

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

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

(Today is August 14th. I'm here with Les Nelson at the Number 25 Trolley Open House in Lakewood. And Les, what brings you to the event today? What's your, what's your involvement?)

Just because I'm very interested in Car Number 25.

(Were you a part of the restoration project at all? I think we talked about this a little earlier.)

Oh yes. Yes, I worked on it quite a bit, especially doing mechanical work. I did a little of a lot of things but most of it was mechanical or _____ [0:32].

(Can you talk a little bit about that, about sort of what you were faced with when they first got a hold of the car and what some of those, what some of the challenges were with the mechanical work?)

Well, I guess the, I guess the biggest problem had to do with power for the car. And I had worked on some things like the bumpers and the trolleys, the trolley um, what do you call it, the _____ [1:10] overhead? And I re-glazed ninety-four windows in the car. But the biggest mechanical thing had to do with how to get power to it. And after a few years of wondering about it and talking about it, the management ended up with this diesel electric generator set which they hauled in from Utah someplace—surplus steel. But how to, how to get power to the car was another thing.

So after much talking, well we decided, well the best thing to do is to put it on wheels and rig a hitch so we could push it out the head of the car, or pull it behind, depending on which way the car was moving, and put this diesel electric generator set on it. Well, when you start to do something like that, they did have some old, not trolley car but, we called them section car wheels—where the section crews [? 2:20] worked. They had bearings and axels and whatnot, but what do you do from there? So we, in discussing it, we decided, "Well, the best thing to do is use some of those wheels and build a car with them."

Well the next question is, "How do you build a car?"

“Well, I can handle that.” I was in the conveyor business at that time so I'm used to mechanical things and design work. So the first thing I offered [was] to design the truck for it. So I took the wheels that we had and the bearings and worked around those, and took the dimensions off of the diesel electric set, and went to work on the drawing board. Well, what you see now is a result of what I was working and sweating over. So anyway, I made the design of it, and then the next question is, “Well, how are we going to get it built?”

I said, “Well, that's alright. I can build it.” So I went to work and opened up my garage at home, and built it right there. And I got all the steel for it and had steel formed for it, and then I tack-welded it together. Well I'm not a real good welder, so I didn't want to go do the finish welding on it. So I asked a friend named Walt Rogalla [?]. He's an old-time welder; he knows how to do any kind of a welding job.

So he says, “Yes, he would take care of it.” I think I traded something with—for him, for it, his work on it. At the end of the day, he got it welded together, and we put it back on the trailer, flatbed trailer, and hauled it down to our conveyor shop, and painted it. Then we hauled it back, and I did the final work on it. And then, one day, we put it back on the trailer and brought it down here. That's where the diesel electric set was sitting, right there on the far side. So we used a hoist on the truck and lifted it over and put it on the set—connected up the things that needed to be connected up on it [laughs], and it's been working ever since. So that's kind of where it came from.

(And I think, you were talking about this earlier I think, but I wanted to just ask you this while we're recording about whether—is that how they'll continue to pull the trolley around?)

I don't think so. I don't know if this decision has been made or not, but I think the intent is to actually run it back from the overhead trolley wire, and if we can get that done.

(Is the electrical functional enough _____ [5:39]?)

Oh the electrical function is well-functional, and it will run on 600 volts DC (current). But I think, I'm quite sure that's the intent in the long run. Of course, it looks like we've got about three years to get ready for that, but time does fly. So I certainly hope that they can get ready. And then, we probably won't have much use for that anymore, not unless we want to put a snowplow on it. I did put fittings on the side of the truck, and I did weld up a frame to attach to those fittings on the side of the truck, and that would go out in front of it. Then the talk was we would build a snowplow to fit on that so we could plow _____ [6:33]. However, that snow plow has never been really designed or thought too seriously about, but [it] might be needed someday—yeah, seeing as how we live in Colorado.

(It'd be used to plow the tracks and _____ [6:49].)

Yes, it could be used to plow the track clear, right. Uh-huh. I would like to see that done depending on where it's going to go. It'd be a little hard-fetched even if we did get an overhead trolley wire. It might be a little far-fetched to figure on using that power to plow snow. On the other hand, it probably could be done. We probably could put an electric motor right on that car instead of the diesel electric set, and build that snow plow, and use that bracket that we've got to push it with, and it could be done [laughs].

(I feel like I have a memory of seeing pictures of some of the streetcars with plows fitted on the front.)

Oh, yes. Yes, some of the early numbers [? 7:37] trolley cars really did have snowplows, and what you see now are what they call cowcatchers [?]. And that's a common name for them, but you can use that structure and that lift procedure on it to put a snowplow on. So that could be done also, if they feel they have enough power coming from the trolley wire. I'd be happy to work some more on it [? 8:09] if it ever came up [laughs], if I'm still around.

(It sounds really fun. It sounds really interesting.)

I'm only ninety-two years old [laughs]. However, I have thoroughly enjoyed working with this club, and working on this car, on the things that are necessary to make it run. I think the club has done a very very good job of it. And we have a bunch of real fine fellows in the club that have managed it, and planned it, and thought it through, and made arrangements, and procured parts that had to be purchased or wherever they might have come from. They've all done a good job, and I noticed a lot of them are still here today. [I'm] pleased to see that. I've been a little inactive in it myself for a few years, but it doesn't mean I'm still not interested in it.

(Were you involved sort of at the beginning when they—Darrell was saying it's been about twenty years?)

Well, I was involved—yes, I've been almost all of that time. Uh-huh. I did a little bit of work on it out, when it was at the Railroad Museum on 44th, but not much. Most of the work that I did was after it was moved here, and put into this little _____ [9:35] shop. I thoroughly enjoyed it over the years though. I really have.

(Congratulations. It looks great; it's moving along the track pretty well.)

Good. Well, it works; it works [laughs]. I've seen it almost all of the way—from the broken, beat-up, rusted and rotted _____ [10:00] it was when we moved it here. Very good. Anything else?

(I don't think so. Are there any other memories you want to get down right now?)

Well, I think we covered most of them, yeah.

(Well, thank you so much for sitting down with us. I really appreciate it.)

Well very good. Thanks a lot.

[End of interview.]