2014 Santa Trains

—Steve Habeck
Santa Train Project Manager

For 2014, the FRRS Board and President McClure agreed with my plan to run the event on three Saturdays in December (the 6th, 13th, and 20th), with the caveat that the event at least cover its costs. In the past, the Santa Trains, although very popular, wound up costing the FRRS money to run. The recent change of charging admission at the gate, and adding the option of donating non-perishable food items for a discounted admission, as suggested and started by Director Gail McClure a couple of years ago, was instrumental at reducing our costs, and the efforts that went into this year's events succeeded in generating income for the FRRS.

Debra Baer volunteered to take on the task of advertising for the Santa Trains, using most of the budgeted funds left in the advertising account. Her efforts, I believe, had by far the most impact on the success of the events. Starting in late October, she arranged for ads in the Feather Publishing family of papers, based in Quincy (weekly papers in Quincy, Portola, Westwood, Chester, Indian Valley, and Susanville), as well as an ad in the Reno Gazette-Journal's special section that came out right after Thanksgiving. Additionally, she (and husband, Director Kirk Baer) paid for and distributed 50 posters advertising the events. She also worked with the Portola Rotary, who allowed the use of their portable, illuminated sign trailer to advertise the Santa Trains. The trailer was placed at the corner of Highway 70 and Gulling Street. She also worked with Audrey Ellis from the Eastern Plumas Chamber of Commerce, who provided a web page advertising our event, and provided a link to MapQuest and Google Maps for us. Audrey also passed out fliers for the Santa Train at her expense. Having Debra and Kirk being able to devote the time to the advertising campaign left more time for the rest of us to complete our preparations. The bar has been set high for the future, for sure.

The Santa Trains are probably the most labor and volunteer intensive events the FRRS runs. Preparations start in early October, with the staging of the caboose train along the shop so power can be run to the train for setup, and placing the baggage car and *Silver Plate* in the shop so power cords can be run and decorations can be put up. The team that has taken care of these cars for the past few years, continuing the ideas first put forth by Director Gail McClure, is now led by my daughter, Kathy Errecart, and my sister-in-law, Vickie Krois, assisted by my wife, Mary, daughter Jennifer, sister-in-law Susie Johnson, Vickie's friend Eddie, Kathy's husband Kevin, Jennifer's fiancé Justin, and my grandson Zayden. They also had assistance this year from Kirk and Debra Baer, as well as from David "Fritz" Elems. After I spend a couple of days running 12 power cords into the baggage car (5 for coffee pots and water dispensers, 5 for heaters, and 2 for lights) and 5 cords into the *Plate* (2 for heaters, 2 for Christmas lights, and one for car lights), Vickie and Kathy's team spends 5-7 workdays setting up these cars, and the results are dramatic. Hopefully some photos (again, thanks to Debra Baer for being the photographer) will accompany this report, although photos just don't do these cars justice. The overall effect can best be summed up by one of the first visitors to enter the baggage car on the first weekend: she came in about five steps, stopped, looked around, wide-eyed, and exclaimed, "Ohhh my God!". This was repeated just a minute or two later by the next lady to enter the car. Of course, the effect continues throughout the car and into the diner. Attention to detail is everywhere.

Out on track 3, I have a system set up for putting the 8000 or so lights on the caboose train. First, with a power cord run to the MoPac caboose, I set this hack up as a workshop for staging and testing lights. We use this caboose since it has two large storage areas, that we can lock, where we store all the Christmas lights for the train, front gate, fence, and shop areas. I also have a heater set up in the caboose for use when I'm working out on the train, and need a place to warm up. This caboose is also where the power for the entire train is fed from, so it's a logical place to start. It usually takes about 10 to 20 days to complete the lighting of the train, spread out over 3-4 weeks (I still have a real job to protect, too), but the end result is always worth the effort. I also spent an afternoon putting up some lights at the Museum's front gate, and, this year, with the UP 105 in the shop, I added Christmas lights to the end railing of the car.

