

SAGEBRUSH HEADLIGHT

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THE NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM
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THE LAST AMERICAN: A Personal Odyssey *Rocky Mountain Rigors*

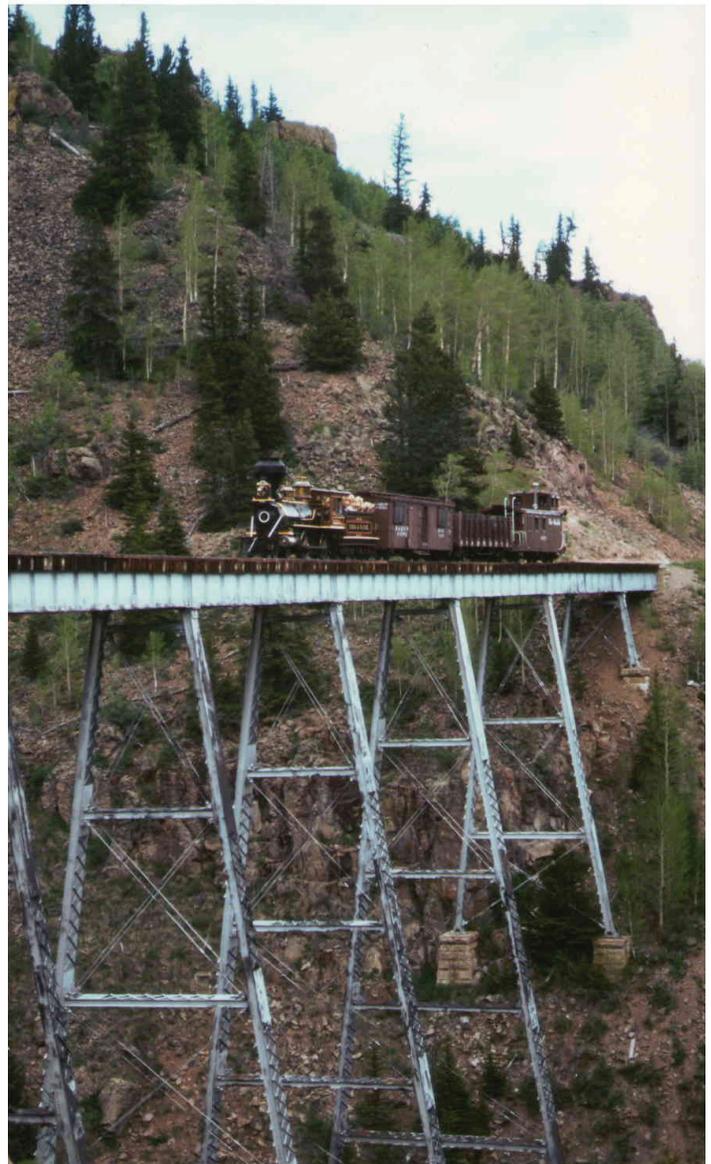
by Daniel Markoff *Photos: Author's Collection*

Running an 1870s wood-burning locomotive in the Rocky Mountain wilderness is the adventure of a lifetime. But the work and anxiety that goes with it has to be experienced to be appreciated.

The Cumbres & Toltec Railroad runs from Antonito, Colorado to Chama, New Mexico. It's 64 miles long; a trifling a trip on today's highways. If you obey the speed limits it takes a mere hour. If you're like George (lead foot) Sapp, it takes considerably less. But distance can be deceiving. Going 64 miles on foot takes several days. By wagon it's not much better. On the space shuttle of the 19th century, the steam locomotive, that time is shortened to one day. Yet what a day it can be.

There are logistics, for one thing: starting with the proper firewood. Assuming one has the right stuff—which we didn't at first—it has to be placed in advance throughout the route. We put ours at Antonito, Bighorn, Osier, and Chama; and carried with us our trusty chainsaw in case we misjudged our range or the quality of the wood.

Then there's the question of what tonnage could be pulled. *Eureka* wasn't built to be a mountain goat. She is a sprinter, meant to run fast over relatively easy grades. In today's lingo, she is in "high gear." If you've tried to pull something with your car in high gear over steep grades, you know what I mean. We did the math, but there's nothing like testing your calculations in the field. Fortunately we were basing our operations out of Antonito, Colorado. The ruling grade from there to Cumbres Pass was 1.42 percent. We started with a gondola and a caboose. From Cumbres Pass to Chama was another tale. The grade is 4 percent for 15 miles. Not only would our brakes going downgrade be a vital concern, so would the climb back to Cumbres.



