

ABBY

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Chapter 44 - Old Number 214

I watched the inspection of a heavy truck sent to us by the State Police when one of our trucking company's tractor trailer trucks returned. The tractor towed our battered low boy gooseneck trailer we had acquired from government surplus. We had sent it out on a customer demand for a light load although it needed tires, welding a crack in the frame, brake repairs, and a good paint job. What resided on top needed much more, and so old I didn't recognize it.

The mechanics explained to me that the derelict cargo on the trailer had been a vintage Mack AC model chaindrive truck from the 1920s or the 1930s. The chain for the rear wheel drive on the right side towards me no longer existed. The decaying rubber around the right hand rear wheel had been the original non-pneumatic tire. I refrained from asking where had this old truck come from.

The Mansion House activities had grown so complex that I had given up thinking I knew what happened all the time. Conference calls with our business coach Cindy helped me, a lot, to let the staff do what they were good at. In this case somebody had allowed our lowboy trailer to be rented out before I would have let it go. My sister-wives encouraged my attending those conference calls. I asked myself, again, where had this old derelict Mack truck come from.

A spiffy expensive late model Cadillac pulled in behind our lowboy with that old derelict truck on top. A portly older man struggled to exit the driver's door and stand up. "Is the boss around?"

Everyone wore a uniform and a name-tag even the mechanics in their grease stained denim uniforms and me in my shirtdress or better and in sandals. When going out of the Mansion House main building I usually had a shoulder bag that had progressed from a bright red derelict from Salvation Army to a new spiffy upscale leather one. The jail work release inmates teased me a little that I didn't have an alligator hide bag since they processed the hides for us. My bag carried an emergency breast pump, a pair of disposable diapers, and my 44 caliber revolver buried under all that. The strap of my shoulder bag went over my shoulder as I walked to him.

He glanced at my name tag reading 'Cindi' and 'Chair'. His eyes went up and down my body and fixed on my young face. "Son, they warned me you wear a dress for Lord only knows what reason. I don't know what you do, but when we stopped at Orange for gas this old derelict truck attracted a crowd. We found it in an old barn hidden behind low hills. One of the men at that Pilot's Travel Stop introduced another man to me as the Chief. Chief of what went unexplained. Cajun or Creole I guess. Anyway, I've never heard such a raving fan before as that Chief spoke so highly of you. He told me this place does good work, and I'd be a damned fool if I didn't stop here."

I doubted anyone had gotten away with calling this portly older gentlemen who had obviously made himself very successful a 'damned fool' in a long time. "What can we do for you, sir?" I made a mental note to check out that Pilot's Travel Stop and later discovered they had showers for truckers. The next chance we had at an expansion we added showers and laundry for truckers which drew business from the Love's Travel Stops nearest us in both directions. A sign went up in our store "our swamp critters are cleaner than your swamp critters". The truckers loved it.

He answered. "Restore this old truck. That Chief reported that you buy all kinds of old equipment for yourselves and fix it up. Like this low boy. He told me you make parts if you have to, and have interns. Having this truck restored is going to be expensive. How about looking at this and give me a call with how you would charge for taking it completely apart. Sandblast and paint the body, overhaul the working parts, and put it all back together?"

Another flock of interns would descend on us soon without a clue of what to have them do. Taking this thing apart could be something for them. Rebuilding it would require help from the repair mechanics and the paint shop. "Sure. We can look it over and call you. That may take a couple of weeks to think this over and tell you what we discover."

"They said you're an honest Swamp Cat."

"They did?" The surprise in my voice sounded patently obvious. "That's a racially tainted term. I'm surprised anyone said that when I'm not even the slightest part of a Cajun or Creole." That I ever knew of anyway. I didn't look it. We never had liked the name of our trucking company. A vision flashed and we thought of renaming it Swamp Cat Trucking complete with a decal of an alligator or a bob cat climbing over a log with a cargo load on its back. But, we didn't.

