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Trains, planes, automobiles, tractors, bicycles, a Segway– and much more

By Gary Herron

Below: In late September, World War II vintage ATSF steam locomotive 2926 was on a siding near WHEELS, a feature of the second annual Railroad Days event. More than 900 people came out to see it and take photos. It looks better in "vintage" black and white.

WHEELS Museum is a 501(c)3 organization in the Albuquerque Rail Yards dedicated to collecting, preserving and creating educational exhibits about the history of transportation in Albuquerque and New Mexico with emphasis on the impact on the development of the area. Our collections embrace the history of the railroads, the impact of the rail yards on Albuquerque, as well as automobiles, horse and wagon, and other modes of transportation.

Admission is free, and donations are more than welcomed. WHEELS is open from 9 a.m. to 12 noon Monday-Thursday, and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on weekends.

Museum hours are subject to change without notice and may differ during special events. Please call 505-243-6269 before your visit.

wheelsmuseum.org

Don't suggest to Leba Freed that the WHEELS Museum she founded 30 years ago might be Albuquerque's best-kept secret. "We've had over 200,000 visitors from around the world, so it's not a secret," Freed says.

The 21,000-square-foot WHEELS Museum is at 1100 2nd SW, just 0.7 mile south of Central Avenue–Railroad Avenue, originally–or Route 66, and 2.2 miles south of what replaced the Mother Road, Interstate 40.

It should be on your must-see Route 66 itinerary, and should certainly get a lot if visits during the centennial celebration in 2026. It's the largest and best-surviving railroad shop complex in the entire U.S., and played an integral part of the national railway system until diesel locomotives made the shops obsolete, leading to their closing in the 1970s.

"There's something for everyone," says Freed, and she should know. She's the president. And that "everyone" is, literally, everyone–for all ages. Heck, there are more than 10,000 items exhibited there, with more to come. Who doesn't like vintage automobiles, toy trains, old tractors, and American history, especially Albuquerque's history?

Freed's grandparents and their four children came to Albuquerque in 1920 by train; her grandfather was brought here as the town's rabbi.

"When they got to Albuquerque–it was a warm December day–he raised his hands to heaven, and he said about Albuquerque: 'This is a special paradise on Earth; we must never leave this place.'"

"That was our beginning relationship with the railroad; my family had a business here for almost 90 years, five generations," she said. She's a proud fifth-generation New Mexican, and fondly recalls the family's worldwide import/export business, Freed Co., and trips to Gallup to trade Native American rugs and other goods.

The 1967 graduate of Del Norte High School, and then off to University of New Mexico to someday be a teacher, which she did in her early 20s before deciding to be in the family business.

She wasn't enamored with the Railyards until a couple decades after it was shut down.

"This was another world," she said.

Back in the day, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway (ATSF) site was the largest employer in the Duke City, and one of Freed's favorite item–a duty board, with

Top to bottom: This railroad passenger car has been used in movies, including a prequel to the "Butch & Sundance" franchise. It is sometimes used as a theater of sorts. For small crowds, with a screen that can be pulled down for a movie or video to be viewed.

Located in the Alvarado Room, this scale model of the famous Harvey House named the Alvarado, which entertained thousands in its heyday, including movie stars from Hollywood, was built by Dan Keith.

A 1998 Suzuki Esteem, used in the production of Better Call Saul, *basically a spinoff of* Breaking Bad.

You can take the teacher out of the classroom, but you can't take the classroom out of the teacher. WHEELS President Leba Freed provides an introduction to the museum to Mountain Elementary students on a chilly November morning.

employees' names–is there for all to see. Freed knows the numbers by heart: 27 acres, 25 buildings, 21,000 square feet, 425 different ATSF occupations, and 1,500 to 2,000 employees on site every day.

"They (railroad workers) built the culture of Albuquerque," says Thomas Sims, a longtime WHEELS volunteer. "They worked here and built the culture. Albuquerque is migrants and transplants; how did we get here?"

Sims and his family came here (in 1952). They took Route 66 and stayed at the Alvarado (Hotel), the gorgeous Harvey House facility that welcomed visitors. Those visitors included the Hollywood crowd finding time to visit the Land of Enchantment on the railroad route between Los Angeles and Chicago. (Indeed, Amtrak passenger trains heading to both big cities still stop in Albuquerque.)

The Sims family soon moved to Albuquerque, and he remembers living close enough to the tracks to hear the various whistles, heralding employees to and from lunch and their workday.

With Freed's love for Albuquerque and its more than 300 years of history, she knew she didn't want to see those buildings razed. Freed couldn't believe what she was seeing at the site–how could the rail yards be in such disrepair? It was like a slap in the face, and in 1994 began her fight to save what she could.

"My goals are saving history and culture, and creating economic development," she says, and what city the size of Albuquerque can't use those?

The ATSF's old blacksmith shops, north of WHEELS, have been the site in recent years of arts and crafts shows, and farmers' markets. Those weekend events have piqued the interest on recent generations of Albuquerqueans who don't know the relationship between the city and the railroad–it's more than a trip to Santa Fe on the Rail Runner Express.

