

These speeders make tracks in a safe way - - on the rails

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Steel wheels hit the tracks in rhythmic cadence as six rail cars wound out of Folsom through the golden fields of late summer, past lazing cattle, sprightly jack rabbits and the occasional red-tailed hawk.

But it wasn't a train on this recent day bumping along the railroad, sounding the requisite two toots to go forward and three to reverse. The individual cars were golf-cart sized, gasoline-powered vehicles known as speeders – used by railroads to repair and maintain tracks during the second half of the 20th century.

Speeders are the growing passion of hobbyists who salvage them from dusty barns, install luxuries like cushioned seats, intercoms and picnic coolers, and chug off to experience the winding rails at a leisurely 15 mph.

"You get to see a lot of the country from a viewpoint no one else sees," said Warren Froese, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, president of the North American Railcar Operators Association. He organized a speeder trip a few years ago through a part of northern Manitoba accessible only by plane or train.

About 1,100 people in North America secure insurance for speeders through the association; the number grows about 5 percent each year, he said.

The boxy cars set off recently from behind the Hampton Inn in Folsom, just beyond East Bidwell Road and Highway 50, in preparation for a Sept. 18-19 railroad festival that will raise money to maintain the historic track.

The 10-mile section was built in the late 1800s or early 1900s to bring Placerville lumber and stone down to market in Sacramento, said one of the festival organizers, Larry Bowler.

The stretch is no longer used by rail companies, leaving it vulnerable to disrepair and development. But the local speeder group has negotiated for use of the run, cutting back weeds, tightening bolts and replacing ties and rails in exchange.

"Inside every man's breast beats the heart of a steam locomotive," said Bowler, 71, of Elk Grove, a retired Sacramento County sheriff's deputy and state assemblyman.

Bowler's two-seat 1960s Fairmont speeder – which often tows a cart carrying maintenance tools – was originally used by the Southern Pacific Railroad. Railroad companies have since replaced speeders with hybrid trucks that can drive on roads as well as ride rails.

Bowler's speeder now boasts upholstered van seats, racks and shelves, brake lights and an antique oiler can. He bought it for \$2,000 a few years ago and thinks its value has increased

to \$5,000.

"This is preserving history," Bowler said, "and it just happens we have fun doing it."

Speeder enthusiasts get permission from track owners and travel in groups of at least two – the aging vehicles inevitably break down and having two guarantees a ride back, Bowler said. His speeder carries six gallons of gasoline, fuel enough for the better part of a day.

Don Lee, 76, of Lincoln, bought a speeder for his railroad-loving grandson. That grandson is grown, but the retired mapmaker for the California Department of Transportation continues to climb aboard his four-seater with the California flag flying from one side and the American flag from the other.

"It's like a disease," said his wife, Diana.

Chuck Ratto, 46, owns a speeder that starts with the turn of a hand crank. Tinkering is requisite – there's no catalog for parts and creativity is a must to keep it running, said the medium-equipment mechanic from Calaveras County.

"You turn the crank and start the engine, put it in gear and go," he said. "Not many people get the opportunity to do that."

Tom Correa, 62, of Jackson, bought a speeder that once ran along the Soo Line Railroad in Minnesota and was discovered in a snowbank. He dismantled it down to the axles, and then the retired Xerox technician installed aluminum running boards, new forklift seats, a wood console with cutouts for drink cups ... and shiny truck horns.

"We're always little kids," he said. "We just happen to get old."

HIT THE TRACKS

The Folsom Historic Railroad and Transportation Festival will take place Sept. 18-19 from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. behind the Hampton Inn, 155 Placerville Road, Folsom. Admission is free, but there will be charges for speeder and streetcar rides to raise funds for maintenance on the 10-mile stretch of railway. For more information, call Larry Bowler at (916) 764-5110.

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