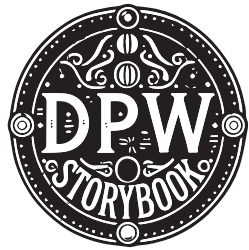


# RAILROAD MIKE

Railroad Mike attended his first Burning Man in 2002. With a background in the railroad industry, he quickly became the Transportation manager after his first DPW season. Known for his dedication and problem-solving skills, he later transitioned to the role of Fuel Master, where he managed and optimized fuel distribution—a critical component of the event’s logistics.

This interview was conducted by “Flo”, Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2016. Most of Flo’s questions have been omitted to improve reading flow.



I came out here 15 years ago. Well, I came out to go to the event and I started working immediately. When I came out, I was like most people and was pretty amazed. By the 3rd day I was like, “Ok, who’s in charge? Some friends of mine from Minneapolis; Johnny Blue Eyes (known as Feral) took me to the Depot and introduced me to Mr. Clean and Michael Mikel. I was like, “you’re not doing this without me. I’m gonna get involved right now.” I didn’t make it three days of my first event, and I was asking to be involved I was immediately starting to show up at meetings, meet people, volunteer.

My first year was 2002 and there were only 50-60 people in DPW, which is not many: now it’s 500. We’ve grown a lot.

They had people that knew what to do, but it was not much of a plan for



Photo credit : unknown. Year : unknown.

most things. You know, the only plans that existed was the Rangers, and then there was the Gate. Then this thrown together group called DPW that did all the work: the building, the tear down, much of that. But most Theme camps did their own thing much as they do today. There was always somebody who’d take up the task and start doing it. Most of what we did was not written down, there was just, “Hey, this guy knows what to do, or this girl knows what to do,” which for me was amazing. This was a really big event and [they] were running it by the seat of their pants.

I volunteered at Café, Fence, Resto. During Restoration I ended up driving. We had some serious dunes build up, making it hard to clean the Playa and I was involved in the problem solving. I was issued a truck. Several days later, the Transportation manager quit. I was a Transportation specialist and I worked in the railroad industry. I jumped in to help. The next year I was hired into the Transpo department as a Truck driver. That manager was having

a lot of difficulty, and he made me his unofficial assistant manager. I basically bailed him out of a big mess. He declined to come back the following year. I was then hired as Transportation manager. I completely rearranged how it was done; It was 3 weeks to 7 days.

When I first got here there were 11 Mikes and only one radio channel, so things would get confusing when you called for Mike. We all got nicknames, Railroad Mike. Bisbee Mike. Welder Mike. Snook. Flash. Tex. There was Welder Mike and Bisbee Mike. I got Railroad Mike.

I went from Transportation to being asked to be the Fuel Master (mobile fuel). This was a very coveted job in DPW. I started with a rental truck and two 100-gallon tanks. 3 years later, I had bought my own additional 300-gallon diesel tank to add to the two 100-gallon tanks, and I was pumping 3,200 gallons a day. This year was 10,000 gallons a day, but we had 4 trucks: 4 trucks, and 2 propane trucks. We were doing 10,000 gallons a day. Half of that

was being distributed out of the fuel station. The other half was being delivered by truck. So, we’re probably doing 4,000 to 5,000 gallons a day delivered, and then the other 4,000 to 5,000 at the station.

You know, people drive up and we sell fuel to the public. We have delivery trucks that bring it in from the city from the pipeline. From Reno: Sparks. We have delivery trucks that bring it up from Sparks. And then, from there, we’d unload it into our tanks, and then from our tanks we’d deliver it into our field truck and take it wherever it needed to go. Most of it was pre-arranged, and for the system for Burning Man, whatever equipment we needed and whatever generators we have are automatically fueled.

I would just track how many gallons would go into this, how many gallons would go into that, and then you’d feedback and somebody else would account for it later. It was different every day. For seven years it was different every day. You also had to be aware of what was changing because it was constantly changing. You know, a generator would get put in and then you’d have to know where the generator is. Then, more things would get added to the generator, so it’d use more fuel. You had to be aware of this because it’d run out faster, so we’d have to deliver it faster.

It got very complicated. It was one of those jobs that started out easy, and then got really hard during the event, and then would get easy. A lot of the DPW jobs are very hard in the beginning and then you don’t do anything for the event and then you do cleanup. For fuel, it’s just as the demand increases and people show up, the more, they’re in demand. Until people go away, the demand is still there.

There’s a lot of people where this is really what they want to do with their life. I like to do this, I like to be a part of this, but this is not the only thing I do in my life. I do a lot of other things like this. This is one more thing. I mean, I’m in the railroad industry. I do other big events. I do television and movies sometimes. Yeah, I do lots of different things. I travel as much as I can.

I like Regionals: I would like to get more involved in Regionals. I just like the festival life because it’s not like normal society. There’s a lot of things about normal society where there’s a slavery aspect that I don’t like. You know? This is a lot less slavery like—even though we pretty much are fucking slaves picking up garbage. But you’re treated with a lot more respect. That’s what makes a big difference. In regular society? You’re just another fucking number. Who gives a fuck what you are? Around here, you know, we all matter to each other and that’s what makes a big, big difference.

I mean, everybody comes here for a reason. I wouldn’t say it’s the meaning of life, but a way to improve your life. Well, I wouldn’t say meaning of life. For some people this is the meaning in their life. Obviously.



Cowboy Carl (left) and Railroad Mike (right).  
Photo credit : unknown. Year : unknown.

“That’s why I do it: I want to get more meaning out of my life. [...] I enjoy stepping out of regular society to do this.”

I mean, you look at people like Logan: they’re all in. This is all they want to do. You look at DA? This is all he wants to do. Coyote? All he wants to do. This is their life. So, there you have meaning. For people who are new, they’re drawn to it because they’re like “that’s different.” They want to get more meaning out of their life, if that makes sense. That’s why I do it: I want to get more meaning out of my life. My life already has a lot of meaning. I do this just because I really enjoy it. I enjoy stepping out of regular society to do this. I really enjoy it.