Furthermore, Antonito is not the hotel-and-restaurant capitol of the world. At the time, there was one motel and one café/saloon. With our long hours, getting something to eat or a comfortable place to sleep was a problem. My “home” was the caboose. Staying with me were Barry Simcoe and Ron Allen. Our sleeping bags were thrown out on the bench seats, and our rations often consisted of either potato chips or stale popcorn from the saloon. Lighting consisted of oil lamps in the caboose. Ah, what luxury.

We wanted our trips filmed for posterity. To find someone suitable, C&TS superintendent Earl Knoob and I sent out a request for proposals. We got some interesting responses. One guy, who shall be nameless, wanted *exclusive* rights to film the entire trip. No one else could take photos of any sort—video or still. I asked if that meant I couldn’t take a picture of my own locomotive. He said it meant just that. His proposal went to the circular file. But like a bad penny, he would surface again.

We settled on David Bowyer, who has produced interesting and different videos of railroads and other subjects. David, a Hollywood cameraman who couldn’t stand the rat race, moved to Colorado to do productions in God’s country.

Fuel placed, tonnage calculated, accommodations figured out, crew assigned, and video arrangements set, all we needed was to get going. My last segment in this series described one of our first trips and the unexpected things that happened—lousy fuel, the use of sagebrush, night running, a cow-pie fire in the middle of the night, and a very late arrival in Antonito: enough for anybody. But that was only one day and night. There’s more.

The passengers who came to C&TS to share in *Eureka’s* operation were eager to get started. There were a lot more people than *Eureka’s* train could hold. Earl put together a chase train pulled by the 463 to accommodate them.

One day, before we left Antonito, the video guy who wanted the exclusive right to film us asked Earl if he could take his ATVs and girlfriend out on the line to film us. Earl couldn’t very well say no. Since the only way out to some of the locations was to follow the railroad, Earl handed him a timetable and said pay attention to it, listen and watch for trains, and keep out of their way. This eager videographer also had a radio. There should have been no problem.

An hour or so later Earl and I were in *Eureka’s* cab when the engineer of a regular train radioed that he had almost hit an ATV! Guess who. Hopping mad,

Earl asked if anyone had been hurt. The reply was no. The ATV wasn’t scratched either, but the incident scared hell out of the engineer. Clearly this videographer didn’t pay much attention to anything.

It was time to start. We loaded passengers and headed through the sagebrush out of Antonito. We made run-bys for the passengers, everyone was having a wonderful time, and David Bowyer got some fantastic footage of *Eureka* running in country that looks a lot like central Nevada.

We climbed into the mountains. At Big Horn siding and wye we took on wood. Our previous problems convinced us to take good, dry timber with us whenever we saw it. Out came the chainsaw to cut up a dead tree. The passengers were amused that we were living off the land, gathering fuel along the railroad. *Eureka* was running on nature’s bounty.

Again we saw our intrepid ATV video guy. He had enough camera gear set up to satisfy Steven Spielberg. There we were in pristine wilderness, thinking we were free of gasoline-belching engines and massive electronics, and being followed by what we had tried to escape.

We pressed on, eventually turning our train at Osier. We were actually one time. As we headed back to Antonito, late afternoon turned to sunset. *Eureka* was charging through the sagebrush with her shadow racing alongside. It was the 1880s on the Denver & Rio Grande. Magically, we were alone in the desert with the charms and thrill of this trip in time. In the cab we commented to each other how impressive the feeling of the past was. It was a time to be savored like fine brandy.

In the middle of our euphoria something on the eastern horizon caught our eyes: a flash of light from somewhere—maybe just a piece of discarded metal or glass. It flashed again, bigger and brighter. Then we saw more than one flash, and the flashes were bouncing! We strained our vision until it became clear. Two ATVs were coming our way, headlights on and raising a cloud of dust. They raced toward us at full speed and in no time were alongside *Eureka*, chasing our train, video cameras in hand, and making the obnoxious undulating roar that can only an internal-combustion engine constantly changing RPMs can make.

We yelled for them to go away, but to no avail. We were followed for miles, with no consideration given for those who were riding with us and who paid good money for the privilege. Something had to be done, but what?

