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Movie Projectionist Switches Tracks to Become Railroad Mogul

Dave Wilkinson rekindles a childhood love of trains to start a new business and help Hollywood directors make movies.

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photos: Rick Rickman
Dave Wilkinson and his wife, Tresa, attribute their success to working as a team.

Dave Wilkinson's childhood fascination with trains roared back like an express locomotive once he got married. Tresa, his bride,

urged him to unpack an old toy train and place it around the Christmas tree. "She almost forced me to do it," says Wilkinson, who at 63 has a white mustache and a slow, genial way of talking.

Soon Wilkinson devised elaborate track layouts, then invested in hardware and toiled in his spare time to build working scale models -- authentic-looking engines up to eight feet long and 1,000 pounds.

The next step: Wilkinson plunked down \$2,500 to buy a full-size, surplus caboose for the couple's backyard in Ojai, Calif. A crane hoisted the caboose into place, and Wilkinson, who made local headlines, fashioned it into an office and guest quarters. Other people soon wanted cabooses -- for offices, game rooms, children's playhouses -- and Wilkinson became the largest part-time caboose dealer in the west, he says.

His moonlighting business enabled him to afford a radical career change. He quit working for Mann Theatres, where he had spent 27 years as a film projectionist and movie-house engineer, and splurged to buy a small, private railroad of his own. The [Fillmore & Western Railway Co.](#), located in the agricultural town of Fillmore (pop. 15,000) in the rolling hills between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, consists of 31 miles of track and, with Wilkinson constantly sinking his profits back into the operation, has grown to more than 70 train cars.

The picturesque landscape and proximity to L.A. have made the mini railroad one of Hollywood's go-to places for shooting train scenes for movies, TV series and commercials. Photos on Wilkinson's office walls memorialize the list of shows shot there, from *Cold Case* and *CSI* to *Fear Factor* and *How I Met Your Mother*. Last year's big production was the movie *Water for Elephants*, a story set around a traveling circus.

"One of our biggest challenges was to find a railroad that would work for filming," says Kei Rowan-Young, the location manager for the \$38 million film. "We had 40-plus days of filming on the railway. We needed trains that we could control for a length of time. Fillmore & Western was really the only place in California that could do that for us."

Wilkinson, who had only one full-time employee and fewer than a dozen train cars when he bought the railroad for slightly over \$500,000 in 1995, steadily built his collection of cars and equipment with an eye toward providing filmmakers with every type of shot possible. He has 24 employees now and the 70 train cars include engines, passenger cars, freight cars and cabooses.



In one large shed, Wilkinson keeps a full-scale mock-up of a train-engine cabin, with working gauges, for shooting interior scenes. He rigs explosions to simulate crashes and stage derailments. He even has a train shell mounted over a diesel truck to create the look of a train hurtling off its tracks. The rig appeared in the movie *Inception* as part of a dream scene in which a train cruises down the center line of an asphalt street.

"I said, 'Are you kidding me?'" says Rex Danyluk, project director for the film industry guide [The Creative Handbook](#), recalling his reaction when he first saw the rig at Wilkinson's yard. He was baffled at how the train had been moved off the rails. "It was just sitting in the dirt," Danyluk says. "Put a camera on that and you'd never know it was a truck in a million years."

The *Creative Handbook*, published in Toluca Lake, points Hollywood executives to specialty resources that can be vital to a film shoot. Few, Danyluk says, are more impressive than Wilkinson's railroad.

"I'm blown away by the quality and quantity of different trains you can have at their facility," Danyluk says. "They've got a stretch of dirt road adjacent to the tracks. You can have a car racing a train. You can have a stagecoach riding next to an old train. Imagine the red tape you'd

have to go through to do that with Amtrak."

Wilkinson and his crew take great pains to make sure filmmakers get the shots they need. "They live it, eat it, and sleep it," Danyluk says. "They've got railroad tracks for veins."

In addition to renting out his trains to filmmakers, Wilkinson books evening dinner excursions, including "murder mystery" train rides, and operates special holiday runs, including trips to a pumpkin patch at Halloween and a tree lot at Christmas.

Watching youngsters stare in fascination at the trains, Wilkinson imagines he was the same way as a child, when he and his older brother, Dan, played with toy trains. Wilkinson studied audio-visual arts at Ojai's Nordhoff High School, which led to his long career with Mann Theatres -- first as a film projectionist in Ojai and later as a multiplex engineer and manager. Though never much of a film buff, Wilkinson liked to sign up for occasional movie extra work, toiling behind the scenes to help electricians and grips.

"It was all grunt labor, pulling cables and stuff, but the money was good," he says. Even more valuable was the knowledge about how things work on a film set.

Affording the railroad was difficult at first, Wilkinson says, but he knew the local bankers, and he and his wife were willing to gamble with their savings.



The Fillmore & Western once was a branch line of the Southern Pacific Railroad, but Southern Pacific unloaded the little-used property many years ago. The shrinking of the great railroads created more than just a surplus of unwanted cabooses; whole sections of track fell into private hands. Dave Thebodo, a member of the national [Tourist Railway Association](#) and owner of [Rail Merchants International](#) in Fairfield, Iowa, estimates that more than 100 small, private railroads operate throughout the United States.

"We're all like little kids," says Thebodo, who was Wilkinson's friendly rival as a caboose dealer. "Dave's a great guy. He's a lot of fun and enjoys what he's doing."

The Fillmore & Western was a small, struggling private company -- newly renamed for the town -- when the Wilkinsons bought it. The couple's hard work and reinvestment revitalized the operation, Wilkinson says. The secret to making such a radical and successful career switch, he says, is making common-sense decisions and staying passionate. At the same time Wilkinson quit the theater business, his wife cut back on her own job -- managing mobile-home parks -- so they could operate the railroad together. He is president and CEO, while Tresa Wilkinson is secretary-treasurer and in charge of the office and reservations.

"We could not have done this without being a team," Wilkinson says.

For Tresa Wilkinson, the best part is the film shoots.

"I love the big kabooms -- the big explosions," she says. Seeing the movie stars is fun, too, even though employees refrain from chasing autographs. "We're all whispering, 'There's so-and-so,' but we leave them alone."

SecondAct contributor [David Ferrell](#) is a former Los Angeles Times staff writer and the author of [Screwball](#), a comic baseball novel.