

[back to article](#)

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HANDCAR REGATTA

A return to the past, on rails

Thousands crowd Railroad Square for costume event featuring human-powered railcars resembling hamster wheels, Viking ships

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Walking through Santa Rosa's Railroad Square on Sunday was like walking through a time warp.

Victorian-age harlots mingled with mad inventors, while Vikings bellowed and a group of toga-wearing Romans clustered together.

The fantastic landscape constituted the first-ever Handcar Regatta, a costume event dreamed up by local Burning Man veterans.

Per its name, the oddball circus of machinery centered around human-powered vehicles designed to ride the train tracks through Railroad Square.

The 15 handcars were throwbacks to various eras.

A group of 19th-century strongmen -- wearing over-sized moustaches -- ran like rodents inside a human-sized hamster wheel that rolled down the tracks.

Another railcar was a vestige of Viking longships. It transferred the rowing power of its horn-clad oarsmen to geared wheels running on the tracks.

The teams of designers competed in several categories from speed to engineering.



MARK ARONOFF / *The Press Democrat*
Marcos Ramirez peers toward the finish line of a race Sunday during the Handcar Regatta in Railroad Square in Santa Rosa.

The cars traveled down the tracks one by one, powered by human-burned calories, and cheered by thousands of spectators.

By almost any measure, the first-time event was a smashing success. Attendance was estimated at more than 3,000 people, surpassing the organizers' best-case scenario. A large percentage of the crowd were in character, wearing costumes and feigning whatever accents they could muster.

And the taco truck sold out of tacos.

"It was really entertaining. And it was really good business," said Maria Elena Reyes, owner of Delicias "Elenita" Taco Truck. "It's the first time I've ever seen anything like this."

The event came together due to the dedication of a few organizers and loads of volunteers, participants, and musicians who donated their stage time.

"We just begged and pleaded with the artists and performers to donate their time, and they were great and did," said co-organizer Spring Maxfield.

The Handcar Regatta was the brainchild of Maxfield and Ty Jones, Santa Rosa residents who took inspiration and aide from fellow Burning Man veterans. They produced the festival on a shoestring budget, and secured permits from the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) that allowed them to race the handcars legally on the tracks.

Many of the organizers and participants are old-school Burning Man attendees, having spent their 20s and 30s getting wild and creative in the Nevada desert at the annual festival. But many are beginning to settle down with family and careers in Sonoma County, and they wanted something a little closer to home to keep them entertained.

"The idea was to show that all these people who were separate could come together here," Jones said. "Now that all these Burners are getting older, we can't just up and go to La Playa."

Many of the railcars, art exhibits and other sideshows have their origins at "La Playa" -- the nickname for Black Rock Desert where Burning Man is held.

Sonoma County residents contribute more than their fair share of exhibits at Burning Man, and the Handcar Regatta was a venue to show off local works.

"There was a hungry audience for this," said Lisa Beerntsen, a Graton resident.

Beerntsen, her partner, Tony Speirs, Michael Coy and other members of the local collective Art Farm Motel built a giant shrine sculpture for Burning Man that was on display Sunday.

"There are a lot of people who want to see more of this happen," said Beerntsen, who helped organize a showing of Burning Man art at the Santa Rosa Junior College.

Also on display Sunday was the growing movement known as steampunk, which is a throwback to Victorian-age visions of the future. The steampunk style is often associated with 19th-century author Jules Verne, who helped pioneer the science fiction genre with novels such as "A Journey to the Center of the Earth" and "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea."

Verne envisioned a future dominated by advanced technology that was most often powered by steam -- the predominant energy source of his day.

Steampunk intertwines today's technology with old-time fantasies of the future. It is an offshoot of the Do-It-Yourself movement, which is a tag to describe people who love building things in their garages and living rooms.

"This community is full of Burners and oddballs," said Clifford Hill, a Santa Rosa resident who dressed in Victorian-era garb Sunday. "There is a lot of potential here."

Hill was part of the crew behind the giant handcar Hennepin Crawler, which was pedal-powered down the track with nearly 5-foot-tall wheels.

Organizers hope to have the event next year, and are even more hopeful to get extra funding. But after weeks of planning and days with little sleep, many are just looking forward to a bit of calm.

"I've got to get home and get some sleep," Maxfield said Sunday night. "I've got two kids I've got to get up and out the door in the morning."

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