

A Brief Explanation of The Feather River Rail Society

by Norman W. Holmes

Railroading has been important to Plumas County since the first rails were laid in 1887. Regular passenger service was started in 1896 linking residents by rail to the outside world via Reno.

Western Pacific rails were being laid in 1908 with the first passenger train operated through the Feather River Canyon August 22, 1910. It wasn't until the advent of the California Zephyr in 1949 that tourists discovered the beauty of Plumas County from the vista-domes of this "most talked about train." While most earlier train schedules traversed the canyon during darkness, the Zephyr was scheduled for scenery. Unfortunately, jet aircraft cut into passenger train travel and operating costs increased so much that Western Pacific discontinued passenger service on March 22, 1971.

Western Pacific was absorbed into the Union Pacific System on December 22, 1982. In an attempt to preserve a piece of equipment from the WP, the Feather River Rail Society was formed, and arrangements were made with UP to donate a "covered wagon," streamline freight diesel locomotive for preservation at Portola. The unit was formally presented to the Greater Portola (now Eastern Plumas) Chamber of Commerce at the first annual Feather River Railroad Days in August 1983.

An agreement was reached with the Union Pacific and the City of Portola to lease the abandoned diesel shop building and trackage to establish a railroad museum. A Grand Opening ceremony was held on Memorial Day weekend, 1985.

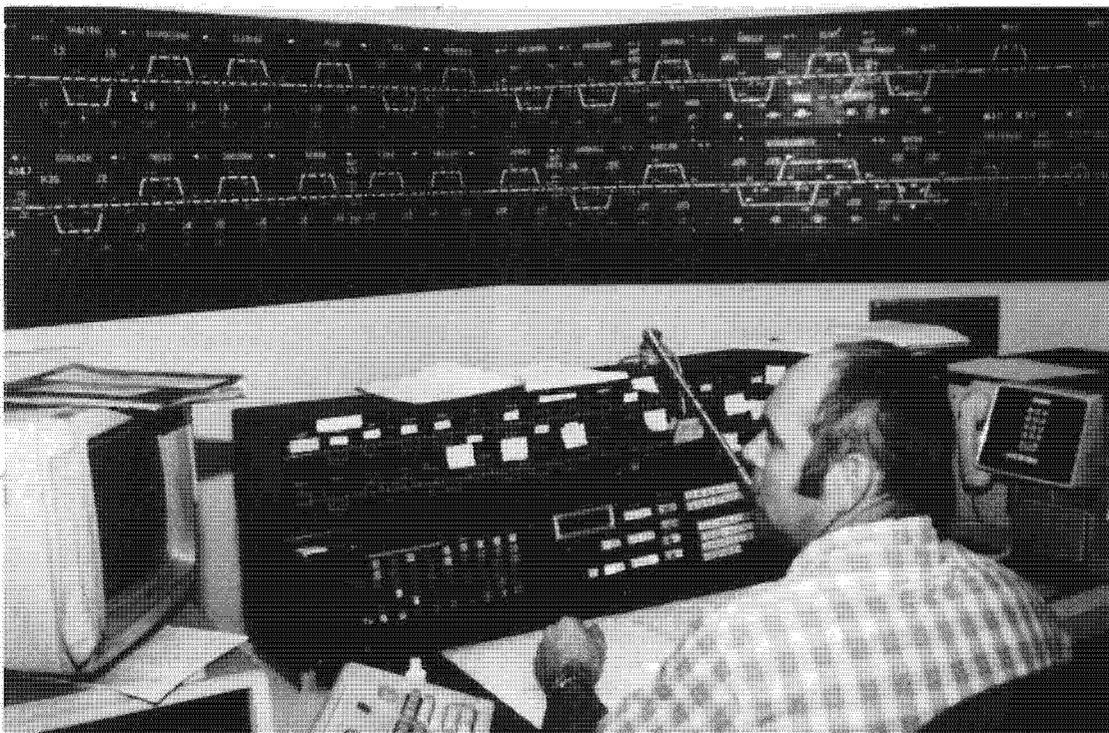
Union Pacific has been extremely generous in donating locomotives and cars as well as providing free transportation of equipment obtained from other railroads. The collection of diesel locomotives and freight cars has grown so that we now have the largest collection (26) of diesel locomotives in the country. We have preserved examples of nearly all types of WP freight cars in existence at the time of the UP merger and have 9 WP diesels. No other museum has saved such a complete collection of equipment from one railroad. Our vintage equipment would be useful to a movie company looking for props for a 1930-1960 era story.

Railfans learned about our collection as soon as it started to be assimilated, and came to Portola to see and photograph the various pieces of equipment. Through newspaper articles, the general public began to visit Portola to see the museum. Our unique locomotive rental program, where one can operate a locomotive under the guidance of an instructor has gained us nation-wide attention.

Tourists visiting the museum frequently stay overnight in Portola adding to the income of local motels, restaurants and other businesses. A frequent statement heard from visitors is that they would not have come to Plumas County if it had not been for the railroad museum.

Society membership now numbers over 900 including 22 foreign members. We have no paid staff, all work done at the museum is volunteer. With our small cadre of local members and the few who come up to help on weekends, we cannot do as much restoration and maintenance work as we would like. We are looking for grants to aid us in our work.

With the decline in the lumber industry, and the reduction of railroad employment, tourism is the only growth industry in Plumas County. Golfing, fishing and camping are important attractions to our area. Whereas outdoor recreation is seasonal, visitors come to the railroad museum year round. Our visitor book contains names from every state and many foreign countries. It is a definite asset to Plumas County and should be treated as such.



January 7, 1991, WP dispatcher's office. U.P. dispatcher takes care of the Desert Dispatcher station (formerly the WP 7th and 8th Sub.) at Sacramento, CA. This equipment is all preserved at the Portola Railroad Museum, and will eventually be displayed. Photo by Wayne Monger.