We also decorate about 150 feet of the fence along the parking lot on each side of the main entrance with Christmas lights. Using tried and true methods, Director Charlie Spikes and Duane VanderVeen take care of stringing these lights and the power cords, and then troubleshooting them to get them all working.

Also, Matt and David Elems (aka Poindexter and Fritz, the Bicker Brothers) took

care of filling the fuel cans with gas and diesel, so we'd have fuel for the generator and the caboose stoves (which burn diesel). After the Elems' filled the tanks on the 3 cabooses with working stoves, Eddie Powell came over a couple of times to work on the fussy carburetors on the stoves, and was successful in getting all three of them to work. Having heat in three of the four cabooses is a big plus with many of the visitors.

Meanwhile, many folks were busy at home, baking cookies for distribution at the events, including my wife Mary, daughters Kathy and Jennifer, Debra Baer, Patricia Ryan (Friends of Portola Railroad Days Committee), Linda Merchant (I Love Portola Committee), Pat Morton (former City Council member), and others (whose names I regretfully misplaced). Special mention goes to Rick Gruninger's friend Leisa, who showed up the first weekend with several boxes of customized goodies that had obviously been labored over for quite a while, and had everyone in awe. Several of us (myself, the McClures, Kerry Cochran, David Elems, and Director Greg Elems) gathered (and donated) other supplies (coffee, cocoa, cider, tea, and candy canes) needed for the events.

So now, the first Santa Train date, December 6th, is almost here, and several weeks of preparation are almost done, as well. Kirk and Debbie picked up the light plant from J's Feather River Rentals that we use to light up the parking lot, and things are ready to go. Ann Powers, the Portola reporter for Feather Publishing, wrote up a nice article on the Museum following a tour I gave her before the Santa Train preps started, and it ran two weeks before the first event, followed by the ad we bought the next week. All we can do now is hope for the best.

Saturday, December 6th (and the following 2 Saturdays, December 13th and 20th): Although the first Santa Train won't depart until 5 PM, several volunteers, including myself, are at the Museum by noon. The passenger cars in the shop are dark and cold; soon the heaters and lights are on, warming and brightening the interiors, and setting the mood. Shop lights are turned on, the UP 105 business car lights are turned on, the gift shop lights are turned on (and the heaters behind the counter for Gail and Jasmine are also turned on), and the heaters in the meeting room are fired up, providing a warm place for the volunteers while on break.

Soon, the next wave of volunteers arrives, and things really get going. Coffee pots are filled, heating up water for hot chocolate and tea, while another pot brews fresh coffee, with the aroma filling the baggage car. Cookies and treats are set up, candy canes are stacked at the ready for Santa and Mrs. Claus, and last-minute cleanup takes place. Several CD's of Christmas music are loaded into the CD player in the *Silver Plate*, and soon the sounds of Christmas complete the setting. Outside, more volunteers are preparing the SP 2873 for service: checking fluids, watering up the engine, and starting it up, allowing it to warm up. Also, SP 1100, our TR6A, was moved to the end of track at the front gate, and a Santa figure was placed in the cab, waving at the visitors as they drive by, lit up by the cab light. Back at the shop, the caboose stoves are lit and tended to by Eddie Powell, warming up the cars for the evening. And, it's only about 3 PM!

Just before the crew safety briefing takes place, the fence lights, front gate lights, outside building lights, and the parking lot light plant are fired up. It's only a bit after 4 PM, but several visitors are already milling around the Museum. The gas-powered generator is placed on the MoPac caboose, and, after a bit of reluctance, was started, lighting up the Santa Train. Now, with everything ready, job assignments are made, and everyone heads out to their positions. Right on time, Santa (Dave Rudolph) arrives, greets everyone, and heads to his staged seat in the baggage car, soon joined by Mrs. Claus (Linda Knutson). Their seats are backed up by a train mural hung from the wall, providing a great prop for the kids' photos with them throughout the evenings. It's Santa Train time!

