

Jefferson County Public Library
Oral History Project
Interview with Darrell Arndt, August 14, 2010.
Interviewer: Patrick Farrell

NOTE: The interviewer's questions and comments appear in parentheses. Added material appears in brackets

(So I am here with Darrell Arndt who was—well, what is your official capacity? I've heard all day that you were kind of one of the people who put in the most time, that you've put in years on this project?)

Yeah I was one of the, a member of the core group that during a moment of great weakness decided to restore the car. The car was out at the Colorado Railroad Museum for many years, and we worked hard to preserve it out there—but challenging you know in an outside environment. The Denver Rail Heritage Society was formed on the Platte Valley, and I was involved with that. Their goal was to restore, excuse me, preserve some local Denver rail history focusing primarily in that downtown Denver area. And they gained use and eventual purchase of the track along the river that was an old freight line. They had nothing to run on it, and a number of us could see this interurban car that was really becoming a challenge to preserve, and we thought that we could restore that interurban Number 25 to operate in the Platte Valley. That's what kind of got it off the ground.

(What was the condition of Car Number 25 when you started working on it? You mention kind of outdoor conditions.)

Of course it operated in-service—well, up until the last day it was a functioning car on the system.

(So that would have been what, 1950?)

Nineteen-Fifty. The Rocky Mountain Railroad Club, this group that was formed in 1938, had taken some excursions on them. When fellows got back from World War II, they were very much into steam, and this wonderful Colorado railroad history that we have, especially up in the mountains, but out here on the plains as well. And a number of them were also interested in the streetcar world, if you will. So they did excursions on the Denver tramway system, both in an aero gauge [?] system and the standard gauge system. And when the system shut down in 1950, they purchased a car for about \$150.00 to keep it from being scrapped. And, then they ran it a couple more years on private excursions out to Golden before 1953 when they had to take it off the property. It wasn't until 1958, it was moved to the Railroad Museum. And then subsequent to that, the car had

been vandalized somewhat with glass breakage and so on. They put it back in presentable shape and then commenced to maintain it outside.

You know, from that point and time till we removed it from the museum, you know the wood just deteriorated: the siding, windowsills; window frames especially would fall apart. The inside was sort of like a time capsule from 1952, and they stopped running the car early 1953. The interior was pretty much intact. The _____ [3:44] seats were starting to kind of crack and separate, and paint peeling. As far as restorations go, as far as the challenge, we were very blessed that we took on this car. I mean if, if it—many trolley restorations around the country are known as chicken coop restorations. My perception is the trolleys, when they, they started shutting down really about 1920—when the auto-mo, Henry Ford came along and ruined everything for us trolley people. Trolleys started falling by the wayside. And they would abandon a system and they'd sell off their car bodies for chicken coops and summer cabins and storage cabins and what-have-you.

And so after the war, when a number of these folks, preservation-minded types, noticed that this is really the end of the trolley era—a lot of them had already been shut down and they wanted to preserve some of this. And to preserve older cars, replica car, representative cars of the past, they ought to go out and do chicken coop—get these old bodies out. There's great stories about finding these old car bodies inside like [?] houses like Aurora just did here a number of years ago. It's a great story on what they're doing with their trailer car. And when you have a car body, you need to find wheels and controllers and the wiring and different pieces of hardware, and the brakes. We were blessed that this car was intact. It was never really messed with very much over the years. They didn't cut a baggage-car door into it you know while in service—pretty much intact. We had to, we did have to cast some new parts and make a few things out of what they mention at least in the trolley world, this material that's known as noobtainium [? unobtainium might be what he means here, 5:44]. And that can be quite challenging. Certainly on a restoration like this, you can learn from others, and I've come to know quite a few, a fair number of folks and trolley museums around the country: Colorado Springs has a great group of folks, Ft. Collins, you know, other places in the country share their knowledge about how to do this, where to get parts and so on.

When we started the project we thought, "Well, Platte Valley Trolley you know, is, it needed a car down there." And this car, an interurban operated up until its, you know, until 1953. We thought it'd take a couple three years, and that's what we told the general services administration when it came out here to the Denver Federal Center.

"Two, three years we should have it done. We'd like to make arrangements to rent your old diesel building." And of course twenty years later, we're just getting

it finished. Platte Valley Trolley got off to a great start, had a pretty bumpy mid-life—that certainly didn't help. And at one point and time, we were looking for alternative places to take the car. And we had something going with RTD a couple years and that concluded, and we had to go back to the Platte Valley Trolley. So we've been active resurrecting it, and it's come back great down there. That operation, this operation out here in Lakewood really have been kind of joined. Maybe not at management level, but down below. I mean, we've gone back and forth the first year that Platte Valley Trolley started operating. We actually closed the door on this building in '78 with the interurban, and were gone for a year helping them get started down there. Of course, their folks came out here to help work on this interurban. So the car had you know, a lot of its original parts, and that was a big help. But we did do some replacement of certain woods, and I can talk about what's been done on the car now or we can do a bit later if you'd like.

(It's up to you. I don't want to take up too much of your time. It's definitely something I'd like to record.)

