

Nevada Northern Railway: Full Steam Ahead Operating a Museum with Main Street's Four Points

By Andrea L. Dono



© Nevada Northern Railway Museum



By the time the sun hangs heavy in the Nevada sky, crews of dedicated volunteers and staff have already spent hours oiling the massive steam locomotive, shoveling 2,000 pounds of coal into the 1000° F firebox, and otherwise readying the iron train for the first ride of the day. During the high tourist season, two to three trains a day load up with passengers ready to barrel down the landscape, past ghost towns and rolling hills, heading full steam ahead into nostalgia for early American history and our love affair with the storied West.

Hearing the blast of the train whistle and seeing giant plumes of smoke billow out from the locomotive's chimneys instantly transport visitors to the Nevada Northern Railway Museum (NNRM) back into time. The museum complex sits on 56 acres dotted with 52 historic structures and buildings and lined with 32 miles of track. Everything from the stone depot to the wooden water spouts remain as they were when the Kennecott Copper Company closed its mines in 1979 and donated the site to the City of Ely.

In 1983, the White Pine Historical Railroad Foundation was created to turn the

remnants of the site into a functional railroad museum. "The complex was given to the community with the idea that since the major employer pulled out of town this would be an opportunity to create jobs and raise revenue," says Mark Bassett, executive director of the museum.

But without a plan or funding, little progress was being made. With each passing year, the grounds and the structures sank deeper into disrepair and little existed to save them except a desire to keep the museum going. By 2002, only 49 train trips ran a year, which meant a visit to the museum didn't always promise a ride, and that caused visitation to slack off.

Adapting the Main Street Approach

Three years ago, Bassett became the museum's executive director after serving as a volunteer since 1999. He was contemplating the plight of the museum while examining the McGill Depot. Located 11 miles from the main complex, the building had fallen into significant disrepair since it had been donated. Bassett loathed seeing the structure fail, but he knew that simply throwing money at its restoration wouldn't be enough to save it because the building wouldn't have a purpose.

Reflecting on his days as a Main Street manager in Laramie, Wyoming, from 1985-1988, he decided the depot needed an economic reason to survive. Bassett, who refers to the museum complex as a small city, thought about the successes in Laramie and other Main Street communities and believed he could put the Main Street Four-Point Approach™ to work for the NNRM.

"You can draw many parallels between the struggles of traditional downtowns like Laramie with those of small museums like ours," says Bassett. "I am not one to reinvent the wheel, so, I thought, why not try out the Main Street approach? We are facing the same problems."

He could tick off the similarities between struggling museums and downtowns: museums do not have enough money or visitors; downtowns lack revenue and are losing customers; people were fleeing downtowns because they saw them as old and stale and the same can be said for museums.

The museum did not have enough money to preserve the complex. The foundation previously had sold off parts of the complex to pay salaries and knew it couldn't continue that way.

"The bear was at the door," says Bassett. "The board was at a crossroads in trying to decide whether to close its doors or reinvent itself." It chose the latter and decided to take a chance on a commercial district revitalization methodology to manage operations.

Bassett immediately delved into his notes from his Main Street days and revisited the National Trust Main Street Center's website and resources. He set out to restructure the organization by guiding its operations according to the Main Street four points. Committee formation is planned for the fall.

The nonprofit, a quasi-governmental agency, now reports to the city council. The management board has all new members and includes stakeholders like representatives from the city and the Tourism and Recreation Commission. An aggressive marketing cam-

paign successfully attracted the public's attention. Today, the organization can rely on more than 100 volunteers instead of just 12; the staff has grown from four employees to 12; a membership campaign has boosted memberships from 65 to more than 1,000; there are 49 train trips every two weeks instead of every year; ridership last year doubled from the year before; and grant writing has brought more than a million dollars to the organization in the last 18 months.

Volunteers Provide the Steam

Since the closest city is 240 miles away, volunteers drive a great distance to work at the complex. Some volunteers even come from across the country to spend time there. Last year, volunteers clocked about 25,000 hours, which equals the work of about 10 paid

full-time employees.

"There are two tiers of museum employees, paid and unpaid," said Bassett. Although he says volunteers simply get a few sandwiches and a plaque at the end of the year for their troubles, which can involve arriving at 3:30 a.m. to work, the volunteer experience at the museum is very rewarding. Each volunteer is highly trained, treated like a professional, and invited to attend weekly staff meetings. Many are given major responsibilities, such as maintaining or even driving a train, and all are recognized at the end of the year at the annual banquet and on the Volunteer Hall of Fame in the Welcome Center.

Bassett says ramping up the volunteer program has been critical to the NNRM's success. "The only way I can raise money is to run trains," he says, "but I can't run the trains without a crew." It takes



Volunteers repair the roof of one of the museum's 52 buildings.

© Nevada Northern Railway Museum

seven people, from the engineer to the brakemen, to run each train, not counting the manpower necessary for maintaining the grounds and other operational costs.

Sending the Message Loud and Clear

Other tickets to NNRM's success are increasing attendance and membership. Therefore, a strong and consistent marketing plan has been a priority for getting the word out. Every ad, poster, brochure, and other promotional material carries the tagline "Still Steaming" and features a locomotive logo, as well as a border in the Nevada blue color.

