Railroad Heritage Park

Timelessly Linked to the First Transcontinental Railroad

Enhancing Tourism in Downtown Colfax with a Railroad Heritage Park

Prepared for Colfax Ad Hoc Railroad Heritage Park Committee

By

Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society
Colfax Area Historical Society

May 7, 2024 (as amended)

Introduction

Colfax was created when construction of the nation's first transcontinental railroad reached here in 1865. The town has a rich history centered around its railroad origins, enhanced by Native American and Chinese cultures, fruit growing and mining. Parts of the story are displayed in the Colfax Heritage Museum housed in the historic Passenger Depot, but many visitors are not aware of the museum's existence or our area's multi-faceted history.

In addition to the items on display in the museum, we have numerous pieces of equipment scattered in the downtown area that could be combined to present an indoor/outdoor history experience for our visitors and locals. The question is – how to best display those items to attract visitors to our downtown, thus supporting our local businesses. One significant piece of history, the Colfax wood-sided Caboose, sits in a prominent location at Main and Grass Valley Streets. Since its arrival in 1969, it has served as a point of interest, welcoming visitors at special events such as 3rd of July and Railroad Days. Yet its location is seen by some as a distraction for the downtown area, and proposals have surfaced through the years to move the caboose and open up its current location as a downtown plaza for daily gatherings. But if it were to be moved, where could it be located and to what end?

This proposal outlines a plan for relocating the caboose to the park area next to the passenger depot. Such a move would allow consolidation of the caboose, depot and other historic items in a combined indoor/outdoor Railroad Heritage Park that would encourage people to walk among our outdoor history displays and visit our indoor museum and visitor center. This indoor/outdoor museum could be promoted in railroad publications and tourist information brochures as a place worth visiting when traveling along the I-80 corridor.

The Passenger Depot

The Colfax Passenger Depot just east of the tracks near Grass Valley Street was built by Southern Pacific in 1905 to serve passengers traveling on Southern Pacific cross-country trains as well as Nevada County Narrow Gauge trains connecting Colfax to the mining communities of Grass Valley and Nevada City. Through the years the depot was the hub of activity in Colfax until the NCNG ceased operations in 1942 and Southern Pacific passenger service began to yield to the automobile in the late 1940's.

The depot was relegated to office space for railroad crews in the 1950's, and sat quietly on the Colfax sidelines until the 1990's when the building was deeded to the City of Colfax to become a multi-modal transportation center coupled with the then-planned expansion of Capitol Corridor Trains. The depot received a new roof and foundation in 2000, along with landscaping in the area around it. From 2003-2007 a City-sponsored volunteer project headed by Colfax-based Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society (PSRHS) members completed the renovation of the building's interior. It officially opened in 2007 housing the Colfax Heritage Museum, Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center, Passenger waiting room and public restrooms. In addition to providing information and assistance to Amtrak passengers, it has served as a focal point for Railroad Days activities.

To accompany the building renovation, the area around the depot was landscaped to become a park-like area for visitors and locals to enjoy. A statue of our namesake, Schuyler Colfax, former Speaker of the House of Representatives, stands prominently at the corner of Grass Valley St. and Railroad Ave., welcoming visitors to our town. Fruit trees planted near the statue signify our fruit-growing and fruit-packing heritage. Amtrak passengers board trains heading east and west from the platform and benches located adjacent to the park.

The Caboose and Other Railroad Equipment

The Colfax Caboose was purchased in 1969 by the Colfax Soroptimists and placed in its current location. For many years it served as a mini-museum, but fell into disrepair until it was fully restored in 2007-2015 by members of Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society. While it attracts the attention of visitors at its current location, it is seen by some locals as a distraction to the downtown area. If it were to be moved, it makes a lot of sense to locate it near the restored Colfax Passenger Depot where it would help draw attention to the depot area. The caboose and depot together would form the nucleus of our story as a railroad town that was created by the railroad and is still very much influenced by the railroad that runs through its very heart.

There are several other historic railroad items either already on display at various locations around town or available to be combined into a common display area. Photos of some of these potential display items can be found on pages 5 & 6.