Ok. Sure that would be fine. I just have to say that after this, somewhere around 15,000 volunteer hours, we really have to tabulate our timesheets for sure on that. But that is close, that this is a very—and all the money that's gone into it, and the donations and in-kind service, and people who've come out here and worked, worked in this building away from the world, with no windows in it, for years. I've never run across a volunteer out here, who's out here because they have nothing else to do. And not all trolley geeks either. I mean, just an interest in preserving history and maybe a fascination with mechanics. So we reached this point today where the car is now under the protection of the West Corridor Historical Rail Cooperative which is run by the Denver Rail Heritage Society in the city of Lakewood, and its preservation and operation now is most assured—and a new era for the car. A very rewarding feeling for those of us that have worked on it for so long. I certainly, I wish that some of the fellas that are no longer with us could be here to experience this. I wish some of the fellas that were in the Rocky Mountain Railroad Club in 1950, could see what's happening with this car now. It's um, I'm sure they'd be very pleased and astonished that not only the car is restored, but that it has a, this future of operating not just in Lakewood, and not just in Denver, but both Lakewood and Denver. It's almost mind-boggling.

It's a project that never should have happened. We shouldn't be here, you know. It just defies all reason and logic. There's moments in time that took place you know, little moments with different people that kind of made it happen. Buying the car when they had no place to put it? Paying \$75.00 to preserve it, and then when they took it off the property and the tramway company said, "Oh no, that price doesn't include the wheels, and the trucks, and the controllers," because that kind of shows how Tramway was so adamant about getting that scrap metal

out of these cars, and the fact that the reason why this interurban is the only car out of like 250 cars that survives with all of its hardware. So they took possession of this car and no place to put it, stored it in different locations: railroad museum. Years later, a group in the valley starts, a group of us in the Railroad Club. For me, I saw not just the preserving of the history of the car—I didn't really study trolleys a lot, but I'd kind of come to know that, came to know the 25 and how it functioned through this Golden/Lakewood/Denver area. And how it was an important part of the experience of Rocky Mountain Railroad Club members whose great photographs of the car posed down at the Zunai [? 11:10] power plant with all the riders. I knew most of these people, you know, posing in the windows and smiling, and getting ready for a trip—such great history, and getting more involved in the preservation of it. And then sticking with it, you know, when we bit this off.

(It sounds like a lot of the challenges were logistical and _____ [11:37])

Yeah, all of the above. I mean it's, it's so much detail work, and research and I don't know how many miles in the car running around town getting parts, and trying to find a certain part, a certain component, a certain tool, a certain screw. I could bore you for quite awhile on finding the screws for the bumper, for example, and going to a shipbuilding company, you know, to find screws for a trolley car.

(What were the sources for some of that work? Were you working from plans from the Denver Tramway Corporation or kind of piecing it together from photographs?)

Imagination. Yeah, there were no plans for the car. There's one basic drawing of the car from I think 1920, maybe a 1924 version, but no drawings, no details. The trolley, the Interurban 25 is a very basic interurban, so there's nothing really totally mysterious about it. Everything on the car, if you have a trolley person come from somewhere else in the country, it's all standard layout. We were blessed with some great fellas that know electrical wiring, several fellas interested in vintage wiring—the 600-volt DC wiring and the mini wires that go to the controllers. So that, you know that, we just, I don't know, we just got into it and figured it out as we kind of went along. I mean, it's sort of—in fact we, I don't know if you've seen, there's a board around here with photographs we've put together of the restoration and the condition of the car when we started it. And we put that board together, I don't know, six, seven years after we started the restoration. And I kid you not, we lay all of these pictures out, and we did the you know the inexpensive plastic cover over it and what-have-you, and we set it up, and we're looking at these pictures, and truly, we realized how completely out of our minds we were to start the project. I mean it's, you know, the rodded bumpers, the rodded ends, doing the roof. We did this entire restoration with no scaffolding. It was all done with extension ladders. That's ridiculous you know,

but that's the way we evolved on it—we took it pieces at a time and used a lot of care.

The volunteers and their patience is phenomenal. A great group of folks. I recall one night the length of the project and the patience, I think was highlighted one evening ten years ago, twelve years ago. Tom Peyton [?] and I were out here working over on the far corner, fitting in a piece of wood on a corner post, and it had to go mesh with the siding. So we had sanded it and did it on the machine and it was pretty close, but it could've been just a little better. And so I told Tom, I said, "You know, let me take this back over on the other side of the car and tweak this piece."

And he said, "It looks like it's pretty good."

And I said, "It won't take that long."

And he, without skipping a beat, he said, "That's what you said ten years ago."

And you know it [was] kinda like "Ooh geez." And he did it good-naturedly. I think our work sense of humor has helped us work together for many years. But it's just, and I guess, there's such a curiosity about the mechanics and the construction and the design of it [the No. 25 trolley car]. And of course, its tie to history in Denver. I mean, not only that it ran through Lakewood to Golden from Denver, but it was built in Denver by the Woeber Carriage Company—very unusual for a local car builder to do that sort of thing. Yep, so it's been quite a journey.

(Congratulations. And thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us.)

Thank you. You're welcome Patrick. We can visit again sometime.

(Yeah I'd like that very much.)

[End of interview.]