"Everything you pick up from us, whether it is the newsletter, train tickets, or brochures, ask if you want to volunteer or become a member," says Bassett. "You can't leave here without hearing about volunteering or membership. It is embedded in the entire program."

The tiered membership program caps at a lifetime membership of \$1,000. Bassett wasn't sure if that would be

too high, but the museum sells a top tier membership about once a month. Overall the membership program pays for itself and has funded the restoration of Locomotive #40 and other major projects.

The consistency of the museum's messaging is matched by the frequency of getting the word out. Whether the museum is placed on Nevada's 11-Most Endangered List or secures grant money, press releases are sent out to local and regional media as well as to trade publications. The organization has tracked where its visitors hail from and sends advertising dollars and news to those targeted areas. In addition, Bassett writes a weekly column for the *Ely Times*, which is then posted on the NNRM website.

Bassett isn't shy about taking on a publicist role. Just by asking the editors at *Trains Magazine*, which he calls the *TIME* magazine of the train industry, he got an image of one of the museum's locomotives on the cover of its 2006 tourist railroad directory. And they even used the Nevada blue color, too, just because he didn't think it would hurt to ask.

A peek at the calendar of events shows a full schedule of activities. Haunted Ghost Trains celebrate Halloween and two-and-a-half-day photo shoot events lure photographers from across the county to the museum, which helps raise revenue during slower months.

"And what do photographers do with their photos?" asks Bassett. "Show them to people! That increases our visibility even more. You can have the most fabulous facility in the country, which we do, but without promotions, what good is it if no one knows about it?"

Bassett is not being modest when calling the NNRM the most fabulous facility in the country. His sentiments are echoed by the Smithsonian's Curator of Transportation, William L. Withuhn, who

calls the museum "the most complete, most authentic, and best cared-for, bar none. It's a living American treasure."

Twice Withuhn has traveled to give lectures during the museum's annual three-day festival, and he plans to return again to participate in the adult rail camps the organization is currently developing. "I gambled on a phone call to a nationally recognized authority and called him up out of the blue," says Bassett. "And he is now part of our extended family."

Finding an Economic Purpose

The design and economic restructuring components work hand in hand. NNRM's goal is to bring as many as possible of the buildings and structures

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In 2004, volunteers logged more than 25,000 hours of work at the museum, the equivalent of about 10 paid employees. Left: The local Lions Club at work on a building; Above: a volunteer repairs brickwork.

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The National Trust for Historic Preservation is the only national, private organization chartered by Congress to encourage public participation in the preservation of sites, buildings, and objects significant in American history. The National Trust Main Street Center provides technical assistance in downtown and neighborhood commercial district revitalization to communities throughout the nation.



The McGill Depot, one of the significant historic structures on the 56-acre museum complex, is slated to become a community center and copper smelter museum, thanks to an infusion of grant money.

back to their original purpose. The museum can do this accurately thanks to the recent discovery of the original blueprints, which help in determining what the structures were built for and how they should be renovated so the museum can tell an accurate story of the railroad.

Finding new uses for the structures justifies their renovation. Instead of recruiting new businesses to occupy the vacancies, structures are returned to their original use or adapted for museum uses, such as turning the Chief Engineer's Office Building into a dormitory for volunteers. Also, with an infusion of grant money, the McGill Depot is slated to become a community center and copper smelter museum, and the tracks leading to it will be operational in time for its Centennial in 2007.

"We use the economic restructuring, or as we call it, economic responsibility, piece to teach ourselves how to run our own business," says Bassett. One economic responsibility project involved bringing the gift shop under the same roof as the ticket sales office. Gift sales instantly tripled.

Another aspect of restruc-

turing the museum economically is forming good business partnerships. Popular attractions at the NNNRM include the dining trains. Bassett wants to split the workload and profits of these trains with local businesses. For example, he is collaborating with the local brewery to launch "Ales on Rails" – beer-themed dinner trains. Also, in the works is a plan to authorize hotels as agents to sell train tickets and further promote the museum and to bottle water, to be called Old 93 Condensed Steam, with the local water company.

Indirectly, the museum is affecting the local economy. "In the last two years the Bed and Breakfast on the road leading up to the depot has reopened and they even started a barbeque stand that mimics the railroad hours," says Bassett. "We didn't recruit them, but we had an impact."

Reinventing the Industry

Bassett believes the museum industry needs to be reinvented. Despite the industry's hardships, few museums are changing the way they do business. So far, the museum

has been meeting its goal to break even on its operating expenses. "The more I talk with other small museum operators, the more I am convinced they can repackage the Main Street program and make it work for them."

Bassett credits the Main Street approach as part of the reason why the NNNRM was able to turn itself around. By tracking statistics and benchmarking data, which he calls his scorecard, the museum is able to get the support it needs and make its case when seeking grants. He knows that a lot of people see what a dynamic program the museum has when he gets resumes from people living on the other side of the country and when national talent participates in events. But despite these successes, Bassett hasn't heard of any other museum directors following his lead.

"With my peers, it hasn't sunk in yet," says Bassett. "But we are doing things today that in the last 20 years no one ever thought we'd do."

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