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The rescued caboose

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America's railroads have been called one of the oldest and most romantic enterprises in the country, which is probably why they continue to have such wide appeal.

Doing their bit to preserve that part of American history in El Dorado County (EDC) is a group of local volunteers who are restoring an old caboose that was parked at the county museum for 20 years.

HOMER RAIL, of Placerville, left, and Paul Velk, of Shingle Springs, place a support beam in the framework of a caboose being built at the depot in Shingle Springs, while Steve Carol, of Rescue, looks on. Democrat photo by Shelly Thorene

Built in the 1920s, the caboose was originally used to haul lumber, freight and workers for the Camino,

Placerville and Lake Tahoe Railroad, which was a subsidiary of the Michigan-California Lumber Company. The railroad connected a lumber mill in Camino with the Southern Pacific Railroad in Placerville. Later it was acquired by a family who used it as a playhouse for their children. When the owners sold their home in Shingle Springs, the new owner, Sandra Koop, donated the caboose to the museum where it sat in a state of disrepair.

Coming to its rescue last May was Placerville resident Ron Sexton, 73, who for many years owned High Country Woodcraft before retiring.

He wrote a proposal to restore the old caboose and presented it to the EDC Museum Commission and the El Dorado Museums Foundation.

In December he received approval for the project and \$30,000 to pay for it.

Now the coordinator of the project, Sexton began by building a one-eighth scale cutaway view model of the caboose as a reference during the restoration work and to also familiarize himself with how the actual caboose was made. He said he was able to do so based on CAD drawings provided by another volunteer, Bill Rodgers. That scale model is now on display in the museum.

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Since January, Sexton and team of skilled volunteers — with the average age of 74 — have been working on the caboose, which has since been moved to the Shingle Springs Depot.

Sexton said they work on the caboose two days a week with nine to 10 people showing up at a time — most of them experienced woodworkers. They also have volunteers from El Dorado Western Railroad and people who just walk in to help.

"We have an incredible group of volunteers," he said, "with accumulated woodworking experience of about 425 years. When asked, they show up and then ask what are we going to do."

One of the regulars is Homer Rail, 77, who volunteers with the museum and is also a member of the Gold Country Woodcrafters. "We're all old guys," said Homer, who said he became involved after taking a ride on the local railroad.

Rail said they started by tearing out the old wood so the caboose could be rebuilt from the floor up. However the pieces were labeled first so they could be used as templates in cutting the new wood. But since the original framework had pieces missing, in some cases they had to estimate the dimensions of pieces. They also visited a railroad museum to study how cabooses are put together.

"The idea was to create as exact a replica as possible," said Rail, noting they are using the same building techniques that were used originally, including the use of mortise and tenon joints along with a limited number of metal bars and bolts strategically placed so the car can flex when it rolls down the rail. Eventually it will have doors at either end of the car, sliding doors on its sides and will be covered inside and out in cedar.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the team was removing the cupola, which weighs 500 pounds. Lacking a way to lift it, they built a ramp and slid it down. However, getting it back in place again once it's finished will require the use of a lift.

Rail said commonly the conductor would sit in the cupola and watch for hot boxes (overheated axle bearings), hobos or other problems. In an emergency, he could apply the brakes.

However the restoration work does not include putting in brakes which is why, at least initially, there are no plans to use the caboose for rides, although it could be done later.

By fall, Sexton said he hopes to have most of the work done.

"That means finished on the inside and painted on the outside," he said. "Then all the detail work begins as well as building a cover for it when it's not in use."

As for how it will be used, he said there are various ideas being discussed. Some see it as being used as an office or as a ticket booth at events. Or it may simply be a display piece. Ultimately it will be up to the museum to decide.

In the meantime work proceeds on reclaiming one more piece of El Dorado County history.
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