Between the caboose and the 1880 Freight Depot is a vintage Southern Pacific motor car, commonly known as a speeder or 'putt-putt'. It was used by Colfax-based maintenance-of-way personnel to patrol the tracks and respond to maintenance issues or signal problems. Adjacent to the speeder is a rare, vintage wig-wag railroad signal. These were used at early railroad crossings, where the 'wig-wag' arm alerted travelers of an approaching train. Next to the wig-wag is a concrete railroad phone booth. These were located at key locations along the route and housed a telephone that was used by repair workers to contact the dispatcher if a problem was found. Two vintage baggage carts currently reside under the colonnade canopy at the passenger depot.

While not currently on display, PSRHS purchased a semaphore signal similar to the train-order signal that used to stand in front of the passenger depot. The semaphore could be displayed with other vintage signals, including a searchlight signal that has been offered to Colfax and until recently controlled train movements near Norden.

The Nevada County Narrow Gauge (NCNG) Railroad Museum in Nevada City has offered a vintage NCNG freight car for the Railroad Heritage Park display in Colfax. The flat car has been restored at the NCNG museum and would be a welcome addition to the Colfax Park to note the importance of the NCNG Railroad that connected the mainline railroad at Colfax with the mines of Grass Valley & Nevada City.

If these items were relocated along with the caboose to the park area by the depot, Colfax would have the makings of an informative outdoor display of regional railroad history. The highly visible caboose would entice visitors to walk through the outdoor displays leading to the historic depot, museum and visitor center.

Visitors to the Railroad Heritage Park could then walk the short distance across the tracks to browse local shops and have lunch, dinner or snacks at downtown restaurants.

Proposed Location for Caboose and Displays

So how could these items be accommodated in the area near the passenger depot? There are currently unused areas covered with wood chips between the depot and Grass Valley Street that could be home to the smaller display items. The challenge is to identify an acceptable site for the much larger caboose. Locating it is complicated by the presence of a buried high-pressure gas line that cuts across a portion of the park-like area. Several options for locating the caboose in the depot park were considered and rejected for various reasons.

One site soon stood out for several reasons. It has minimal impact on the grassy area in the depot park, does not interfere with access to the depot, and places the caboose in a highly visible position to serve as a visual attractor for visitors passing through town on Grass Valley Street. That location can be seen in Figure 1 below. The caboose and security fence will fit between the two trees adjacent to the curved sidewalk, placing it in a highly visible location along the pathway to the depot and other displays. Only a small portion along one edge of the grassy area will need to be converted to a pad for the new site for the caboose. The loss of this portion of the existing park area is more than offset by moving the caboose from the corner of Main and Grass Valley Streets, resulting in more open space for Roy Toms Plaza at the Gazebo.

Figure 1 also shows proposed locations for several displays of other historic equipment, including the NCNG railcar, the SP motor car or speeder, vintage railroad signals, and a revamped pear tree "orchard". None of these other displays result in any impact on the grassy area. Also, all the displays other than pear trees avoid the surface area over the buried gas pipeline that traverses a portion of the park area.

Figure 2 on page 4 shows an alternative caboose location that would enclose the caboose and NCNG car within a single fence, along with the pros and cons of this alternative layout.

Figure 1. The caboose and its security fence are located between the two trees adjacent to the curved sidewalk and Amtrak platform. All other proposed display locations are in areas currently covered in wood chips. The curved walkway takes visitors on a pleasant stroll starting at the Schuyler Colfax statue, passing numerous railroad and other history displays on their way to the depot museum and visitor center.

Alternative Caboose Location that requires only a single fence to enclose sensitive displays.

One drawback of the layout shown in Figure 1 on the previous page is the need for multiple security and safety fencing for some of the display items, especially the caboose and NCNG flatcar. If these displays could be grouped together, they could be enclosed within a single security fence.

Figure 2 shows a layout that would group the caboose and NCNG flatcar displayed within a single security fence and still have minimal impact on the grassy area, but it requires the removal of one tree next to the curved sidewalk. Depending on the final layout, some other display items could be included within the security fence. The advantages and disadvantages of this layout are listed below.

