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WEEKEND BREAK

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Love of locomotives

RYDER DOPP, 16, IS PART OF A VOLUNTEER TEAM RESTORING VINTAGE “NO. 21 BALDWIN”

By HEATHER DOUGLAS
For EO Media Group

While many teens choose to spend their free time on social media, 16-year-old Ryder Dopp spends his Saturdays with fellow volunteers many times his age restoring an antique steam locomotive nicknamed the “No. 21 Baldwin.”

The core crew — led by Astoria Railroad Preservation Association President John Niemann — has been chugging away on the project for more than two decades inside a rusty metal shop near the tracks between the Portway Tavern and Astoria Trolley Barn.

A workhorse

Officially known as the “Santa Maria Valley No. 21,” the vintage locomotive in her prime was a workhorse pulling loads of sugar beets, vegetables and petroleum products along the 36-mile Santa Maria Valley Railroad line in Southern California. When the railroad fell on hard times, it was purchased at a sheriff’s auction for \$75,000 by oil tycoon and philanthropist George Allan Hancock.

A very wealthy man, Hancock’s family was friends with Walt Disney and owned The La Brea Tar Pits. When the No. 21 was ‘retired’ in 1962, a small book called “The Final Run of #21” shows photos of Disney on the train.

The locomotive ended up in Astoria in a way reminiscent of the Astoria Riverfront Trolley’s origins.

The No. 21, like the trolley, was found disassembled in a field in Snoqualmie, Washington. The antique steam engine was sold by the Hancock family to an unidentified owner who had hoped to restore the machine but abandoned the mission. In 1991, Niemann and the Preservation Association jumped at the opportunity to purchase the relic for \$17,000.

The community helped raise enough money to lift and transport the pieces to Astoria — a task that required six trucks. Once the locomotive was settled into the shop, Preservation Association volunteers stripped the engine’s paint, then sandblasted, cleaned and primed it in preparation for assembling it.

Their ultimate goal from day one: to restore No. 21 to the fresh condition it was in when the locomotive departed the Baldwin shops in 1925, and, one day, to run it as a tourist train along the Columbia River.

Put right to work

In 2015, Ryder Dopp — the son of Diana Kirk and Steve Dopp — had just moved with his family from Portland to Astoria. He noticed a sign across the street from his new house: “Astoria Steam Restoration Shop.”

Soon, the teen was at the shop offering his services. “I could see the sign from my window and figured I’d just be put to work sweeping the floors or something,” he recalled, “but I think they put me right to work grinding handles the first day.”

He has been fascinated by trains ever since his grandfather gave him a train set when Dopp was a child; he can’t remember a time when he wasn’t in love with them.

“You know those DVDs of trains at the library? I would just sit and watch them for hours,” he said. “I’ve always had a passion for it.”

Dopp, an Astoria High School student, also has a paid part-time job as a summer camp counselor with the Astoria Recreation Center. But he isn’t worried about donating his time to the No. 21.

“How many people can actually say that they’ve done an interesting thing in their life like working on a steam engine? I’m honored to be able to do this,” he said. “Later in life, you’re not going to remember playing video games with your friends. It’s the experiences that matter more than the objects.”

Reading and volunteering

A love of reading is what ultimately led Dopp to become a volunteer at age 11 when he lived in Portland.

“I volunteered with the Multnomah County Library system for many years,” he said. “I took the bus there by myself. I’ve always been really independent.”

After volunteering at several libraries throughout Portland, Dopp became one of the youngest volunteers to manage the “Summer Reading Program” through Multnomah County Library at the Holgate location.

