
West Oakland steamfest brings joy to kids of all ages

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An attendee at the Kinetic Steam Works fundraiser shoots targets with the steam-powered Wicked Water Cannon. (by Emilie Raguso)

Steam junkies of all ages celebrated in West Oakland on Saturday at the “coming out” party for Kinetic Steam Works , a local collective devoted to steam-powered art.

Throughout the day, participants climbed inside a giant metal snail to make it shoot fire, watched pumpkins get split by a hand-cranked guillotine and practiced shooting targets with a steam-powered water cannon.

As the sun dropped into the Bay, painting the surrounding warehouses a deep orange, visitors explored the steam shop and art space where the collective is based, tucked behind a chain-link fence on the west side of the Mandela Parkway.

Children ran back and forth through steam shot from a horizontal mill engine, and held their ears when engineers blew “Pappy’s” horn. Pappy is a restored J.I. Case traction engine and threshing machine from 1917. Other steam-driven creations in attendance included “ Hortense ,” a 15-ton traction engine from 1920 with a flaming canopy (added in 2006), and “ Wilhelmina ,” a 46-foot stern paddle wheel steamer that sailed down the Hudson last year with six other handcrafted vessels.

Zachary Rukstela formed Kinetic Steam Works in 2005 to bridge the gap, he said, between “old world” steam aficionados and modern industrial artists. To rely on generalities for a moment, imagine the former as a handful of older men, possibly with backgrounds in rail fitting or other heavy metalworking, who get together to restore a steamship. The latter could, and does, look more like a crowd headed for Burning Man.

“We’re a conglomeration of people coming at vintage steam from an entirely new perspective,” Rukstela said, while gulping down a beer during a quick break in his office Saturday afternoon. “We want to make contemporary art with vintage equipment. We’re bringing in new blood to learn the old ways.”

Rukstela, an engineer, said he planned the event to celebrate Kinetic Steam Works’ new status as a non-profit. The 33-year-old Oaklander said he “grew up with steam” engines as a farm boy from Maryland. He said wanted to share his passion with people in West Oakland who “never saw steam in the fields.”

Vintage locomotives or farming machines may be the most common types of equipment

associated with steam power, but the energy source's applications are broad and still very much in play today.

According to Wikipedia, the modern steam turbine was invented in 1884 in Britain by Sir Charles Parsons; it still generates about 80 percent of the electric power in the world.

“Nuclear submarines are steam driven,” Rukstela said. “When they launch an F-15 (fighter plane) off an aircraft carrier, that's steam. It's the best source of motive power. Period.”

Rukstela said he has been amazed by the fascination people have shown in Kinetic Steam's projects, and hopes the curiosity will translate into financial support for future creations.

“We're not a steampunk organization. We're steam dorks,” he said. “We pride ourselves on the engineering. We've got boilers out there. We're not just walking around wearing goggles.”

Steampunk is a movement with roots in science fiction and fantasy writing that blends a Victorian-era aesthetic with fictional technological inventions. Think 1995's *City of Lost Children*. Leather boots, aviator goggles and mechanical accessories are popular, and certainly were easy to spot Saturday. But attendees in jeans, tennis shoes and fleece jackets were just as common.

The festivities had the feeling of an interactive amusement park, especially as the sun went down. Propane flames from 10 jets in Hortense's canopy shimmered above the engine. Children and adults took turns honking the Snail Art Car's horn and sending fire billowing from its tentacles. Those looking for a snack could buy hotdogs from a double-decker bus outfitted with a dumbwaiter, or munch cupfuls of hot popcorn from a full-size retro popper. A steam-powered margarita maker was on-hand for the thirsty.

Some participants relaxed at a “fire garden”: a mesmerizing fire pit filled with sand licked by violet propane flames; they used metal pokers to make and erase shapes in the sand – kind of like those miniature desktop Zen gardens, but much, much cooler.

Sophia Puglia, 29, and Daniel Rappaport, 25, both of Oakland, walked through the warehouse admiring a steam-driven sewing machine, and pausing for closer looks at Hortense, the engine, and Wilhelmina, the paddle wheel steamer.

“We love boats and trains and things that run on steam,” Puglia said. “It's old world. It's the beginning of mechanics. But mostly it's romantic.”

Mike Woolson, 47, of Oakland said he camped with Kinetic Steam Works at Burning Man in September and likes being part of a subculture still in its early stages.

“It's a movement, but it's one they haven't named yet,” he said. “In 20 years, we'll be able to look back and talk about all the cool stories and projects we helped with.”

Ray Velasco, 47, is a plumber and lifelong Alameda resident. He got to know a number of the industrial artists in West Oakland nearly a decade ago as they moved into live/work warehouses and needed help refitting the spaces for living. But he said his interest in the fundraiser was based on more than the friendships.

“This is what built America – the Industrial Age,” he said. “This is living history.”

Five years back, Velasco trained Stephen Rademaker in plumbing. Rademaker, 34, of Oakland is now a general contractor and part of the Kinetic Steam Works collective.

“I like plumbing. I like water. I like pumps,” he said. Looking around at the machines, he continued, “This stuff is what made the earth flat. You could go anywhere in the world. It

made everywhere the center. The railroad, the steamships, they saved people's backs, but they also took them away from working the land. It was kind of the beginning of the end."

Ken McCroskey, 42, of Albany, brought his son Camden to the party. Camden peered with curiosity at the huge green gears of The Dingus , enormous cogs that transfer power from an engine like Pappy to a piece of kinetic art like a carousel. Then he jumped on the back of a huge metal trilobite sculpture on wheels, lit blue from within, that can be driven with a joystick. McCroskey said attending the event had been pretty much a no-brainer.

"We just love machines and fire," he said. "It's not too complicated. He's an 8-year-old boy. And I was one once. Let's face it, I probably still am."