Advantages

- Only a single security fence is required for major displays - reduces cost of multiple fences
- NCNG Flat Car could be used as a bandstand or stage for concerts, speakers, etc.
- Allows more space for the Pear Orchard
- Wood Chip area near depot is available for other displays
- The NCNG flatcar is roughly in line with original NCNG tracks behind the depot

Disadvantages

- Requires removal of one tree and use of more of the grassy area
- Could delay early move of SP motor car and phone booth until pad is ready for caboose
  (note – these items currently are not fenced. They could be moved to temporary sites)

The reduced cost of security fencing, and the added value of the NCNG flatcar as an events stage rather than merely a visual display offer significant advantages over the layout shown in Figure 1.

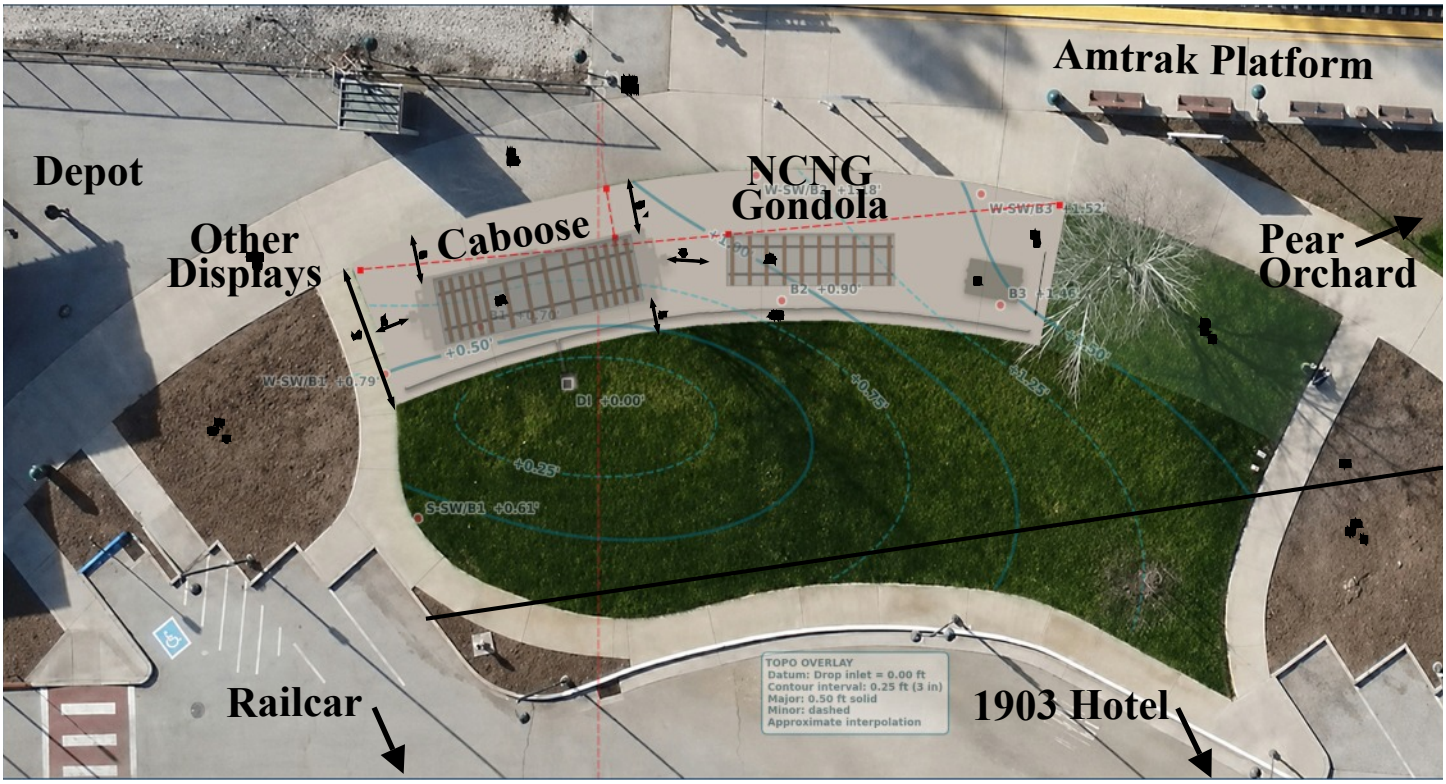


