

PORTOLA RAILROAD DAYS 2006

- John Walker, Museum Manager

Portola Railroad Days was August 24th through the 27th this year. This was the 24th annual event and it was the biggest in many years.

For several years, Railroad Days had been drifting downward with less and less participation and fewer venues. The City of Portola hired a promoter to run the event the last three years and she tried hard to keep it going with uneven results. After a lot of consideration, several community leaders had a meeting in September 2005 to try and revitalize Railroad Days and turn it back into the huge community event it once was.

After a lot of discussion, and on more than one occasion, telling people to put up or shut up, the town rallied together and took back control of their event. WPRM agreed to become a one fifth partner along with the City, two chambers of commerce and the Portola Business Improvement Association in the planning and administration of the event and John Walker began attending weekly meetings with the other partners to work out the details.

The results of the new planning organization were fantastic! A year ago, many of the service organizations in town would not participate in the event. Now they are fighting over who is going to run different venues! In past years, merchants closed their doors instead of staying open. Now they are adding more stock and sprucing up their stores in anticipation of this year's event. Lots of new sponsorships have also come in which helped pay for new attractions this year. And for the first time in many years, we had advertising outside the immediate area, even radio stations in the Reno-Sparks market and the central valley. In previous years, it was hard to get a vendor to sign up before August 1st. This year, we had 39 already signed up before August and over 60 by Railroad Days! Our museum also had to break out of its funk and try to do some new things this year as well.

The theme of this year's event was History and Heritage. Railroad Days began on Thursday night with a semi-formal dinner (there was some confusion over just what "semi-formal" actually meant – it was later determined that in Portola, "Semi-formal" meant that you were suppose to wear shoes and socks – seriously!), dance, silent auction and a living history

presentation by Jim Beckwourth. The parade entries begin setting up in the museum parking lot Friday afternoon and after the judging, a street dance was held downtown at the WP caboose in the parking lot on Commercial Street (John Walker and local citizens spruced up the caboose. Norman Holmes repaired the WP logo on the side of the car). Chris Skow's Trains Unlimited Tours brought another 70+ people up to Portola on Saturday.

On Saturday, the parade began at the museum at 11:00 am with a record number of entries! The sound of the museum's locomotives blowing their horns started the parade. Abe Lincoln, the "Barbie Brigade," Tribal Mountain Belly Dancers, Barstool Racers and Llamas and many classic cars were just some of the entries featured in the parade. Our President Rod McClure secured the presence of the Union Pacific's "mini train" to participate in the parade this year. The "mini-train" has not been back to Portola in nearly twenty years and we we're very excited to have it back this year. Reed Jackson of the UP Steam crew supervised the unloading and set-up of the train and along with his wife Martha had the train operating in no time at all.

Other venues in town included wild animals, a 25-foot climbing wall and other attractions for the kids in the City Park, vendors along Commercial Street and another street dance



Dave McClean and Terry Decottingies with UP 849.

- photo by Gail McClure

that was so successful, that 200 people refused to let the band go home that evening and the party continued on into the early morning!

On Sunday, the featured attractions included the traditional Willie Tate Memorial 5 and 10K run, fishing derby for kids, the traditional "Lucky Duck" races (with another record number of participants) and a freestyle motocross jumping show. A notorious group of gunfighters was also seen accosting people and having shootouts on the city streets, the museum parking lot and jumping the train and asking for donations (One of whom looked suspiciously like known desperado Tom Carter).



*The handcar rides were a big hit with visitors.
- photo by Gail McClure*

The Western Pacific Railroad Museum hosted four model railroads. The Truckee Meadows N-Trak, the Carson City Railroad Association, and the Donner Pass Gandy Dancers were inside the engine house and the Van Tresse Family live steam layout was out on the dock. The Knudson family provided food service for the visitors and crews. Linda Brimmer and Linda Knudson handled the gift shop with flair – thanks Ladies. Janice and Hank Stiles sold raffle tickets while Jack Hathaway returned to sell train ride tickets.