The Santa Train (GP9E SP 2873, and cabooses UP 25283, MP 13878, UP (RI) 24592, and UP 25732, all lit up with LED lights) makes it's first run at 5 PM, and then runs as often as necessary (load & go) until around 8 PM, or until the crowds thin out. The train starts out from the boarding area on track 3 alongside the shop and proceeds west, going around the balloon and then coming up the south lead, running east along the parking lot to clear the pedestrian crossing. This gives visitors just arriving or leaving a good view of the train in motion. The train then backs up, utilizing a shop light mounted on the railing of the UP 25732 as a backup light, and returns to the loading area, where passengers are exchanged, and the process repeats.

Running trains at night, at a museum, in the cold, with the general public as passengers, including lots of young children, requires competent operating personnel, attention to detail, and teamwork to be successful. We have accomplished that with the volunteer team that

stepped up to handle this task. I have high praise for everyone who helped make these events a success (the baggage car crew, mentioned earlier, also were the ones who served the cookies and drinks, and most of them were there for all 3 nights). Special mention goes out to Bart Hansen, who did a fantastic job as conductor for all 3 nights, David Elems, who was anywhere we needed him to be all 3 nights, Director Charlie Spikes, who, in addition to working as engineer on the trains, took care of watering up the kitchen area each event afternoon, and then draining it again after the event, to prevent freeze damage to the water system, and Duane VanderVeen, who helped with the water system, and assisted Director Kirk Baer collecting admissions and food items at the front gate. Others who served on the train crews, in various positions as they rotated through, included David Hanson (Bart's dad, who is also a Director for the local electrical cooperative), R. Hanson (Bart's brother), Matt Elems, Director Greg Elems, Loren Ross, Ed Powell, Matt Shuman, Ron Huey, Rick Gruninger, Kevin Errecart, Randy Morton, Ethan Doty, his girlfriend Ali, and his dad. If I have omitted anyone, my sincere apologies for my failing memory (I did refer to the volunteer sign-in book, as well, so make sure you sign in when you're at the Museum).

FRRS President Rod McClure also was there for 2 of the events to oversee things and assist in parking control and grounds security. Director Gail McClure was also at two of the events, handling the Gift Shop, assisted by Jasmine, who was in the store for all 3 events. Out at the front gate, Director Kirk Baer, his wife Debra, Duane VanderVeen, and Ethan Doty's dad, among others, all worked in the cold to collect admissions, count cars, and gather the donated food items for the events.

It should be noted here that the spirit of WP's Willing People was alive and well at the Santa Trains, with President Rod McClure, Directors Greg Elems and Kirk Baer, and Randy Morton, all hired by the WP (and, except for Kirk, who is retired, still working for the railroad) all volunteering to help make these events a success.

Special thanks go out to Dave Rudolph and Linda Knutson, who have played Santa and Mrs. Claus at our Santa Trains for several years now. Their willingness to sit with countless children and pose for photo after photo for several hours contributes immensely to the success of our events; just having them there completes the setting we're trying to achieve.

After the crowds have thinned out, the focus shifts to closing things up. Caboose stoves are allowed to burn out, the engine is shut down and drained, generators and lights are shut down, coffee pots and drain tanks are emptied, trash is collected and dumped, the kitchen water system is drained, and the volunteer crew gathers in the *Silver Plate* for pizza, provided by myself and my wife (6th and 20th) and the McClure's (13th). After enjoying pizza and conversation, the last of the trash is dumped, the lights and heaters are turned off, the building is locked up, and the front gate is closed and locked. The Museum returns to off-season slumber.

Following the 3rd Santa Train event, the usual cast of characters returns to put everything away and allow the Museum to move on to other needs for the winter. First, the baggage car crew comes in and takes everything down in the passenger cars, boxing it all up for return to storage in one of our boxcars. Then, the power cords are removed from the cars, allowing them to be moved outside to free up shop space for planned winter projects. Charlie and Duane removed all the lights and cords from the fence, and I got everything removed from the front gate. David and Matt Elems worked with the baggage car crew to get everything back into the boxcar. By the end of 2014, the only thing left to do is clear the lights off the Santa Train itself, which I worked on as time (and health issues) allowed. By mid-February, that task is completed. All the lights and stuff are locked up in the MoPac caboose lockers, and the cabooses themselves are locked up for the winter. We're ready for the summer season.

