

Press Release

FROM: Santa Fe Southern Railway
DATE: 3/25/03

'Little Railroad That Could' Enters Second Decade

Here are some highlights from a typical week:

Monday 160 local school kids ride. Almost none of them have ever ridden on a train before. Amazingly, the same is true for the teachers and parents who are with them.

Tuesday 145 Federal judges, all dressed as Zorro, take the train to Lamy to have a barbecue in a large white tent, while listening to flamenco music. All of them stayed at local hotels and shopped here for three days.

Wednesday On the way back from Lamy, our engineer and brakeman spot an unconscious woman who had fallen off of her bike on the "Rail Trail." They call emergency services, and because the emergency vehicle cannot drive in to reach her, the train crew takes her on the train to the nearest point the emergency vehicle can access.

Thursday We pick up 5 boxcars full of beer in Lamy and deliver them to Premier Distributing. Each boxcar holds 60,000 cans of beer.

Friday Dozens of locals and visitors make new friends while watching the sunset on the Friday Evening High Desert Highball train.

Saturday A local wedding! The train picks up the entire reception party at La Choza and takes them on a wonderful and memorable ride, which bonds the two families during an experience none of them will ever forget.

Sunday 65 seniors from a local retirement residence ride the train after church. They talk nonstop about train experiences from their past.

Santa Fe Southern Railway marks its 10-year anniversary on March 12. The above represents an eventful, but not atypical, week in its history. What other business in Santa Fe can lay claim to such a wide range of experiences, much less business interests? Only the most recent chapter in a 122-year history, SFSR has been called everything from "quirky, but lovable" (a letter to the editor) "the little railroad that could" (a recent business column), to "that damn train" (a crewmember in a private moment). "Whether you love us or vilify us, you can't ignore us" grins Bob Sarr, part owner and general manager. "We're big, loud, stinky and colorful."

And full of contradictions. Sometimes criticized for its diesel smoke, Santa Fe Southern Railway's freight moving business is responsible for reducing the number of 18 wheel diesel trucks on New Mexico's highways (and Santa Fe's streets) by about 1700 per year. Health and environment-conscious mountain bikers ride down to Lamy on the hike-and-bike easement granted by SFSR to the City and County and take the train back. Bob Sarr and his staff see themselves as environmentalists who, while selling tickets for the excursion train, are preserving a corridor which will someday be used for rail commuting.

Passengers range from severely handicapped Challenge New Mexico patrons in wheelbeds on a field trip to well-to-do corporate officers enjoying a private charter excursion while at a business conference in town. The train is a sought-after canvas for murals and a graffiti magnet. It's a for-profit business, which still is not profitable and a benefactor to hundreds of non-profit fundraisers over the years. According to horticulturists, its right-of-way is home to an ungrazed "heritage" eco-system. It is also a favorite haven for the homeless.

Some Santa Feans just haven't quite known what to make of Santa Fe Southern Railway. One police officer at the scene of an early accident asked for the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) of the huge 1954 diesel electric engine for his accident report. When told that the only identifying number was the one foot high #92, he insisted that couldn't be right because his form had spaces for 17 digits.

If you consider only the federally-mandated train whistle, the range of comments fielded by railway staff is enough to cross your eyes: "The horn is too loud." "The horn is too soft." "The horn is non-existent." "I hate the horn." "I love the horn." "We bought our house so we could hear the train whistle." "We can't sleep at night because of your train whistle."

It's difficult enough to do business in Santa Fe, but the challenges facing management and staff at the railway could make a grown man cry. Grown men have cried. Vintage equipment is always breaking down. (A pair of wheels costs \$1,500, not installed. An engine wrench is as big as your leg.)

For about three years, SFSR withstood a campaign by two City Councilors to evict the rail line from the railyard. Now, with the passage of the Railyard Plan by the City Council, the railroad is assured of its historic home.

