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Archives: News

At 103, Nelson climbs into engineer's seat

By Beverly J. Lydick/Tribune Staff

It took a few years, but Earl Nelson finally got his heart's desire.

Wearing a striped cap, a red bandana and an ear-to-ear grin, the 103-year-old Fremont man boarded a diesel locomotive of the Fremont and Elkhorn Valley Railroad Saturday for his very first time at an engine's throttle.

"I think I'm dreaming," Nelson said while waiting for 60 passengers and crew to board the train for its 18-mile excursion to Nickerson and back.

But what happened Saturday was more like a dream-come-true.

Nelson, who lives independently at Nye Square, said earlier this month in a Tribune article that once in his life, he would like to sit at the controls of a locomotive. Nye Square staff picked up on the comment and arranged for Nelson to have his wish.

The elderly engineer did not arrive at the FEVR station alone. Along for the ride were more than a dozen assorted relatives, including daughter Irene Spain of Omaha along with brother and sister-in-law Dean and Connie Nelson of Bellevue.

As they found seats in the passenger cars, several photographers surrounded the engine, asking Nelson to smile and wave.

He obliged, saying, "They're sure wasting a lot of film."

Departure time neared and Mel Cunningham, FEVR engineer, pointed out the train's whistle. Nelson tried it out and some of his family stepped to the door of the first car to wish him well.

"Keep it on the tracks," said brother Dean. "I



Earl Nelson, who at 103 lives independently at Nye Square, has always wanted to sit at the controls of a locomotive. On Sunday, he fulfilled that dream on the Fremont and Elkhorn Valley Railroad excursion to Nickerson. - Beverly J. Lydick/Fremont Tribune

took out extra insurance."

"I suppose he took it out on himself, not me," replied Nelson as Cunningham eased the train out of the station.

For the first five or six miles, Nelson rode shotgun in the conductor's seat, taking in a view that only 15 miles an hour can provide.

Mourning doves fluttered up and away from the tracks and butterflies danced among the goldenrod blooming in the ditches. Wild plums ripened on branches growing so close they brushed the sides of the cab.

The train whistle blew at every crossing.

Nelson covered his ears but took it all in.

"This is wonderful," he said. "I never thought I'd ever be doing this."

A few miles out of Nickerson, Cunningham brought the train to a halt and turned to Nelson.

"It's your turn," he said.

Although Nelson wore two hearing aids, he didn't have to be told twice. Moving into the engine seat, he smiled and said, "You'll see something now."

Then Cunningham eased the throttle forward, and the oldest engineer ever to man a FEVR train took it straight down the tracks. It wasn't the fastest run, only about 10 miles per hour, and it wasn't the longest, just a mile or two.

But for Nelson, it was the trip of a lifetime.



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