He continued. "Well, yes, that Chief did with a voice full of admiration. I like your candor." He dug out his wallet and gave me his business card with an address in Dallas, Texas. Out of his car came a soft battered black leather satchel. He counted out ten bills of one hundred dollars each. "Here. I know perfectly well that making a careful exam of it and all those rusted bolts will cost you something."

I frowned as I held his money. "Come into the office. We'll write out a repair order to keep this 'Honest Swamp Cat'."

In the office Wheelchair Bob already had an image on his computer screen of that truck model. He loved thinking about it. The printer whirred and a repair order spooled out.

The new interns had become paid staff with us or elsewhere before we assembled all the parts needed. Those parts included overhauling the engine, transmission, and that peculiar final drive. We kept the e-mails and images flowing to him almost every week. His wire transfers arrived at the bank every time we had to repair or buy an expensive part.

He wanted it painted green. Wheelchair Bob did his best to convince him to have it painted a red from an image of one found on the internet. Or maybe gray. But no, that man wanted it painted deep dark green. Well, that matched what we had painted our trucks and that conex container with all those new tires.

When the time came for our customer to come fetch that Mack truck our lowboy had long ago been restored. It had new brakes, tires, cracks welded with splices, its own paint job of Cedar Valley Trucking's attractive industrial green, and a decal of the logo of a small grove of Atlantic White Cedar trees at the edge of a swamp.

He walked around it several times as he rubbed his chin. "What octane gas?"

The mechanic who had supervised the restoration responded. "Low. That's a problem. The lowest we sell is 87, but it wants 60. You'll want to research this yourself. We mixed kerosene in lowering the octane, but it needs the right fuel."

The customer smiled. "Honest answer. Do you know a model T will run on kerosene after starting it with a little gasolene? Betcha Big Bertha here will do that too."

The mechanics and interns assembled around us all smiled at that name.

He already knew our bill by e-mail and wrote us a big check. "Fire that puppy up."

So, he knew truckers' lingo. "Don't you want to?"

"I can tell the people here loved this project. You can't do this as just a job. Who worked on this the most?"

"Oh, sir, that included many people." A vision flashed through my head as one of our big rigs pulled in. Shannon scurried out there with her flashlight and tire pressure gauge to inspect that rig. She had been the first at the wheel of that Mack when we turned the crank. "Let me introduce our gentlest driver." I raised my voice. "Hey. Shannon. We need you."

That round face of hers made her perfect for the kind of radiant smile she could throw. "Here's the man for the Mack truck. He said 'fire that puppy up', so get yourself up there in the cab and take him for a spin."

One of the guys turned the crank handle as Shannon worked the spark advance. It started on the second try.

She took it purring and puttering down the side road, and across the stop light intersection to our motel, toured the shopping center parking lot a few times, and brought him back. They must have talked as he asked her to load it on our lowboy flat bed trailer and haul it to Dallas for him.

A few months later we received an e-mail from him with images of his antique truck at a big fair. It had won a ribbon which pleased him very much. He also referred to us two people with old cars to restore. Wheelchair Bob made another website for our new business of 'Honest Swamp Cat Restorations'. He made a picture history for the truckers' store, the restaurant, and on a new website of our restoring that Mack Truck. I got the psychologists in on whether we should use that self deprecating name. They came back with a survey they had made of the staff. For some weird reason never fully explained to me the staff liked it.

My sister-wives told me one of the secret reasons the staff liked it came from the pun of calling me a 'swamp cat'. They needed a fun way to pull me down a little.

My sister-wives had learned to use my last diaper change in the evening for how

I had experienced my day. When I talked about the Mansion House complex growing all on its own they reminded me of my leading the escape. I had made a safe place for everyone. I had that now, so let everyone else grow into their own space.

The diaper changing and breast pumping station needed a little expansion, which we did. The sign remained of 'no privacy, no modesty, no suicide'.

The next e-mail from our older customer in Dallas put shivers through all of us with an image of a railroad steam locomotive in sorry shape. It didn't take long for Wheelchair Bob to find the few places that restored old steam locomotives he could send it to. "Naw" was the old man's answer. Bob found which heritage railroads had shops that could make us any castings and parts needed.

The model railroad club morphed into a big railroad club.