A new thing for the museum this year was opening up our passenger cars for walk through tours. Sally Thomas and Norman and Barbara Holmes watched over the cars and answered questions. Steve Habeck and Charlie Spikes had the rotary running (several people have suggested that we could make money by allowing people to throw stuff into the rotary blades, watermelons, Styrofoam, anything that will break into pieces and make a mess – what do you think?)

Another new event for us was David Sowers and Duane Vanderveen running hand cars, which we borrowed from Susanville. This was very popular and we want to do this again next year. Dave McClain and Steve Milward brought up their motorcars and also gave rides around the balloon track in between caboose trains (why don't any of our motor cars run?). And yet another new venue was the first annual Railroad Days Photo Contest with a \$100 cash prize! Ed Wagner of Fremont's photo of our equipment out on the road took top honors and will be published in an upcoming issue of The Headlight. Ed was also very generous in donating the prize money back to the FRRS.

Back inside the engine house, Sandy Coots and the guys restoring the Spanish Creek Lumber Company No. 2 over in Quincy were on hand to show off their progress and answer questions about their efforts. Bill Strahle, Chris Dow and Gene Bridgman represented Operation Lifesaver and actually brought the simulator this year (Thanks to John Ryczkowski for his help in lining this up). The kids had a lot of fun with the simulator and learned the importance of safety around the railroads. Chris Allan and his family were answering questions about the restoration of WP steam locomotive 165 (Chris's wife Rita also cleaned up the shower car – you slobs owe her a big thanks). Carl Allen Walker also visited with his family and autographed copies of his WP Steam CD. Mr. Walker also donated a unique WP tie that was given out as an employee recognition award.

The Operating Department handled our usual Caboose train rides. With the anticipated increase in attendance a sixth car was added to the train. John Buberniak, Ed Powell, and Seth Adams stood by in case of mechanical problems and gave tours of the UP GP30 849 when not needed. Many of the train crews took turns sitting in locomotives and cabooses answering questions and giving tours. Vintage WP railroad movies were shown in the SN 1652 caboose.

Gail McClure prepared a sumptuous meal for all the volunteers on Saturday evening and it was great to have 60-70 old friends sitting down and enjoying a great dinner and catching up with each other after a good days work.

Plans to have several "special" pieces of equipment on display from the Union Pacific Railroad fell apart at the last moment. UP6936 was already here but was shipped out a few days before Railroad Days. We we're also hoping to have the WP Heritage unit back again this year but that fell through as well.

Still, the City of Portola and the FRRS put on a tremendous show for Railroad Days this year. Everyone is looking forward to Railroad Days 2007 and preparations are already underway with plans for an even bigger, better event in 2007. If you didn't make it this year, you really missed out on a great party! So make plans to be in Portola August 23rd -26th for the Silver Anniversary of Railroad Days 2007!

If you haven't been to the museum in awhile (and I haven't seen some of you in a long while),

please come for Railroad Days and see the work we've been doing. Catch up with friends and former RR employees. Drop a couple of hundred dollars in the gift shop, grab some great food, have a beer, watch the parade or kick back and enjoy the bands that will be playing, renew your membership and have a great time!

As always, we're going to need volunteers. We're going to need weed cutters, painters, sweepers, bug killers, cleaners, sign makers, and strong backs with weak minds. During the event, we'll need greeters, sweepers, car attendants, ticket sellers, train crews, crossing guards, electricians, security, runners and "Go Fer's". Do you like to talk? We need people to greet our visitors and tell them about our equipment. Lunches will be provided by the museum. Overnight accommodations are available.

This is our single biggest event of the year and the best opportunity we have of showcasing our collection, our work over the last year and get together and have some fun. Invite your friends and bring up a carload and join us for a great time!



Visitors admire WP GP7 707 during Portola Railroad Days

- photo by Gail McClure