Figure 2. The removal of one tree next to the curved sidewalk allows grouping of sensitive displays that can then be enclosed within a single fence rather than multiple fences. The NCNG flatcar can serve as a static display as well as a stage for events with seating in the grassy area. The wood chip areas to the left of the caboose and near the pear orchard are available for other displays.

Photos Of Items That Could Be Included in the Railroad Heritage Park

Colfax Depot with semaphore-style train order signal

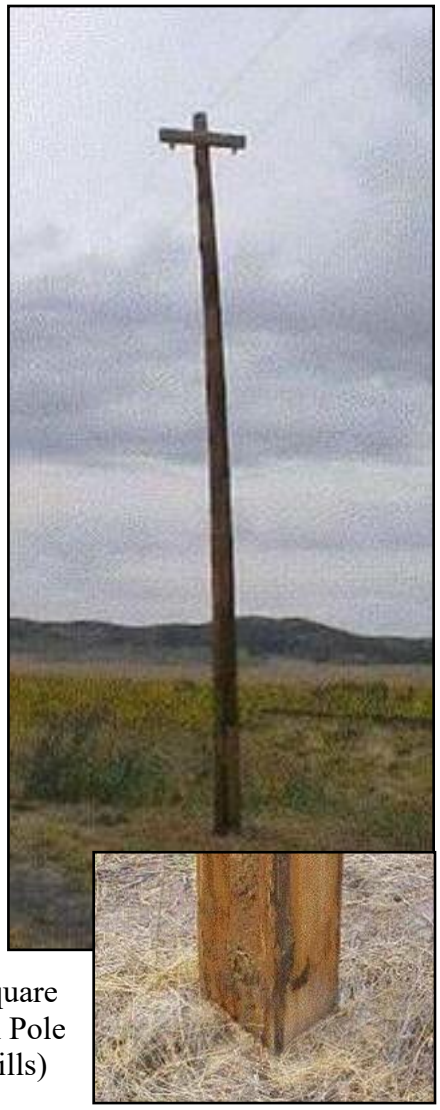
Colfax Caboose at its grand opening

Left - SP 'Speeder' Motorcar next to concrete railroad phone booth; Center - Railroad phone booth; Right - Vintage wig-wag crossing signal

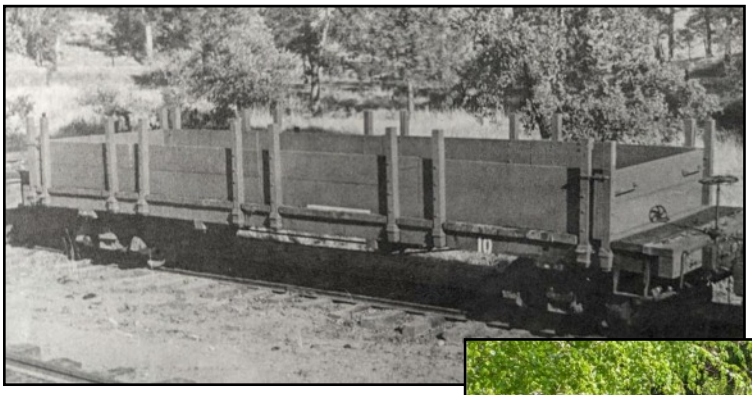
Above: Searchlight signal at Norden donated by UP
Right: Semaphore signal similar to donation by PSRHS

Photos Of Items That Could Be Included in the Railroad Heritage Park

Signal Bridge Donated by PSRHS



CPRR Square
Telegraph Pole
(Peter Hills)



Westside Lumber
Narrow Gauge Gondola
(NCNG RR Museum)