

King of the Army 2-8-0s

The life and projects of Robert Franzen and his company: Steam Services of America

By Steve Glischinski | January 25, 2016

RELATED TOPICS: STEAM/PRESERVATION | HISTORICAL | PEOPLE



Steam Services of America, is repairing Great Smoky Mountain Railroad 2-8-0 Consolidation-type No. 1702 at the railroad's shop in Dillsboro, N.C. When complete, the locomotive will be among the latest U.S. Army Consols restored by 2-8-0 "king" Robert Franzen.

Steam Services of America

SYLVA, N.C. — Robert Franzen is a busy man. As president of Steam Services of America, he assists in steam locomotive restorations, provides parts and lubricants for steam engines, and serves as a technical advisor for steam projects. But these days you could call him the

“King of the Army 2-8-0s.” He is working on the rebuild of former U.S. Army Consolidations in Alaska and North Carolina, providing parts for another at the Age of Steam Roundhouse in Ohio, and consulting on yet another Army 2-8-0 restoration project in the United Kingdom.

During the World War II the U.S. Army Transport Corps was called upon to provide a heavy freight steam locomotive for use in Europe and Africa. Many of the locomotives were to be stockpiled in Britain in the lead up to the D-Day invasion of Europe, and some were to be loaned to British railway companies to help with the war effort. The result was the S-160 class Consolidation 2-8-0. Built between 1942 and 1945, they were the largest single class of steam locomotives ever constructed in North America, with 2,120 built. The three major American builders, Baldwin, American Locomotive Co., and Lima were all engaged in the effort to build the locomotives.

Closest to the Steam Service of America shop in Sylva is Great Smoky Mountains Railroad S-160 No. 1702 in Dillsboro, N.C. Baldwin built No. 1702 in September 1942 for U.S. Army use at Fort Benning, Ga. After going through several owners, it was sold to the Great Smoky Mountains in 1991. It has been out of service since 2005.

Franzen says good progress is being made on the overhaul of No. 1702 with the firebox now installed.

“We replaced the rear flue sheet, the door sheet, the crown sheet and the side sheets,” he says, all of which were newly fabricated. Franzen and his crew are now putting



Robert Franzen

Steve Glischinski



A Steam Services of America employee works on staybolts for Great Smoky Mountain Railroad's former U.S. Army 2-8-0 No. 1702.

Steam Services of America

staybolts and rivets in, then will move to flues and tubes. After the boiler appliances and various other parts are back on the engine, the boiler will be hydrostatically tested and then test fired. The railroad is hoping to have the engine back in service in mid-summer 2016.

The company has had one to two employees working on the engine since June 2015. The company's contract is for work on the boiler, providing the boiler materials, specialty tooling, and labor such as boilermakers, based on the railroad's needs. Great Smoky Mountain employees are providing the majority of the labor to rebuild the engine, including overhauling the tender and other items such as valve gear repair, the lubrication and electrical system, overhauling appliances, and the cab.

Over the last two years, Steam Services has also been working on the overhaul of Alaska Railroad 2-8-0 No. 557 in Anchorage, Alaska. No. 557, built in 1944, was the Alaska Railroad's last operating steam locomotive, used as late as 1962. Franzen was hired as a consultant to show the non-profit, all-volunteer 557 Restoration Project the proper steps to restore the engine, file paperwork, and establish maintenance and operating procedures.

"I help them with everything as far as what to do and how to do it," Franzen says. His workers are the only paid employees on the No. 557 project.

Like the No. 1702, Franzen's company fabricated an all-new firebox for the 557's boiler and is supplying all the boiler materials. The firebox was installed in the summer of 2014 over a six-week period by an Steam Services crew and 557 volunteers. Franzen's company also rebuilt the air pump and governor at its shop in Sylva, and when 557's wheels were sent to Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum in Chattanooga, he managed the machining of the wheel sets.