Parking for the railroad has been an ongoing challenge. When the Catellus Corp. was preparing to sell the railyard to the City, it granted a 'right of first refusal' to another business for the parking parcel that had served the depot since horse and buggy days. This business exercised its option and purchased the property, leaving the train depot without parking. The City refused to use its available power to protect the only reasonable parking for its historic depot. Despite being a tenant of the City, not the landowner, SFSR attempted to reacquire the parcel using its power as a public utility to initiate eminent domain litigation. The legal effort cost SFSR nearly \$200,000 and was unsuccessful. Santa Fe's working train station is now a virtual island without clear access or parking.

An Eldorado grass fire caused by the engine in 1997 resulted in claims against the railroad for replacing burned cholla cactus and juniper!

SFSR entertains enough governmental oversight to stress even the most hardy business folk. Four Federal Railroad Administration inspectors and two State of New Mexico inspectors check on different functions of the rail-line from 12 – 18 times per year. It is not unusual for the crew to hold a scheduled train until an inspector completes his surprise inspection.

A railroad attracts a great deal of attention. Six thousand school children ride each year, including many from out of state. Movie and TV commercial producers hire the train or lease the right-of-way as a set. (One recent gig was the feature film "All the Pretty Horses" during which the train was transformed into an early twentieth century Mexican steam train.)

Photographers and painters, shunning Santa Fe's stunning mountain vistas and picturesque architecture, wander one of the few railyards in the United States that allows visitors. Daily, staff members listen patiently while train lovers, affectionately dubbed "trainiacs," talk endlessly about the minutia of rail esoterica. ("Did you know that one of your engines produces 100 horsepower more than the other one because it was modified in the 60s?" "No I didn't, but did you know that for an extra \$50, you can ride in the engine cab with the crew?")

Never satisfied, Santa Fe Southern Railway employees have created a vast number of special and holiday trains. Santa Claus, St. Patrick's Day revelers, Hanukkah celebrants, Solstice worshipers, fireworks, clowns, and llamas have all figured in train rides over the last decade. Book signings, postage stamp cancellations and signings, and numerous special out-of-town guest trains have graced the platform over the years. This past summer, visitors could see "Tracker," the SFSR sponsored Painted Pony which eventually sold to a train-loving couple, netting \$9,600 for Warehouse 21, Santa Fe's Teen Art Center in the Railyard.

Even the famous railroad which preceded SFSR was fraught with contradictions. Known world-over as "the Santa Fe," the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway never actually ran its "main line" through Santa Fe. For many years Santa Fe had been the largest and most economically important city in the Southwest due to the Santa Fe Trail so it was logical that the AT&SF would consider the city as a major destination. However, by July 4, 1879 when the rails reached Las Vegas, NM, the railroad abandoned plans to go through Santa Fe due to the heavy grades in and out of the city. Instead, after clearing the grades of Glorieta Pass, the AT&SF established a station at Galisteo Junction, now called Lamy, and proceeded to Albuquerque.

Fearing that bypassing their city would mean an end to its prominence, mercantile leaders, along with Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy, floated a bond to build the 18.1 mile branch line into Santa Fe, the rails and first train arriving at the current terminus on February 9, 1880. The AT&SF maintained passenger service on this branch line until 1936.

On March 12, 1992, six investors who didn't know each other previously purchased the spur line from the AT&SF and called their enterprise the Santa Fe Southern Railway. Freight service has continued without interruption, and excursion service began in a small way in 1993.

Today, people from all over the world come to Santa Fe to see the depot in the namesake city of arguably the most famous railroad in the world, "the Santa Fe." They expect to see a terminal on the scale of Grand Central Station. Instead, they stand looking in confusion at the tiny, mission-style depot at 410 S. Guadalupe Street. They then enter the Depot to inquire as to the whereabouts of the Railway Museum they assume must exist nearby.

Despite ten years of shoestring financing, political uncertainty and equipment vagaries, the trains still run. At a recent Chamber of Commerce meeting, Joe Horace of Joe Horace Dodge remarked "You guys have nine lives." Bob Sarr sums up his feelings about the adventure of running SFSR: "It is a privilege to be given the opportunity to engage in an enterprise that is as challenging, interesting and purposeful as that of preserving a city's historic, and sole remaining rail link. Keeping it real magnifies the challenge and interest. We are not preserving an artifact or a representation but a useful functioning element of Santa Fe's infrastructure."

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