Back in Antonito, David Bowyer was filming for us had his equipment set up to video our arrival. He had witnessed the ATV couple, and was not happy. They were interfering with his efforts, too. As we got near the loop to turn, The ATV couple set up their cameras right in front of David. That did it. The last anyone saw, David was chasing after the ATVs—and not to invite them to cocktails.

The next day we were off again, except this time we would be running all the way through to Chama, New Mexico. Up to then the farthest we had gone was the mid-point at Osier. Now it was the full run. *Eureka* was ready. We got our train together, loaded passengers, and were off. We put the miles behind

forward, George yelled, “There’s a camera in the track!” Before I could do anything about it, I heard a loud CRUNCH from beneath the locomotive. Simultaneously I saw David’s face. He had the most depressed look I have ever seen on a human being. I had just crushed the camera that contained all his hard work. Boy, did I feel bad! But, there was nothing I could do about it. If I had known the camera was there would not have run over it: especially not HIS camera. Fortunately, David had a spare camera. He also managed to recover the footage from the one *Eureka* crushed.

The trip continued, passing through the most spectacular mountain country imaginable. Unlike



us, dashing through the desert, climbing the mountains, doing run-bys for the passengers. When we reached Sublette, a section-house area for the railroad and a place we would take on water, I left the cab to get a drink myself from a nearby spring. I was bone dry from all the work.

George Sapp was firing this leg. He signaled to me he was ready to depart. I noticed there were a few people standing around, one of whom was David Bowyer. Earl Knoob gave me the highball, and I eased open *Eureka's* throttle. As we started to roll

the Durango & Silverton, which runs mostly in a canyon, the C&TS runs on top of ridges and you look down on the world. The train passes through huge meadows, over pristine crystal rivers, and through dense alpine forests; all the while making its way to Cumbres Pass, 10,015 feet in elevation. From Osier to Cumbres Pass there are no roads, so the only people that saw our passage through this wilderness were those on the train. Nevertheless, the word was out that *Eureka* was heading to Cumbres Pass. As we neared Los Pinos meadows not far from Cumbres, I could see cars and people

lining the highway. I wondered why they all were there. As we got closer, I could see that they had cameras and were waving. We made the big turn through Los Pinos headed back into isolation until we reached Cumbress Pass. As we neared Cumbres, I couldn't believe my eyes. There were hundreds of people, all over the roadway in every direction, to watch our arrival at this legendary railroad location. It was an exhilarating experience I'll never forget.

After taking on water it was time to get down to Chama on the 4-percent grade. It's hard to describe what it's like to look down a 4-percent grade from a level spot. It's akin to standing next to a canyon and peering over the side. It looks very steep!

At this point, it was time to rotate the crew. Earl Knoob took *Eureka's* throttle. It was getting toward evening so I lit the headlamp. As we prepared to depart Cumbres, and looking over the track that dropped down in front of us, Earl said to me, "Pray to the air brake gods!" Fortunately, we had several cars behind *Eureka*, and therefore lots of brakes, but there were still 15 miles of that grade. It would be a long trip down!

As we descended it grew dark. The mountains are full of bears, elk, deer and cattle. We had to keep a sharp eye out for them so we would injure neither the locomotive nor the animals. The yellow glow of the oil headlamp was all we had to light our way. After several miles, it was pitch-black except for the lamp. It was hard to see anything. As we rounded one turn, suddenly we were blinded, not by the night, but by many bright lights in our field of view. We shouted to turn them off, but no one cared. The people were parked on a grade crossing with all their lights shining on *Eureka* just to get a picture of it coming down the mountain at night. Earl and I were very upset as these people were more concerned with getting a picture than with the safety of the train. Most photographers are mindful of safety, but on this occasion I think they were simply caught up with the historic moment. When they realized the problem they were causing they became very apologetic.

We crept on down the mountain. A few miles from Chama, we noticed something very large looming in front of us in the dark. We crept on at a slow speed carefully watching the object, which as it came within range of the headlamp turned out to be a bull Elk standing in the middle of the railroad. We couldn't believe what we saw, and he couldn't believe what he saw! As we brought the train to a halt, this elk 'decided it was best to jump aside.

By-and-by we arrived in Chama, greeted by many people again. We serviced the locomotive and stored her in the engine house, which people visited throughout the night. The next day we would climb the mountain.

