and Chama as well as brush control along 64 miles of the railroad. Lettering is added to a string of narrow gauge oil tank cars near Chama’s iconic coaling tipple. **Photos, page 15, top to bottom:** Carl M. Turner and his wife, “PJ,” wave from inside the newly-dedicated Carl M. Turner Parlor Car in 2007. Turner passed away the following year but “his” car is included in most passenger trains. Friends perform important preservation work on buildings as well as railroad cars. The structures atop 10,022 foot Cumbres Pass have weathered well in the harsh climate for over years, thanks to Friends continued maintenance. Using salvaged parts, Friends members assemble a set of wheels for one of the oil tank cars currently under restoration. All photos courtesy of The Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad.