

Volunteer Spotlight - Mike Herbert



Mike Herbert and son Mike Jr. photographed on steps of LASTA #748. (1/28/2012) Bill Hamblin, Jr. photo

Mike “Nitro” Herbert enjoys working on equipment large and small. “Nitro” works as an equipment mechanic for Jefferson Parish. He first met former LASTA President Bruce Brown about five years ago when he was working on the reclaimed oil project at the Parish.

His first job as a volunteer was to change the water pump on Rock Is-

land 745 (“Agnes”). Since then he has worked on or operated all of LASTA’s maintenance-of-way machinery including the big Orton crane and smaller motor car. On a smaller scale, Nitro had an operating O gauge train layout adjacent to the food tent at the 2010 LASTA Christmas party that included some of his own equipment as well as some from other family members. On a grander scale, the week before that Christmas Party Mike and family were working very late hours pulling spikes, tie plates and rail alongside LASTA President Bill Morris as part of the Yard relocation project.

Nitro is especially proud of the paint job SP 745 received prior to Gretna Fest 2010. “Nobody (who attended Gretna Fest) realized that this was the engine out of Audubon Park,” he recounts. He is passionate when painting is discussed, and has a strong desire to maintain historically accurate colors on the locomotives and cars. And when it comes time for a fresh coat of paint, Mike proclaims “there will be no sandblasting” of the engine.

Since joining LASTA, he has performed maintenance work on the motor car, the crane, and the diesel equipment. “I also run machinery at the

yard when necessary, like the track hoe and the dozer,” he adds.

He is part of what he calls the “weekday crew.” This group also includes, among others, Dave Honold, Phil LaRosa, Ed Ernewein, and Erich Lendermon .

“My first switch movement was in the Orton (crane) under careful watch of David Honold (LASTA’s Safety and Training Coordinator), Mike states. “I’ve helped bring 748 to life and have also given her fresh paint under Phil LaRosa’s guidance. Currently, I am working on the Orton crane to fix all the air leaks and applying grease via the many, many grease fittings. I also run to the yard to do odd jobs when no one is there.”

Mike seems to always be doing something at the yard. “I find new and used parts at various shops and other places at ‘cost’ or a very fair price” he says. Mike is also helping to train the next generation of LASTA volunteers. Mike Jr. learns from Dad and sometimes works as his “gofer” (go get this part, go get that tool).

How did he come by the nickname Nitro? For now the answer to that question will remain a mystery; you will just need to ask him personally.

Jonathan Sturges

The Blind Machinist at DeQuincy

A few years ago, we were at DeQuincy, Louisiana while on tour. We had invited the public to inspect SP745. While we were there, a blind man about 70 years old was escorted up to the train by his son. The man said, “Come on, son, take me up there to see that locomotive.”

This now-blind man had been one of the first black machinists on the Southern Pacific railroad and was based in DeQuincy. When they moved the shop to New Orleans, he went back to being a brakeman and gave up the machinist trade.

He felt around the running gear and drivers. He said, “I bet that’s about a MK5 2-8-2.”

“Yes, dad,” replied his son. “Probably one of those built in New Orleans,” the man said. “Here, take my stick,” he said to his son.

Then he measured the main driver counter-weight with his bare hands. He backed up. “Let me do that again,” he said. He felt the corners of the counter-weight. “Rounded corners,” he said. “Balanced for 95 MPH. With a good fireman, the engineer can get 105 MPH out of it,” he added. “Help

me get into the cab, its been 50 years since I been in the cab.”

Once aboard, the old machinist settled into his comfort zone of familiarity and memories. Decades removed from his trade, his pride and love for the job was obvious to anyone who could see.

This man knew steam locomotives. In the cab, he knew the function of every appliance, every valve and handle. Although now sightless, with his hands, he “saw” SP 745 in more depth and detail than any other visitors.

Harry Abbott