

2005 In Review

- John Walker, Museum Manager

2005 is over. I'm tempted to say Good Riddance! After all of the momentum that we had built up at the end of 2004, the New Year greeted us with six feet of snow. Despite this, we got the museum open on time. The snow finally melted away in mid March and we thought we could finally get back to work. But then it started raining. We had rain, snow, sleet, hail and freezing conditions for five out of seven days for two and a half months. This weather precluded any kind of out door work and left everyone very frustrated. It got so bad that we began looking through the archives to see if we could find the plans for the Las Plumas we were so wet. Although our RAL and passenger ops began on schedule, the lousy weather adversely affected our visitor traffic and the slow start eventually led us into a cash crunch that would continue to haunt us throughout the year.

Business picked up in June and July despite a six-week heat wave that left temperatures inside the engine house well over 100 degrees. August started out promising, and just as it looked like we might start catching up and turn the year around, the record high gas prices quickly slowed attendance to the museum yet again. Still, we hosted a decent Railroad Days and a visit from the Union Pacific 3985. Eventually August proved to fall short of the previous year and by 3 PM on Labor Day the operating crews had nullified the last runs of the day and there was nothing to stop the occasional tumbleweed from blowing through the parking lot.

September was a very poor month. But just as it looked like the year was going to be a total wash, the gas prices began falling, the fall foliage came out and the weather turned unseasonably warm and dry. RAL's and visitors remained steady and we were able to recover some of the income we lost in the spring and summer. Oddly enough, the last three months of the year turned out to be better than last year and, along with a great July, were the only bright spots in an otherwise rotten year financially. Although disappointing, I can honestly report that this was not due to any error on our part. We did everything right but the weather and fuel prices are simply out of our control. In hindsight, there were probably some things we could have done better but we've yet to find a

crystal ball lying around the museum that can accurately predict the future.

Quite honestly, I couldn't wait to put 2005 behind us and start over. But, now that I've had some time to reflect back on the year, I have to admit that despite all of the adversities, we still continued to make good progress in many areas and we had several accomplishments that we should be very proud of.

Although we're still crunching the numbers, it looks like our gift shop and operations are down 10-12% from 2004. While disappointing, that's not too bad considering our remote location. Reports from the Tourism industry indicate that we did better than a lot of other people. Our financial donations improved and our material donations were very good as we received the gift of several items, which we can really use at the museum. Our community relations are improving rapidly and we are working together on several cooperative ventures, which will benefit Portola, Plumas County and our museum. Our relationships with other museums continues to get better and better with lots of potential benefits to all of us. Our facility operates more smoothly and productivity around the museum is at an all time high.

And we made some significant improvements this year. The gift shop received a healthy overhaul with some new paint and expanded display areas. The entire shop area was cleaned and reorganized. The battery house and oil shed received some new paint. The old gift shop (now known as "The Board Room") was cleaned and spruced up with new paint, shelves and furniture. The efforts by many to clean up the museum grounds resulted in more junk being picked up, more trees trimmed and nearly 8 acres of sagebrush and weeds being cleared from the property and old Hospital. Electrical improvements included new lights in the display room, additional outlets in the gift shop, safety and security lighting in the shop, and repairs to several broken light fixtures and outlets. We now have the start of a computer network and DSL inside the museum and a working web cam and security cameras! We have a fantastic new web site that just seems to get better and better all the time. And we painted three pieces of equipment this year!

And let's not gloss over our activities outside the fence either.

While railfans reveled in photographing our WP 707 and 2001 running around the Bay Area last spring, something much more important was happening. Nearly every railroad museum in the country has some oddball pieces of equipment, which just doesn't seem to fit the parameters of their collection. And it's safe to say that many of us have more stuff than we can take care of. Downsizing or reconciling these misfits has long been a mute subject in the railroad preservation community. More often than not, these orphans were left to "rust in dignity" rather than even entertain the notion of trading or giving it to a new home where it might find some "good lovin".

Our good friends at the Bay Area Electric Railway Association in Rio Vista have broken new ground by returning to their roots and focusing on their core collection, which is electric interurbans. It was a courageous decision to downsize and refine their collection. BAERA has been very generous to us and other museums in offering their surplus equipment to new homes where they will be better appreciated. We have also been very fortunate that BAERA officials and staff have openly shared with us the problems, pitfalls and the processes involved in this very progressive undertaking. I think it's safe to say that the whole experience has been an eye opening experience for the entire rail preservation community and we've learned a lot from being able to view this transformation from an insider's perspective. Our thanks to BAERA for their open, friendly and insightful cooperation. We've done more than just trade equipment. We've begun sharing information, ideas and services, which are proving very beneficial to our organization. And now that the barrier has been broken, other museums are beginning to talk about equipment trades, information and service exchanges. A new dawn has risen in the railway preservation movement and the FRRS was there to help get it started.

In July, Chris Skow of Trains Unlimited Tours offered us a unique chance to make some extra money and advertise the museum on a series of excursions in the Pacific Northwest. Since things at the museum were kind of slow, we jumped on the opportunity. The results were good. We

raised some money, passed out a lot of brochures, talked to a lot of members and met and talked with many private car owners, volunteers from other museums and railroad officials from several shortlines and regionals.

The end of these excursions coincided with our participation in Dunsmuir Railroad Days where we put on quite a show and left everyone in Dunsmuir very happy. The organizers said that our participation made the event the best it has been in nearly ten years! This was another opportunity for the FRRS to show off its professional railroading capabilities. All of our equipment performed flawlessly and the McCloud Railway and officials from the Union Pacific spoke admirably of our abilities and the professional way we conducted our operations.

The Union Pacific called on us in August to transfer some vintage railroad equipment from California to the Heritage Fleet Headquarters in Cheyenne Wyoming. Once again, the FRRS performed admirably and successfully completed the task. And we did it with flair: with freshly repainted WP caboose 484 bringing up the rear of the train! The UP returned the favor by dispatching UP 1983 to Portola for Railroad Days in the new WP Heritage paint scheme (which we supplied the color chips for) and a two day visit from UP 3985.

The Historical Division (WPRRHS) also had a good year with progress continuing on the archives, several large donations, a new display at the museum this year featuring a photo essay on snow fighting on the WP and SP by noted winter railroading photographer Dick Dorn, three new issues of The Headlight and a successful convention in Tracy.

As winter approached, we got a lot of small jobs completed at the museum that protects our equipment from the inclement weather and will help us get off to a good start this spring - providing the weather cooperates. So, all in all, the FRRS had a pretty good year and we made good progress and did a lot of good things. Once again, WP stands for "Willing People".

In closing, I wish I could express to all of our members just how much we (the management and staff) appreciate you and need you. It was only through your faith and support that we've come this far. You're what made our