

Restoring Railcars

Rivanna Chapter of National Railway Historical Society renovates cabin car for use on tourist train running between two Pennsylvania towns.



The restored Pennsylvania Railroad caboose, complete with a bow, as it is ready to be delivered to a nonprofit railroad in Pennsylvania for use on a tourist train. A farewell ceremony for the caboose was held on Dec. 19.

Photo courtesy of John Pfaltz

by *Ronald E. Gareis*
Community contributor

For the last six years, members of the Rivanna Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society have been restoring a Pennsylvania Railroad cabin car (called a caboose on other railroads). Now it has been donated to the nonprofit Colebrookdale Railroad in Boyertown, Pa., about an hour northwest of Philadelphia. There it will be maintained and kept in operation on tourist trains running on the eight-mile track between Boyertown and neighboring Pottstown.

“We restored (Pennsylvania Railroad) No. 477768 from being a virtual wreck to nearly its original condition so that it could be seen and enjoyed,” said John Pfaltz, one of the restoration team leaders. “It does not belong on an isolated siding in central Virginia.”

The caboose has left its Red Hill, Va., siding for two brief trips: in 2010 it went to Steamtown in Scranton, Pa., where it was on display, and in 2012 it went to Harrisburg, Pa., to be displayed at the

Amtrak station. These moves were made possible by Norfolk Southern, which picked up and delivered the caboose. This time, however, the movement will be for good.

The NRHS Rivanna Chapter held a farewell ceremony at the caboose in Red Hill on Dec. 19. Chapter members, friends, and families attended the event, along with dignitaries from Boyertown, the Colebrookdale Railroad and the NRHS national organization.

Until the 1980s, all freight trains had the familiar red caboose at the rear end. Usually a conductor, brakeman and flagman rode there; it became their home away from home. Consequently, this N5b caboose has a work table, bunks, ice box, sink with running water, toilet, and potbellied coal stove. Everything except the toilet has been restored to the way it was when No. 477768 was first built in July 1941 in the Pennsylvania Railroad Shops in Altoona, Pa.

Even as late as 1941, railroads only used oil lamps, and Don Wells found original versions on eBay for the caboose. Only later, was electricity installed. Two electricians, Bob Lent and Tom Bennedeto, restored the deteriorated 12-volt system. A caboose was a complex living organism. Unfortunately, modern technology has made this all unnecessary and today the caboose has been replaced by just a flashing red light.

On the Colebrookdale Railroad, these aspects of 20th century railway life

will come alive for tourists as they ride in the caboose on busy weekends.

"This kind of public education is one of the major goals of the NRHS," said Ross Thomas, the Rivanna Chapter president.

A second important goal is restoration of historically important railway properties. Consequently, the donation of \$5,000 by the Lions and Rotary clubs of Boyertown to the NRHS Restoration Grant fund was a factor in the decision to donate No. 477768 to the Colebrookdale Railroad. There is a strong community commitment to making this railroad a central theme in the continuing revitalization of Boyertown.

This is not unlike the role of Charlottesville's Downtown Mall. According to Nathaniel Guest, president of the Colebrookdale Trust, operating Pennsylvania Railroad Equipment is hard to find, and just having the cabin car on display will provide a significant boost to this revitalization effort.

It is virtually impossible to detail what is involved in the restoration of a railway car. Many people were involved in the restoration. Members of the Rivanna Chapter put in well over 1,000 man-hours. But, it has not been just NRHS members; there has been an outpouring of Charlottesville area support. Because of rust, nearly half of the right side of the caboose had to be removed and replaced. Out of the blue, two skilled metal workers, Charles Bailey and Jeff Perry, volunteered to do the cutting and welding. Charlottesville Glass and Mirror provided new Lexan windows at their cost. Central Virginia Rentals provided sand blasting services. The Martin Marietta Corp. allowed the caboose to be stored on their track.



The restored interior of the cabin car. Usually a conductor, brakeman and flagman rode there and it became their home away from home.

Photo courtesy of John Pfaltz

1935

The National Railway Historical Society was founded in this year and has grown from 40 founding members to more than 13,000 men and women.

According to its web site, the *original society* was formed as a consolidation of two of the earliest railfan clubs in the U.S., the Lancaster (PA) Railway & Locomotive Historical Society and the Interstate Trolley Club of Trenton, N.J. The official goal of the new society: "to preserve steam and electric railway historical material; to encourage the building of model railways; to secure data on the history of transportation; and to encourage rail transportation."—**Mike Spohn**

RIVANNA CHAPTER WANT TO JOIN?

While the NRHS Rivanna Chapter cannot guarantee future restoration projects as glamorous as the caboose, it would welcome new members who are interested in both the historical and modelling aspects of railroading. The chapter has meetings on the third Tuesday of every month at the Elks Club just off Route 20 at Pantops. There is a buffet dinner at 6 p.m., followed by a presentation at 7 p.m. The public is welcome. Further information can be found at nrhsrivanna.blogspot.com or contact Ross Thomas, president of the Rivanna Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society, at rtt21@comcast.net.—**Ross Thomas**

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The original Pennsylvania cabin car that was renovated by the Rivanna Chapter of the National Railroad Historical Society.

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