

Twenty Years Ago

By Norman W. Holmes

The twenty-first Feather River Railroad Days is now history. It doesn't seem like it was 20 years ago that the Feather River Rail Society was formed and the Union Pacific donated Western Pacific F7A No.921 for preservation in Portola.

The circumstances leading up to this event was the purchase of the Western Pacific by the Union Pacific which was approved on December 22, 1982. With the loss of "our" railroad some of the Portola employees who thought more of the railroad than just a job got together in February 1983, to form an organization to preserve the history of the WP in Portola.

When UP took control they immediately deadlined all of the older WP diesel locomotives and brought in their own newer power. Included in the deadline were two EMD F7A units, the last remaining units of this type on the roster. We thought what better item to remember the WP than to have one of these classic units to preserve and display in Portola.

Mr. R.G. (Mike) Flannery had been President of the WP and after the merger he became President of the UP. Soon after taking office Mr. Flannery came through Portola on a private train inspection tour. While the train was stopped here I approached Mr. Flannery's private car, knocked on the door and was invited in. I asked him if we could have one of the covered wagons (slang for F units) for a display in Portola. He said to write him a letter and he would see what he could do.

It was not long before I received a letter to meet with Walter Treanor, WP Vice President-Law, asking for a meeting in San Francisco. I invited Skip Englert, who was President of the Portola Chamber of Commerce and a railroad enthusiast to accompany me to San Francisco.

At that meeting we received the news that the UP would donate one of the F7 units to Portola, the other one would go to the Bay Area Electric Railroad Association. Since the Feather River Rail Society was just forming and did not have non-profit status it was decided that the railroad would donate the unit to the Portola Chamber of Commerce.

The two units were sent to North Platte, Nebraska for repainting back into WP's classic orange and silver. During late August WP 921 arrived in Portola resplendent in its new paint. The unit was formally donated to the Greater Portola Chamber of Commerce at the Railroad Days kick-off dinner August 26, 1983. The unit was placed on display at the Portola depot along with a UP SD40-2, a flag car and a caboose. Steps were constructed to allow public access to the equipment and a second presentation was made for the public. Sunday afternoon a railroad crew was called to move the exhibit cars to the yard and to place the 921 in the diesel house as a temporary storage area.

On September 13, 1983, the Feather River Rail Society was incorporated as a California non-profit corporation and later we received the coveted IRS 501C(3) status for tax deductible donations.

In October the City of Portola, at the request of our Society, sent a formal request to Mr. Flannery for a lease of the unused diesel shop building and adjacent trackage for a muse-

um site. In December Mr. Flannery and the Union Pacific agreed to lease the site. This property was then sub-leased to the Society for use as a railroad museum. The reason for the City's involvement was that the City was established and we were new and the City had the capability of obtaining grant money to improve the property.

(Later, after we proved ourselves as a reliable, trustworthy, organization the Union Pacific transferred the lease to FRRS and the City transferred the equipment that had been donated to them. The Portola Chamber of Commerce transferred the 921 to our care.)

Subsequent requests for WP equipment were made to Mr. Flannery's office and received favorable responses. This has resulted in the Portola Railroad Museum having the largest collection of railroad equipment from any one railroad. No other railroad museum has anyway near this quantity and variety of equipment from one railroad.

I am sure that without Mike Flannery's love for the Western Pacific and his faith in our organization to follow through with the commitment to establish and maintain the railroad museum here in Portola, we would not be the great railroad museum we are today.

Mike Flannery passed away on May 21, 2003.



Norman Holmes with Mike Flannery in front of the 921 after the donation ceremonies.