

The Old Hickory Railroad Revival

Efforts are underway to revive the Old Hickory Railroad, a unique excursion train that operated in Jackson, La. until about three years ago. As an extremely popular attraction in Jackson, Old Hickory ran Saturday and Sunday excursions for almost a decade. Originally built in 1964 for a theme park in North Carolina, the train was brought to Jackson in the late 1990s by Jackson businessman Leroy Harvey.

Once operational there, Old Hickory became a favorite destination for children and grown-ups alike. The steam locomotive, like those of the nineteenth century, had a special attraction for riders. Children could blow the steam whistle, ring the steam-driven bell and sit in the engineer's seat after a ride. Adults loved the beautiful, outdoor experience.

Andrew Martin, who drove the train for three years in its heyday, says, "Most park train rides last 15-20 minutes. Ours was about an hour. We had on-board narration and stopped at points of historic interest. It was great for a family's weekend adventure."

Eventually, however, the beloved attraction had to be shut down for extensive repairs. Because it was 45 years old, maintenance of the locomotive and its two coaches was expensive and difficult. The old track had also deteriorated. Instead of getting intended improvements, the landmark Old Hickory Railroad slowly settled into disrepair.

Now a new board of directors for the Republic of West Florida Foundation has been formed to bring the train back to life. Chaired by Jackson businessman Mike Salmon, the Foundation owns and oversees the Republic of West Florida Historical Association which will manage the Old Hickory Railroad and the Republic of West Florida Historical Museum, as



well as some 11 acres of property at the site.

Future plans call for additional historical museums and exhibits like the extremely popular and operational "Greater Baton Rouge Model Railroaders Exhibit." In addition, an outdoor garden railroad and a live model steam engine facility typically run on the 2nd and 4th Saturdays of each month.

Salmon says, "These types of projects are important because they help boost historic interest, tourism, and economies, not just in Jackson but in the entire Feliciana area...The Felicianas offer a lot of interesting experiences for both their residents and their visitors, and Jackson wants to be a vital and vibrant part of those experiences."

The Republic of West Florida Historical Association is a 501 (c)(3) tax exempt organization, so project contributions are donor deductible. The board hopes that an interest in rail-

road history and operation, historic preservation and the train's economic benefits for the Florida Parishes will stimulate organizations, volunteers and financial resources to help the project succeed. For railroad news, visitor information on the museum, model railroads or other exhibits, call Harvey Enterprises at (225) 634-7397.

"This is a unique venture," Salmon emphasizes. "We know it will take a lot of time, effort and money, but we also know that there will be many benefits for our friends, relatives, neighbors and visitors upon its completion. The Board is committed to doing everything it can, in whatever time it takes, to bring this new dream of the Old Hickory Railroad back into reality once again."

For more information, visit www.louisianasteamtrain.com.

Source: Republic of West Florida Historical Association