Morning came. We got the locomotive and coupled a gondola and caboose to *Eureka*. We thought that would be about all she could pull up the grade. When we came to the 4-percent grade the engine began pulling very hard. The nose raised up as we entered the grade, and reminded me of takeoff rotation in an airplane. As we climbed I had the throttle wide open. The Johnson bar was down in the forward corner. I was giving the engine all she had, but it wasn't enough. Before long, she stalled only a couple miles into the grade.

We then backed down to Chama, and dropped the gondola, packed everyone into the caboose and tried again. This time we didn't stall, but the little engine was down on her knees crawling up the mountain. At one point we had to stop to build steam. The highway was just above the railroad and was again lined with cars and people to watch us. After building steam we hand sanded the track ahead and then tried to get going. *Eureka* gave it her all, and very slowly her drivers began to turn. A mighty cheer went up from all the spectators lining the highway, as we made our way upgrade to Cumbres Pass. Eventually, we made it. It was just about the most thrilling experience imaginable. At Cumbres, we picked up a 5 car freight consist for the trip back to Antonito.

The trip back to Antonito was without any problems. *Eureka* handled her train beautifully. As we neared Osier, we had to cross a very high bridge. As we neared the high bridge we saw our ATV "friends" with their cameras set up on the far side. *Eureka* rolled across the bridge and entered a slight curve. I looked back to check the train, and noticed one of the boxcar doors open. The look on the faces of the ATV couple was shock as that car passed them. I wondered what happened. Only later did I learn that someone else on the train also saw them, and decided to give the ATV couple a full-frame "moon" at Osier. Somehow, it seemed a fitting "end" to their video.

We made it back to Antonito. We were tired, but both *Eureka* and all our crew and passengers were safe and sound. The next day, it was time to get ready to bring *Eureka* back home to Nevada. We had the adventures of a lifetime, and will never forget our Rocky Mountain High. on the Cumbres & Toltec.

**NEVADA STATE
RAILROADMUSEUM**

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museums.nevadaculture.org

Open 8:30 to 4:30 Fridays through Mondays except Dec. 25 and Jan. 1
Admission: \$5. Children under 18 and members of the Friends of the Nevada State Railroad Museum are admitted FREE



The museum is an agency of the
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Terms of office end in December of year listed.

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Submissions for the Winter Sagebrush Headlight must arrive at the editor's desk by Monday, December 6, 2010.

NEVADA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM

McKEEN CAR RIDES Saturday, Oct. 30

departing from Wabuska Depot, 10 AM till 4 PM

McKeen Car Fares: \$10; Children 11 and younger \$5.

FNSRM Members HALF PRICE with Membership Card.

STEAM-UPS

Thanksgiving Weeekend, Friday/Saturday, Nov. 26 & 27

departing from Wabuska Depot, 10 AM till 4 PM

Steam Train Fares: \$5, Children 4-11 \$3.

Three and under FREE

FNSRM Members HALF PRICE with Membership Card.

Santa Train—Saturday/Sunday, Dec. 11 & 12

departing from Wabuska Depot, 10 AM till 4 PM, All Seats \$3.

Progress Report

New Permanent Exhibits at NSRM



Designer's rendering, view from north end of JIC looking south.

Final Exhibit Design after NSRM staff review has been accepted, approval of the design by the Nevada State Fire Marshall has been granted, and the application for permitting by the State Public Works Board (needed because the Jacobsen Interpretive Center is State-owned) has been submitted.

Production of exhibits and audiovisual media is about to start, and removal of existing exhibits allowed NSRM staff to paint the JIC interior. So that the building can be available to the public for Santa Train and the rest of the holiday season, exhibits will be installed after January 2, 2011.

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Spotlight on Patrick Mobley

Born and raised in Carson City, Patrick grew up around the Nevada State Railroad Museum: his parents are long-time Friends members. Both are teachers, and the family traveled every summer and visited all 50 states. A 2005 University of Nevada, Reno, graduate, Patrick followed in their footsteps. He teaches world and US history, and coaches speech and debate, at Carson High School. He obtained his Masters degree in 2009.

For four years Patrick has volunteered at NSRM, mostly to construct and operate the model railroad. Model railroading is a family hobby in which both his dad and his uncle, Paul Martinovich, participate. Each year Patrick has assisted with the Nevada Railroad History Symposium, serving as audiovisual technician in 2009 and 2010.

—Lara Mather



Please note:
NSRM Monday
Evening Programs
have been
discontinued.