That castings business nearly collided us with the Mob again. Quality steel castings for machining arrived from India. Fake castings of gold arrived from Venezuela by way of Brazil painted to look like gray steel. The freight forwarder switched the contents of the boxes and sent the camouflaged gold castings back to India as defective steel castings. India had a shortage of gold, or at least their Mafia did. We called the FBI only to become a shadowy figure in a CIA sting operation. We were greatly relieved when that switching operation closed down before we were violently attacked.

There were over a dozen railroad museums within a day's drive of us, but only one had working steam locomotives. They made common repairs such as replacing the fire tubes through the boilers, but nothing so fancy as this project. Their insurance prohibited guests from visiting their shop.

The Arizona Railway Museum told us all the horrors of restoring steam locomotives. They couldn't help us directly, but we could visit them near Phoenix located over a day's drive away. We attracted volunteers from them which strained our relationship for awhile, but they got over it when their volunteers returned to them with their success stories.

That older customer bought it, sent us a big wire transfer, and a signed a repair order. That order had a new waiver that Danielle our resident lawyer wrote for us.

That operating Heritage Railroad had first dibs on all the used crossties and railroad rail they could find. Wheelchair Bob did better. Flat bed trucks of both rails and crossties arrived. We had to borrow a crane for lifting that heavy stuff, but he found an old truck crane which we bought, and of course, repaired. We extended our track around the back side of the shopping mall. A sheet steel building went up over the tracks near our garage spanning the tracks to keep people out of the work area and from being hurt.

My sister-wives shared my doubts. On a suggestion in a coaching call, we formed an Executive Committee of the Chairs of the more important Committees and Task Forces. The ExCom became all for restoring that old locomotive as long as we kept it safe. In a coaching call another client of our coach Cindy told a story of her being in the hot cab of a working steam locomotive charming the crew. That crew loved being asked guy style questions by what they thought of as a pretty woman while Cindy got a first class tour of the gauges and gadgets. I became envious and had visions of boiler explosions.

We didn't need a telephone call when that locomotive arrived on a railroad flat car on the railroad tracks under the highway bridge. We had to move it quickly as they used that track all the time. The restaurant staff saw it and sent an intern for me.

The railroad wanted to bill us for sending a switching engine. They sent the engine, but they never billed us. A customer lent us his bulldozer that we had repaired from time to time. We built a track ramp from one of our derelict tracks up to the height of that flatcar.

That old engine did not have working brakes. We assembled two bulldozers. One pulled on that engine as the other held it back. That locomotive wobbling scared me terribly as it moved off that flat car and onto the temporary ramp.

I took deep heavy breaths as the whole thing had been safely moved. I became so wrapped up in myself I didn't notice everybody else also taking deep heavy breaths, but they told me.

We all went inside for sodas, coffee, and heavy munchies as the two bulldozers were being disconnected. We abandoned our drinks and munchies and rushed back to the locomotive as it rolled creaking down the slight incline. A bulldozer pulled it back up, and this time scraps of wood and steel were wedged in under the wheels. Whew.

So many restaurant customers asked to see the locomotive we made it into a show piece called 'pet our pet project'. Pictures of the progress went up. A website was launched. A collection box for donations would go some days without a thing, and then some weekends would have a hundred dollars a day. We used barriers for allowing customers into the shed with the locomotive in a way they could pet, literally, a black rusty part.

Taking it apart with many busted bolts became a task for the interns. There were a few close calls with very heavy parts. We made our own cranes and lifts for parts that easily weighed hundreds of pounds. The front had lost its brass plate with a number. Having a new one cast became so expensive we asked the owner what number did he want. He responded a few weeks later with the number 214, so we named it Ole 214.

The day arrived for pulling the fire tubes out of the boiler. For this, the advice of the other heritage railroads' repair shops became priceless, and more so a few hard core volunteers from the museum. We had to make our own tools for this task. Of course those fire tubes being rusted in place made this harder than ever. The noise became deafening. We made the interns wear ear muff hearing protectors which they hated in the heat. We sent an e-mail to our customer in Dallas with pictures of pulling those fire tubes.

