

Bring Freight Back to the Rails

A long term goal of the museum is to open the railroad for freight service from Ely to Shafter Nevada. Once a small community, Shafter is now a ghost town, but it is the interchange point between the Nevada Northern Railway and two transcontinental railroads, the Union Pacific and BNSF. Opening the railroad will give Ely and White Pine County access to the international transportation grid.

Accomplishing this goal is a tall order, to succeed about 118 miles of track need to be refurbished. The last freight train operated over the track in 1999. The last movement over the track was in 2000, when the Army locomotives came to Ely. Since that time the Mother Nature has slowly taken over the line.

In 2008, due to a grant from the federal government we were able to start working on the south end of the line heading north. Track was open from MP 138 to Hiline Junction MP 135.4. Then from Hiline Junction, work commenced towards McGill Junction MP 128. As part of this project the Club 50 highway crossing was replaced. Today we have the track open to MP 132. We are just a tantalizing four miles from McGill Junction.

On the north end of the line we have even more exciting news. In early 2009, we were approached by a company that wanted to investigate using the rail line from Shafter south for rail car storage. A Request for Proposals went out and S & S Shortline Railroad submitted the bid that was accepted. Their proposal was that they would pay for the refurbishment of the rail line and accept rail cars for storage. Neither the City of Ely or the Foundation would invest any money in the line. Once the costs of rehabilitating the line are covered, the City of Ely and the Foundation will be receiving a portion of the rental income. (The City of Ely is a joint owner of the line with the Foundation.)

Steve Flanders, one of the principles in S & S, signed the contract on July 31, 2009 with the City of Ely and the Foundation. The ink was barely dry on the agreement when Steve and his crew showed up at Shafter to begin working on the railroad. Using Shafter as a base camp, they started refurbishing the track heading south.

The biggest challenge is the track itself. Today, it is the same railroad that Mark Requa built in 1905, meaning 60 pound rail laid on wooden ties with little or no ballast. Today the mainline railroads use 141 pound rail laid on concrete ties with lots and lots of ballast. When the railroad was last used, BHP hauled 60 car trains filled with copper concentrate at about 100 tons per car. That was a lot of weight going over 60 pound rail but it worked. But it did leave a legacy of broken joint bars that hold the railroad together.

S & S's crews have replaced thousands of joint bars, hundreds of ties and spread lots of ballast. They also removed miles and miles of brush and weeds. Through a lot of hard work, Steve and his crew opened the line to MP 53 and have the track useable to Currie.

On December 21, 2009, S & S had a locomotive delivered to Currie. A crane lifted the locomotive off of the trailer and placed it on the track. After an inspection and brake check, the locomotive started for Shafter forty-four miles away. It made the trip with no problem. It was a historic event; it was the first movement over the line since 2000.

In January, things really started happening as cars were starting to be delivered to Shafter by the Union Pacific Railroad. Today, 336 cars are stored on the line with 186 cars coming.

Now the challenge is where to find the money to open the sixty-five miles between Currie and the southern end of the line. The cost of opening this track is estimated at \$17.5

million. This is considerably more than the City of Ely, the Foundation or S & S Railroad can afford to invest in the rail line.

Through a fortunate combination of circumstances, we were able to meet with Senator Reid in Washington D. C. to discuss rail issues. In the midst of the discussions, Senator Reid asked how much would it cost to open the rail line to Ely? An estimate of \$10,000,000 was suggested. Senator Reid directed his staff to assist us in developing an appropriation request for Fiscal Year 2011. The request needed to be finished in five days.

Luckily, we had figures available from previous studies of the line and our experience of the line rehabilitation from MP 138 to McGill Junction and Steve's experience from Shafter to Currie. Using Federal Railroad Administration standards as a guide, our goal is to upgrade the track to Class 2 standards. This would permit freight trains to operate at 25 mph and passenger trains to operate at 30 mph. A freight train going from Ely to Shafter to Ely should be able to make it in five hours and a passenger train about four hours.

Crunching the numbers it appears that it will take about \$17.5 million to open the line. Our appropriation request was for \$13.8 million. If we were fortunate to receive that money then we would need a 10% match or \$1.38 million. To raise that match, the mine was approached about donating rock to the project.

Robinson Nevada Mining Company agreed to provide and make available up to 150,000 tons of rock that can be crushed to be used as ballast upon approval and appropriation of the grant request. The estimated value of the rock is \$1,500,000, now we have the match.