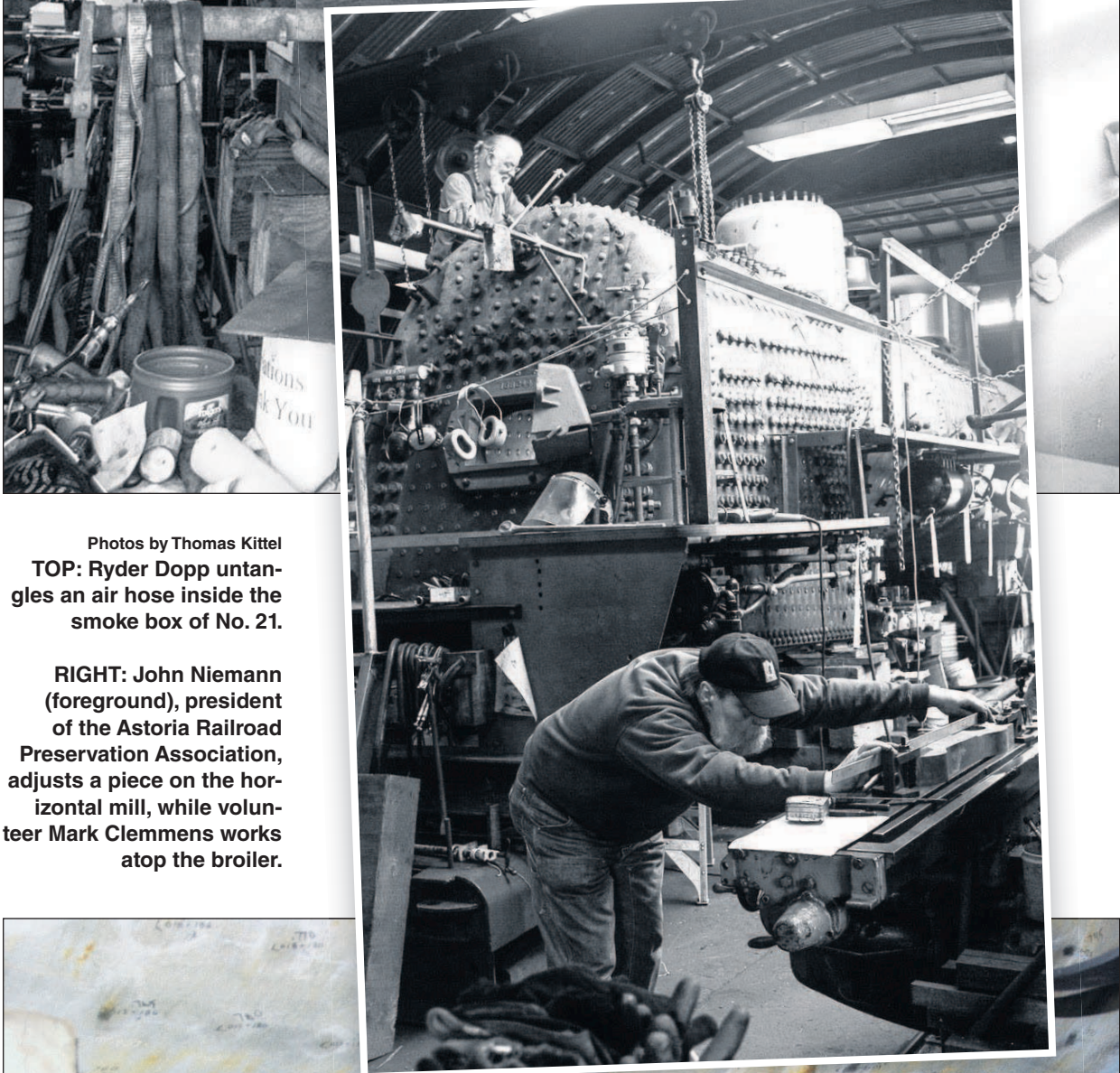
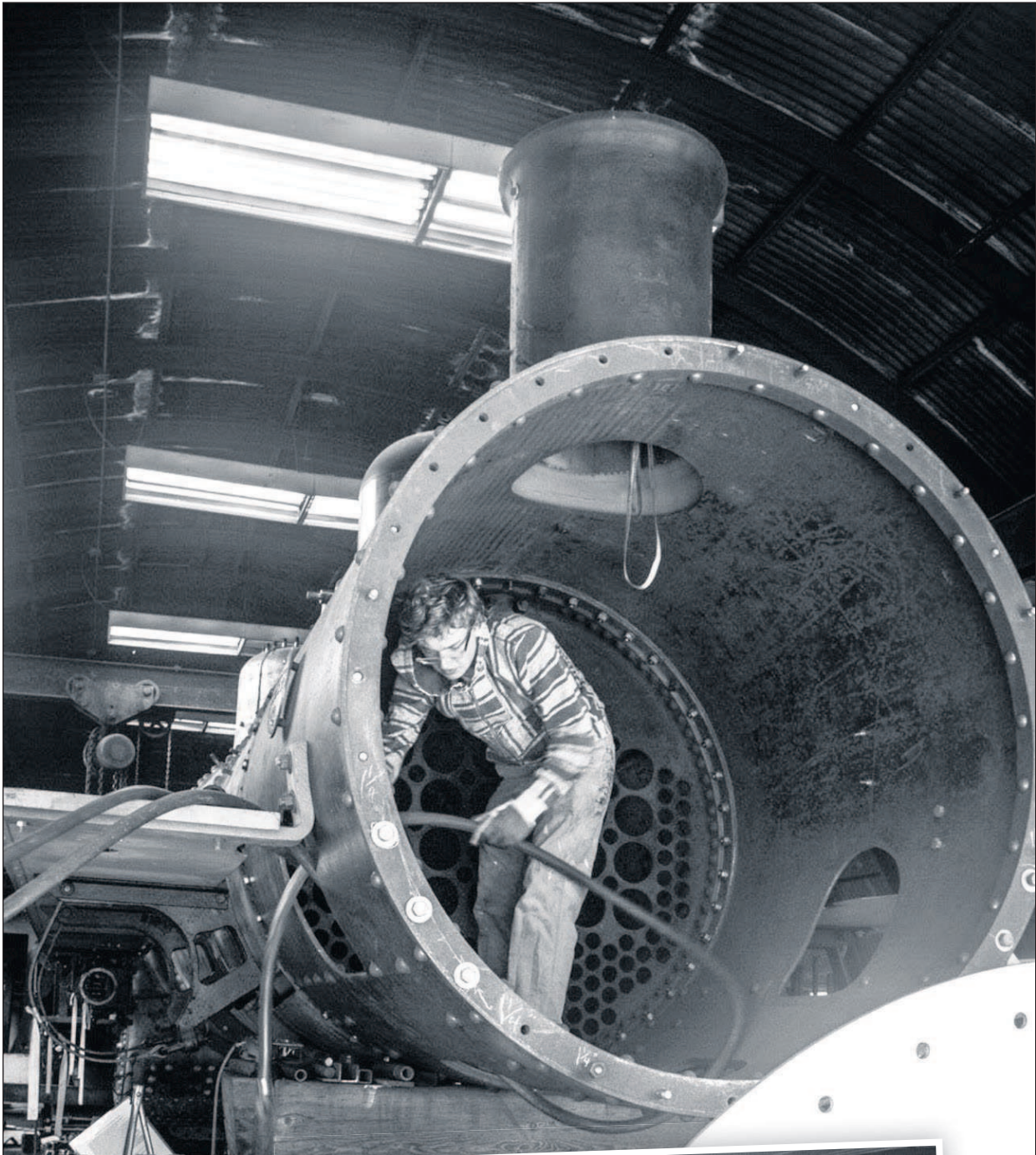
“My family is really into reading and every summer we did the summer reading program at the library. I was also encouraged to get up and go do things socially with other people,” Dopp said. “When I moved to Astoria, kids my age were not quite as active in the community. I got into the train restoration to give myself something interesting to do. It can be a sleepy little town here sometimes.”

The old technology

Though he is the youngest volunteer, the group treats Dopp as a team member.

“I feel that I fit in well with them,” he said. “Some of them have worked on the railway and military, and I just sit and listen to their stories. I find that interesting.”

Jim Smith, a fellow volunteer, said of Dopp’s involvement: “It’s pretty cool. We’re all old — we gotta have somebody to take over!”



Photos by Thomas Kittel
TOP: Ryder Dopp untangles an air hose inside the smoke box of No. 21.

RIGHT: John Niemann (foreground), president of the Astoria Railroad Preservation Association, adjusts a piece on the horizontal mill, while volunteer Mark Clemmens works atop the boiler.

Photo by Heather Douglas

With guidance from Dave Hill (far left), Dave Hamilton (middle left) and Jim Smith (far right), Ryder Dopp (center) uses a cheater bar to tap a hole for a drain valve.

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