

'The Space Program of the 1880s'

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This 1941 photo of the Chili Line 470 train crossing over the Santa Fe River with the Santuario de Guadalupe Church in the background will be one of several historical photos and pieces of art on display at El Museo Cultural in the Railyard this month for the inaugural New Mexico Railroad History celebration. (Courtesy of Jim Terhune)

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The first locomotive arrived in the territory of New Mexico in 1878, coming in from Colorado over the Raton Pass.

Between then and today, about 122 railroad companies have come and gone through New Mexico transporting freight, goods and, eventually, people, according to Fred Friedman, a railroad historian and a 30-year Railroad Bureau chief for the state Department of Transportation.

Without trains to connect it to the Union, New Mexico wouldn't have been able to attain statehood, he said.

"If we didn't have a railroad, we were sort of stuck out in the boonies," said Friedman.

In what he described as "long overdue" for New Mexico, Santa Fe will host a celebration this month honoring the state's extensive railroad history.

"Railroads really were the Space Program of the 1880s," said Friedman, one of the several dozen celebration committee members. The committee, founded by lead organizer and local

model railroad enthusiast Jim Terhune, includes the New Mexico History Museum, the Rail Runner, TOURISM Santa Fe, La Fonda Hotel, and other groups and individuals.

“They (trains) affected architecture, lawmaking, economics, transportation, environmental issues, tourism, all those kinds of things,” said Friedman. “If you don’t realize and understand that, you can’t really appreciate New Mexico’s development in the present.”

The event, described as the nation’s only statewide celebration of railroad history, runs from Sept. 8-30.

A railroad history-themed exhibition will be ongoing at El Museo Cultural, and there’s an opening reception and panel discussion Thursday, Sept. 13, at the New Mexico History Museum. But most of the festivities will take place Sept. 15-16, coinciding with the 10-year anniversary celebration of the Santa Fe Railyard District.

Terhune, a self-described history buff, hatched plans for the celebration earlier this year with Rick Martinez, chairperson of the Keep Santa Fe Beautiful organization.

“You cannot help but be surrounded by railroad history there,” he said of downtown Santa Fe, which between 1880 and the mid-20th century brought in lines like the famous Atchinson, Topeka & Santa Fe – its tracks were later used by Santa Fe Southern Railway – the “Chili Line” that went north to Española and on to Antonito, Colo., and the New Mexico Central Railway that connected Santa Fe to Torrance County to the south.

Over the weekend of Sept. 15-16, there will be tours of the La Fonda hotel; railroad history bike rides (with two more later, on Sept. 22 and 29); a train film festival at Violet Crown Cinema with screenings of the original “Murder on the Orient Express” and the 2007 remake of “3:30 to Yuma”; living history re-enactments in the Railyard Park; and boardable train cars sitting on tracks in the Railyard.

A Santa Fe Southern Railway coach and caboose from 1922, as well as a modern Rail Runner coach, will be stationed there. An old handcar from the Philmont Boy Scout Ranch will also be on the tracks.



A historical image of the Santa Fe Depot. A celebration of New Mexico's railroad history will be in Santa Fe from September 8 to 30. (Courtesy of Jim Terhune)

According to Terhune, mayors from Santa Fe, Albuquerque and Pecos, and governors from Isleta, Santo Domingo and Sandia pueblos will all arrive at Santa Fe Depot on the Rail Runner at 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 16, as part of the Railyard's 10th anniversary celebration.

All the events take place against the backdrop of a large exhibition at El Museo, where there will be historic and current railroad-themed art and photography, model train layouts, informational booths and children's activities.

"Right now, we have more than 150 photographs and art pieces of a historic nature of trains to Harvey Houses to depots all around New Mexico," said Terhune. "When we pulled that together, it's amazing what we've discovered. Things are coming out of the woodwork."

The exhibit will feature a collection of rail photographs from the former Sanbusco Market Center and a 360-degree cinema dome that The Children's Museum is bringing in to screen short railroad-themed videos. Martinez said some former Harvey Girls will be on hand.

Terhune is also designing a 125-square-foot model railroad layout of Northern New Mexico that will be unveiled on the celebration weekend and then permanently stationed at the Santa Fe Depot.

He said railroad history aficionados will recognize some of the Santa Fe structures, like Tomasita's restaurant, the old Union Depot Station and old area churches. "It will be a representation of 1938, the way the Railyard looked back then," he said.

This coming Thursday, Sept. 13, the celebration's opening night reception at the New Mexico History Museum includes a panel discussion with city, state and railroad industry representatives about the evolution and influence of the railroad industry in the state and the impact it had on developing its cities. Friedman will moderate.

At some point since the late 19th century, every county – with the exception of late-comer Los Alamos County – had a railroad operating through it, according to Friedman.

Across the state, livestock, produce, wool, coal and, eventually, uranium were sent by rail out from New Mexico. But the railroads also provided a chance for things to come into the state. "One of the most important things that came in were tourists," Friedman said, as a hospitality industry began to emerge in the 1930s.

"They wanted to see Native American areas, the scenery, and how quaint New Mexico was."

With the tourism industry came Harvey Houses, the hospitality businesses owned by the Fred Harvey company and stationed near railroads throughout the west, including in New Mexico. Downtown's La Fonda Hotel, a Harvey House from 1926-69, will be hosting public tours Sept. 15-16.

According to La Fonda marketing and sales director Ed Pulsifer, the history tours will include information about the use of the hotel to house scientists on their way to the Manhattan Project, views of AT&SF-commissioned portraits of state historical figures that were placed in depots throughout the country to promote tourism, Native American art purchased by the Harvey Company, and rooms created during the hotel's expansion of 1926-29.

That's when Pulsifer noted Harvey began "Indian Detour" programs out of Santa Fe, taking tourists to Taos, Chaco Canyon and Bandelier, and Route 66 began bringing in visitors by car. "It went from about 55 rooms to 155 rooms," he said of the hotel.

Terhune said he wants the Railroad celebration experience to be educational for people of all ages. He said there may be residents who have no idea of this industry's impact on New Mexico and Santa Fe, whose name became part of railroad lore.

Thanks to trains, "the name Santa Fe is known across the U.S.," he said.

If you go

New Mexico Railroad History Celebration

WHEN: Sept. 8-30, with the main festivities occurring Sept. 15-16. For a full event schedule and locations, visit nmrailroadhistory.com.

WHERE: Various locations throughout Santa Fe, primarily in the Railyard.

TICKETS: The celebration is free and open to the public. Tickets for movies during the Violet Crown Cinema's Train Film Festival Sept. 15-16 are between \$9-\$12.