To make the project work we need to open two railroad crossings, one at Currie and one at Ruth. The plan is to approach the State of Nevada for assistance in opening these two crossings.

If the appropriation goes through, we have the opportunity to open the Nevada Northern Railway to freight traffic all the way to the mine. Why is this important? Frankly it is vital to the future of White Pine County and the City of Ely.

Fuel prices are going to continue to rise. This will increase the cost of transportation for the mine and the community. It will mean that it will become more expensive to live and work in White Pine County.

Having the railroad open for freight could be our economic salvation. A freight train can move a ton of freight 457 miles on just one gallon of fuel. This will lower transportation costs for the community and business. And better yet, it is green transportation. When you compare emissions by the ton-mile between rail, water, truck or air – rail is the clear winner. Rail ranks as the least polluting in terms of oxides of nitrogen, volatile organic compounds, carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide! Only in particular matter emissions does air transportation have an advantage over rail transportation.

There are many pieces of the puzzle that will have to come together before the rail line can be opened. The appropriation request from the federal government will need to be approved by both houses of Congress and signed by the President. The Currie and Ruth road crossings will need to be replaced. And the price of copper needs to hold firm until the money is released from the federal government. If all of the pieces come together, what about the rail cars that are stored on the line, where will they go? We'll still have room for them. We have 18 miles of track between Cobre and Shafter, 8 miles of track on the Hilene and the McGill yard.

And if you want proof to see what having a railroad can do for a community in Nevada, visit Fernley, Reno or Elko. All three of these communities had taken advantage of rail. The growth in Fernley over the past decade has been spectacular. The next time you go to Reno get off I-80 at the USA Parkway. Drive through the Industrial Park and imagine if that was located in White Pine County. Finally, Elko is developing its Northeastern Nevada Regional Railport. It is now open and the first rail cars have been delivered. All of the lots that front the tracks have been sold and new businesses are locating there.

A century ago, Mark Requa imagined a railroad, a copper mine and smelter to be built in White Pine County. He succeeded. Now is our opportunity to build on his legacy and open the railroad to freight traffic once again. Just as it was a century ago, it won't be easy, but it can be done.

Photo Captions:

Locomotive at Currie: After the last freight train passed here in 1999, it was long odds that a locomotive would ever pass Currie again. Yet on December 21, 2009 a S & S Railway locomotive traveled from Currie to Shafter.

Shafter Interchange: It doesn't look like much, but this is the connection to the international transportation grid at Shafter. It is now open. S & S Railway interchanges with the Union Pacific Railroad here. There is also the option to interchange with the BNSF Railway.

Shafter Yard: Last summer a lot of work was done in the Shafter yard.

Track Shafter South: This is the track out side of Shafter heading south. The railroad is now open to MP 53 and passable to Currie MP 60.

Down the Tracks at the Museum

Museum, gift shop and ticket office hours are: Mondays through Saturdays 8:00 to 5:00, Sundays 8 to 4, Closed Tuesdays.

Our first train of the season is the Pony Express Express to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Pony Express. Tickets are available now, the train will feature locomotive 40 railway post office car 20 and first class coach 5. The post office will do a special cancellation in the railway post office car.

Regular excursion start April 10th and 11th and White Pine Weekend is April 17 and 18. During White Pine Weekend all White Pine residents ride free.

Call the ticket office (775) 289-2085 and check our website for train times and availability (www.nnry.com).

Volunteers are always needed at the museum. We need tour guides, narrators, concessionaires, gift shop helpers and train crew members. If you have some spare time and would be interested in helping out, give the railroad a call at (775) 289-2085. You don't need to live in Ely to volunteer.

If you are interested in joining us in preserving the Nevada Northern Railway, memberships in the museum are available at these levels: Active \$30; Family \$50; Centennial \$100; Sustaining \$250; Patron \$500; Friend \$1000; Supporter \$2,500; Benefactor \$5,000 and Leader \$10,000. Please contact the museum for more information.

The 2010 Limited Edition Locomotive 40 Centennial Coin with a Certificate of Authenticity is now available. This is the second coin in the Nevada Northern Railway locomotive series. It is a benefit of membership in solid copper, silver or gold plated silver.

Mark Bassett is the Executive Director of the museum. He can be reached by e-mail: director@nnry.com; or by first class mail at: 1100 Avenue A, PO Box 150040, East Ely, NV 89315.