

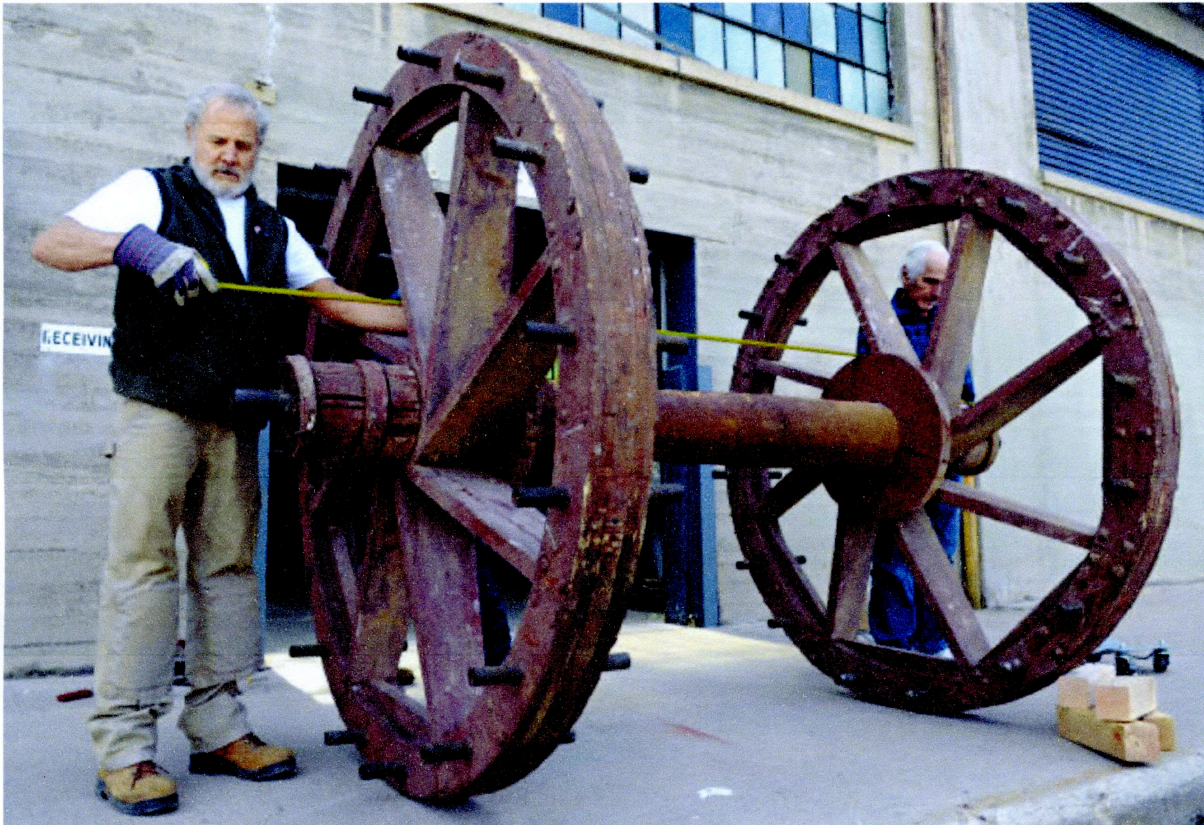
Remember Me

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL

Well spindle rolls into city's Wheels Museum

By [Ollie Reed Jr. / Journal Staff Writer](#)

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Martin Matlack, left, with fellow Wheels Museum volunteer Barry Lyon, delivers a well spindle to the museum at the Albuquerque railyards at 1102 Second SW. (Dean Hanson/Albuquerque Journal)

It's big, round, rough, obviously old and looks more than anything like the wheels off the world's biggest ox cart.

And if that were the case, the fact it is the latest exhibit donated to Albuquerque's Wheels Museum makes perfect sense.

But this is not a set of wagon wheels. It is a link to the world of steam locomotives, a relic from a bygone era of railroading. It's a well spindle.

Martin Matlack, who knows more than most about water and railroads, explains. A well spindle was a vital cog in getting water to steam locomotives that could take on as much as 25,000 gallons during a stop, he said.

Wheels Museum

Cared for and operated entirely by volunteers, the museum at 1102 Second SW is dedicated to showcasing the past, present and future of transportation. Although it has no formal hours, volunteers are usually on hand from 9

a.m. to noon most days to admit visitors. There is no admission charge, but donations are accepted. Call 505-243-6269.

This large piece of equipment, made up of two 6-foot-diameter wheels and weighing about 800 pounds, was used to lower pumps into the wells that supplied water to railside water tanks.

This particular spindle came from one of six well houses a mile north of Negra, a tiny Tarrant County town 23 miles west of Vaughn.

Negra came into existence when the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad built the Belen cutoff about 1905 or 1906. The well spindle likely dates back to that time.

"Towns had a way of springing up along railroad tracks, because steam engines needed water," Matlack said Friday during a phone interview from his Cedar Crest home. "There were six 900-foot-deep wells about a mile north of Negra. There were two large water tanks (at Negra) and these wells supplied those tanks for the locomotives."

The well houses were 16½ feet by 26½ feet with concrete floors, wooden frames and pitched roofs that opened up like a clam shell directly over the well. The well spindle now in the Wheels Museum came from one of the three well houses still standing. The two Negra water tanks are gone.

Matlack, 63, grew up in Los Alamos and graduated from the University of New Mexico.

He is a retired water operator with the Sierra Vista Mutual Domestic Association, a water system in Cedar Crest.

"My passion is railroads," he said. "After I found the train under the Christmas tree, I was hooked."

He combines his enthusiasm for railroads with photography, a hobby since he was a kid.

"I've been shooting pictures of trains for 50 years," he said. "I go out and find a good place and shoot pictures of Amtrak trains."

He photographed Albuquerque's Alvarado Hotel, the grand old Harvey House railroad hotel, not long before its demolition in 1970.

Roman Garcia, mayor of Vaughn, which gets its water supply from the old Negra wells, donated the well spindle to Wheels.

Matlack, a volunteer at the museum for about eight months, helped load up the spindle and transport it to Albuquerque.

He points out that there are handles on the wheels of the well spindle, lots of handles.

"They were hand-powered and there was a rope (on the spindle) so they would winch the well pump in and out of the well bore," he said. "There was a mechanical brake to stop the action of the spindle."

The spindle was used to place the steam-operated pump into the well and to pull it out for repair or replacement.

Matlack said there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the well spindle could be used to pump water if the steam pump failed.

"The top of the well house opened up, so we've heard stories that they could put a block and tackle through the top of the well house and use the well spindle to move the sucker rod pump up and down manually," he said. "You could get a lot of men around that 6-foot wheel."

And trains with schedules to keep couldn't wait on pumps to be repaired.