The Santa Trains generated income for the FRRS by charging admission at the front gate of $10 per carload, or $5 per carload with a donation of 3 non-perishable food items, which we collected for donation to the EPCAN (Eastern Plumas Community Action Network) food bank. With car counts of 119, 107, and 111 for the three events, over 1150 pounds of food items were collected for EPCAN, and cash income for the FRRS was nearly $3200 in gate admissions and donations, and cash in donation boxes in the UP 105 and the *Silver Plate*. Gift Shop sales are not included in these figures. Expenses attributed to the Santa Trains came to about $1850, including the electric bill (high due to the number of electric heaters in use, plus all the lighting in the building and cars), advertising, rental of the light plant used to light up the parking lot, and supplies. As can be seen, this

resulted in a profit for the FRRS in excess of $1300, which is directly attributable to the dedication and drive of the FRRS volunteers who made it happen. As Project Manager for the Santa Trains, I cannot thank all of these people enough, and I hope many of you will be back next fall to do it all again. The 2015 Santa Trains will run on December 5th, 12th, and 19th. Come up and see what a dedicated group of volunteers can do; you'll be impressed.

Waking a Tired Workhorse: Bringing WP917D into service for 2015

— David Elems ("Fritz")

Following the troubles with getting 917 to turn over on March 4, Poindexter (Matt Elems) and I decided to put the batteries on a charger for a couple of days. I returned two days later on the sixth and found the voltage of the batteries had come up and that the charger was putting out the expected amperage.

Hopeful that I'd finally get the prime mover to turn over I started watering up the locomotive, leaving the charger hooked up as long as possible. While waiting for the cooling system to fill, I opened all the cylinder relief valves and barred the engine over to clear the cylinders. Eventually the cooling system was filled; at 200 gal, it takes some time. Once the charger was disconnected and all the cords and the hose pulled, I gave it another go. Giving the layshaft a couple of inches I pushed the start button; the engine turned over, but not fast enough.
At this point I suspected a problem with the batteries, and decided that it would be best to not draw a load from them until checking their condition. Voltage wise they hadn't dropped significantly, which means the batteries were low on water or there was a shorted cell. Steve Habeck, the keeper of the batteries, was thus sent a text message of the situation. At that point nothing could really be done until the next day in which Steve and I would have to take a look at the batteries.

The following day, being Saturday the seventh, was a board meeting day. Following the board meeting a group gathered at the West end of the shop for the verdict on the batteries. Each battery was checked individually while the engine was turned over (via the starting circuit). The discovery being that the fireman's side battery had indeed developed a short. The decision was made to pull the batteries and replace them with the ones in the rotary plow snail. This would have to wait though, due to scheduling constraints from my classes and other people's work schedules. It would be another week and a half before anything more would be attempted.
I arrived early on Thursday the 19, and set about cleaning in and about the machine shop, waiting for Habeck and Poindexter to arrive. About an hour later, I was greeted by McClain and Whetstone who had come up to install the hydraulic rams back onto the white forklift and continue repairs to QRR 1100.

WP 917's right side battery box, prior to cleaning. Regular cleaning helps slow the corrosive effects of battery chemicals on the metal of the locomotive. The wood lining prevents terminals from inadvertantly touching the meal body.

— David Elems Photo

With their help 917 was moved over the oil pan, a location more readily accessible by the electric forklift. Within an hour and a half Steve arrived, and work could finally begin on getting the batteries swapped. The batteries were removed and the battery boxes washed out. Clean battery boxes are important!

While waiting for the battery boxes to dry, Habeck and I needed to rearrange the battery house to get 917's former batteries put away. It's a little easier to walk inside, having swapped the over-sized pallets by the large swing door with one of a more reasonable size.

Having completed the task of getting the batteries put away and the battery house arranged to Habeck's liking, we then took a brief respite while we waited for Poindexter to arrive. Luckily that wasn't long, and we were back to work within the hour.