The 557 Restoration Project has set an eight-year time frame for the engine's overhaul, but hopes to complete it in a shorter time frame as funds permit. Franzen visits every two to three months to help line up the work, help with sourcing, and set the scope of work to be accomplished, with the amount of work depending on funding. Franzen's crew plans to return in 2016 to install staybolts, get the boiler ready for flues and tubes, and eventually a hydro test.

Franzen's connection to Army 2-8-0s stretches back several years to when he owned one of the engines. In 2010 he purchased No. 612 from the State of West Virginia where it was stored at the Cass Scenic Railroad, and moved it to storage at the Southeastern Railway Museum in Duluth, Ga. The engine was built by Baldwin in 1943 as No. 2630, and renumbered 612 in 1954 when it was used for railroad operation and maintenance training at the U.S. Army Transportation School at Ft. Eustis, Va. In April 2015 Franzen sold No. 612 to Jerry Joe Jacobson's Age of Steam Roundhouse in Sugar Creek, Ohio.

Steam Services is supplying Age of Steam with a new set of flues for 612 that have already been delivered; a new set of superheater units, a new dome lid, and performed the Federal Railroad Administration Form 4 boiler specification paperwork for the engine. Franzen said after Age of Steam completes some other projects at the roundhouse, they would turn to rebuilding No. 612.

Franzen is also serving as a consultant on a project to rebuild an Army 2-8-0 in the United Kingdom. No. 2253 was built by Baldwin in 1942 and worked in Poland before returning to the U.K. Now owned by Peter Best, the engine is now under restoration to working condition at AD Engineering Ltd. in Stockton. Upon completion it will be based at the Dartmouth Steam Railway. So far Franzen's involvement has been by email and phone, but he hopes to travel to the U.K. in the next three to four months to help on-site.

Franzen volunteered as a teenager at the Southeastern Railway Museum, commuting to Georgia from his home in South Carolina. He was also a volunteer during the days of the Southern Railway steam program, working under the tutelage of Southern's Master Mechanic – Steam, Bill Purdie.

Among the locomotives and projects he has worked on over the years are Burlington Route 2-8-2 No. 4960, Chesapeake & Ohio 4-8-4 No. 614, Reading 4-8-4 No. 2100, and assisting in the move of Steamtown rail equipment from Vermont to Scranton, Pa. He worked for a time with steam restoration specialist Gary Bensman, and while working with Bensman met a young Steve Sandberg, who would eventually go on to rebuild Milwaukee Road 4-8-4 No. 261. Franzen has worked with the Friends of the 261 since its inception in the early 1990s, and is a regular engineer on 261 trips.

He served as chief mechanical officer for the Grand Canyon Railway for 14 years, rebuilding his old friend No. 4960 and two other former Lake Superior & Ishpeming steam locomotives. He was also responsible for purchasing former VIA Rail Canada Montreal Locomotive Works FPA4 diesels and a fleet of passenger cars.

When Iowa Interstate Railroad purchased two QJ-class 2-10-2 steam locomotives from China in 2006, the railroad hired Franzen to oversee their maintenance and operation. When Iowa Interstate decided to step back from steam operations directly, the non-profit Central States Steam Preservation Association was established to assume the preservation, maintenance, and operation of the engines. Franzen is the organization's chief mechanical officer and serves on its board of directors.

He started Steam Services in 2001 on a part time basis, and in 2005 began devoting himself full time to the company. In addition to steam restoration work, Franzen's company is now the biggest axle and rod grease supplier to the tourist railroad industry in the U.S.

« Previous story

**East Lansing station
replacement enters service
this morning**

NEWSWIRE

Today's Stories

Previous Day

Older

South Shore proposes fare increase to boost capital budget

Commuter trains mostly up-to-speed in the Northeast

UP improves safety in 2015, except for derailments

Isle of Man horsecar line closed permanently

Minnesota streetcar restoration nearly complete

Amtrak shoulders through blizzard W/ video

CSX and NS keep moving freight despite heavy snows

East Lansing station replacement enters service this morning

King of the Army 2-8-0s