A response came back from his wife that he had suffered a stroke. She asked what had been owed to that point, but she couldn't let him pay us any more after that.

We tried to be nice about it, but the locomotive seemed to be a wreck as it sat there. We couldn't send it back to him without more money. Instead, she and he made a gift of it to us.

Now what?

'Now what' became appeals for money at the restaurant, at the gas station, at auto repair, at the motel, on the internet, and anywhere else. The money came in

slowly, and the work slowed down to match. The interns graduated to paid positions refurbishing cars and trucks we bought in nearby cities. Our vintage tow truck went to the darndest places for old cars.

In a coaching call we were told to raise our rates. Cindy agreed. Another came around to the same view. My sister-wives went around the staff who agreed over a little time. A dime a gallon and quarter a meal doesn't sound like much, until it all adds up.

The pipes as fire tubes for the boiler, the peculiar hollow staybolts at the firebox, and the lagging over the boiler cost real money. Bob found scrap sheet steel for the jacket over the boiler, but the acetylene and oxygen for cutting their exact shapes cost money too.

We couldn't afford to buy it a tender if one could be found for sale. A community college offered to weld us a center sill from thick heavy strip steel, and with that offer we planned to build the tender ourselves. We couldn't afford the trucks. Someone heckled the mainline railroad into giving us four old axles with wheels. With steel strips an inch thick and three inches wide we made arch bar trucks the way they did when that locomotive had been new. That style of railroad trucks had been banned for many years; we were not supposed to run it on a real railroad. Just one step at a time.

We struggled making a heavy lift apparatus for taking that locomotive off of its wheels to replace the bearings. We had to mold our own babbitt metal for those. We had to make our own fixtures for turning the steel tires on the cast iron wheels. That almost became a disaster until we made a very heavy fixture for holding the cutting tool as the wheel rotated. The Strasburg Railroad told us how to heat and remove those steel tires, and heat them to put them back on. We bent copper pipe into a circle matching the wheel diameter and made that into a huge circular gas burner. One diameter for the main driving wheels; another for the pilot and trailing wheels.

We'd run out of money and wait. A railroad buff at a major shipyard a day's drive away would call us about government surplus we might use if we formed a non-profit for our heritage and tourist railroad. With all of the interns who cycled through every year we easily claimed being educational. Applying became enough. He called us with free stuff. He found an old surplus girder bridge that matched the vintage of our locomotive. We used it crossing a swamp drainage passage called a gully.

The big surprise came from the railroad that ran under our parking garage. Someone knew someone on the railroad. They sent us defective new concrete crossties and old rail they couldn't use with their heavy fast trains. Our locomotive would be light weight compared to them, and we thought would go much slower. Later we learned better.

An Historical Society had a restored locomotive much bigger and heavier than ours. It made an excursion trip to a nearby big city. A bunch of us had to go see it. When we explained what we were up to they gave us a first class tour of all the working features of that big heavy locomotive. They had us sit with them at dinner as they talked about running it. After dinner they talked about repairing it. Daunted, educated, and inspired we drove home ready for the next challenge.

Truckers liked that locomotive as much as anybody. One of them told another who told another who told a ready mix concrete company. We made the forms and every time a concrete mixer returned with unused wet concrete they couldn't use they poured into crossties for us. We had to buy the rebar for that, but scraps of that showed

up for free too.

Someone found us state money as a prospective tourist site. Not too much, but when it arrived it boosted our spirits as we had all been feeling miserably low right then about this project.

Replacement fittings for the back end of the boiler were expensive. Finding a maker for the main steam pressure gauge so it looked original became a tedious discussion. Making a suitable face plate became an insurmountable problem. By now our locomotive shed had grown into a machine shop. They made a circular brass plate. Our artistic group hand painted all the markings on the face plate. It looked terrific when we sent it off to the gauge maker.