She formed an urban council that included others interested in the rail yards and a perspective museum in 1999. The next year, the urban council secured a $2.5 million loan to purchase the rail yards from BNSF, apparently just in the nick of time; Burlington was pondering a potential sale of the rail yards to an out-of-state developer who was expected to raze the remaining buildings on the site. The rail yards were sold to the City of Albuquerque for $8.5 million in 2007.

Along the way, former New Mexico Congresswoman Heather Wilson secured $545,000 for planning; former New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson provided $2 million with the mandate to create the museum. Freed's plans for a museum thus stayed on track.

Welcome to the museum

"I have had to protect this property for 30 years against some very, very strange possibilities that I thought were completely inappropriate for Albuquerque and this site, and I fought many wars," she explained.

WHEELS–that's an acronym for "We Have Everything Everyone Loves Spinning"–is a short walk to the BNSF

tracks to the east, was originally the storehouse and part of the Locomotive Repair Shops; the storehouse was built in 1915.

This historic footprint of the Duke City's heritage–"one of the last of its kind in America," she says–includes one huge building used for farmers' markets and arts and crafts events most of the year, with several potential plans for uses in the other huge buildings.

WHEELS site is actually the seventh, and even now Freed says it's bursting at the seams.

"The property is 27 acres; I don't think it's big enough." Freed said in early November, noting that land to the south, owned by Burlington, might be nice to acquire, as well as seven acres to the north. Also revealed: acquisition of a 57-foot glider to be hung from the ceiling.

There are a lot if turn-of-the-century–that's the turn from the 19th into the 20th century–items, many on loan to the museum but surely of interest to all. For instance, a 1915 Model-T Ford, a four-cylinder, 20-horsepower roadster.

Speaking of horses, there are several horse-drawn carts.

It was the coming of the railroad in 1880, with Albuquerque as a division point for the ATSF, that led to the city's importance.

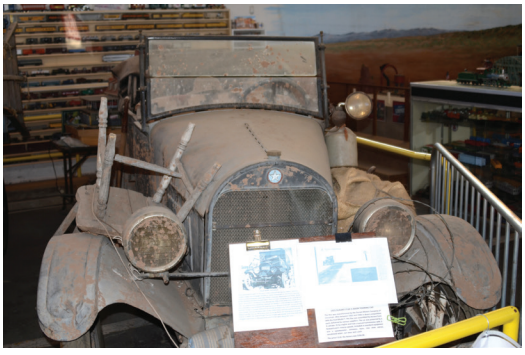
The turntable will be rebuilt and Freed says a machine shop will be situated here, ultimately to have a place to keep the ATSF steam locomotive 2926 housed here, with excursion trips being eyed for the future. More than 400 feet of rails was laid near the site to bring five rail cars, available someday for those excursions, "a big goal" says Freed.

In September 2024, the New Mexico Heritage Rail hosted the second annual Railroad Days event, attracting about 900 "trainiacs" and showcasing its 80-year-old 4-8-4 steam locomotive (2926) outside the museum, and included some short "drive-bys" for photographers to catch the train in action. The train ran under its own steam power for the first time in 2021, thanks to repairs and refurbishment in the neighborhood of more than $1 million, entirely funded by donations from the community.

Her vision includes converting the old 800,000 square foot machine shop for the display of steam locomotives, vintage autos, airplanes, education facilities, and more, at an estimated cost of $800,000; and use of the pattern shop as the museum's visitors center. Plus, a possible future location for the New Mexico Railroad Club's layouts and exhibits (you should see how many locomotives and rolling stock, plus passenger cars, that aren't being used now) in the Babbitt welding shop.

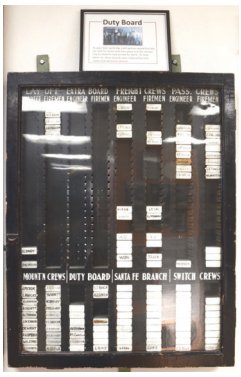
To be sure, WHEELS has become a love affair for Freed, Sims,nd about 50 volunteers.

"I'm giving my life to save it," Freed says. "I don't want to ever retire."



Freed's ten favorites at the museum

- Last duty board
- Water wheel
- Ice cream cart
- HO railroad layout from Clovis
- Passenger train car made for movie
- A ride on the train
- The horse with wheels
- Wooden airplane
- Star Durant car
- 0 -gauge train layout



Above:
The railroad crews learned of their daily assignments on the Duty Board.

Left, top to bottom: Three-year WHEELS volunteer John Westfall operates the O-gauge train on its 20-foot by 40-foot layout, on which he can run as many as six trains at a time, including a replica of ATSF 2926.

Hot-air balloons, a river, King Kong climbing a building and five railroad layouts make this an interesting exhibit for kids as well as adults. It came from Clovis.

Looking like to it just arrived during the Dust Bowl, this 1923 Durant Star cost $350 when new; it had four cylinders and 35 horsepower. It's left dusty, making it easy to imgine trips west to California for "Dust Bowlers" 100 or so years ago.

This "well spindle" was originally in the Village of Negra, near Vaughn, New Mexico, and used to pump well water to the surface from deep inside the Earth.