The steam locomotive had been lifted off of its wheels when the trailing truck had been pulled out. It had a big crack through the cast iron. We didn't even ask. The Feds would never approve using that trailing truck with that big crack. Wheelchair Bob could not find one for sale. Our hearts sank at this news. Misty came through again. He proposed and we did use his 3D printing to make small sections of a huge lost wax casting. Those sections were glued together with hot wax. He found used wax as a drug on the market. No one wanted it with all the acquired impurities. We could have hardly cared less. We watched almost in awe as this huge block of light blue wax grew shaped as a trailing truck. We cut many pieces of wood to hold it up when we loaded it on a flat car to carry to the foundry. It all worked. We had a new trailing truck.

The day came when we called the State Government who called the Federal inspectors. It took days pumping enough compressed air into that boiler which leaked slightly. My stomach feared a boiler explosion which didn't happen. Later the volunteers told me a cold boiler held more pressure safely than a hot one. Oh dear, I'd have to worry all over again when we heated it for steam.

Our track stretched thousands feet around a bend on the far side of the shopping center. We fantasized how much further our locomotive could go around that bend when it had moved barely out of sight.

We still didn't have a tender until out of the blue we had a call about a rusted out derelict in West Virginia. Having it hauled to a railroad and then to us seemed frightfully expensive. Instead, our trucking company went there with our lowboy trailer, and we hired a heavy construction crane out there. We asked for financial help from everyone we could contact. It didn't have the trucks, but we were well on our way to making our own. It was a pain lifting that dead weight off of the lowboy trailer. The newest interns took welding courses for adding new steel all around the bottom corners of the rusted out water tank.

A good name for our railroad eluded us. Names such as Swamp Critter or Crockigator were too cute. Our in house computer guru Misty ran the muzak playing softly with a bias towards pop country. Who he consulted with for the music selection never became clear. One day he played an old classic song *Blue Bayou*. That caught on. We named our not so little heritage tourist railroad the *Blue Bayou Railroad*.

The locomotive boiler and tender became covered in the thick industrial rust preventing royal blue our paint shop routinely stocked. That paint gleamed so much we could vaguely see ourselves in its reflections. Lower down in small lettering on the tender where big railroads used to paint the gallons of water and tons of coal we added a line. We had worked hard for official recognition of our little railroad as a 'Charitable

Educational Organization' and painted that on the tender in a line below those capacities. Below that we had a strong statement of 'We are proud multi-ethnic Americans from the edge of a swamp'.

Who would be the first engineer? Multiple fireman and many volunteer brakemen could all take the first ride.

On who would be the engineer for the very first time I shook my head. "Not me; this is everyone's project." I did ride a footboard at the back of the tender as an honorary brakeman for the first run. We didn't have any railway cars needing braking.

The first engineer was the man who had done all the research and called all those sources of information and stuff we needed. He had made himself into our resident expert. The team built a ramp up to the cab, and pushed Wheelchair Bob up there. They had installed hand rails for him to move into the engineer's seat on his own. His live-in girl friend had bought him genuine historic railroad coveralls and a matching cap. As the fire heated the boiler, the interns and other volunteers oiled and greased all those bearings and moving parts normally maintained by the engineer.

Bob waived from the cab window to every camera. The whistle blew. The bell clanged. Steam shot out of the cylinders. The whistle blew again. Bob moved the reversing lever forward to the first notch, and cracked the throttle. Nobody cared about all the steam leaks to be fixed.

Blue Bayou Railroad locomotive number 214 moved on its own power to a crowd of cheering staff, volunteers, friends, customers, a reporter, church members, and only the Good Lord knew who else. I cried.

We sent e-mails with images to the wife in Texas, who wrote back with appreciation from her and her invalid husband. We had painted his name in small letters under the engineer's window as an honorary engineer. She told us he had been charmed by that. After all the photos, we painted that over.

On the first trip our locomotive went all the way around behind the shopping center to the end of our short track with its front wheels almost off the rails. It brought itself back, too.

We collected more old rails, more ties, and even a derelict flat car which we rebuilt.

The railroad kept putting me in view of the public. The diaper changing station altered the way they did things which no longer widened my hips. I wanted surgery for my hips, my voice, and whatever else would make me appear more genuinely feminine.