

Old house surprise: Missing Southern Pacific depot

By Janet Eastman
The Oregonian

ASHLAND (AP) — Squint as you walk by a decomposing Douglas fir structure on a residential street in Ashland and you'll see patches of peeling paint, called Southern Pacific yellow, peeking out through glassless windows. Stop. There's more to the story.

Barricaded behind weather-beaten boards and, until recently, shrouded by towering cottonwood trees and 10-foot-tall blackberry bushes is the city's first train depot. This significant piece of the state's past has been missing for a half-century.

It was built in 1884. Charles Crocker, one of the Big Four of the Central Pacific Railroad, stood by Ashland's train depot three years later as he drove a symbolic golden spike into the last section of tracks circumnavigating the U.S., finally linking Oregon to California, and transforming Oregon's economy.

Fast forward to the landmark today: Inch by inch, a congregation of volunteers is unearthing the Queen Anne-style building and piecing together the curious story of how the decommissioned train depot was moved stealthily in the 1960s from the rail yard to this nondescript lot about three miles away.

The structure's survival remained a secret until this summer, when the property was sold by representatives of the third generation of the family that lived inside it. As word of the discovery slowly reaches city officials and historians, the reaction is the same: Who knew?

"I rode by this house for years," says Amy Gunter, a city employee who serves on the Ashland Historic Commission, "and never had a clue what was behind the walls."

The long-lost train depot was "hiding in plain sight," says historian Victoria Law, who operated the Ashland Railroad Museum and maintains an archive of railroad memorabilia.

Finding the gabled depot was a surprise, but it's not uncommon for homeowners to stumble upon vintage architectural elements hidden in their houses, especially during renovations.

Just as classic car collectors speak in hushed tones about "garage finds" — long-forgotten gems camouflaged by dust or tarps — there could be a bonanza of Victorian hardware, Arts & Crafts tile, vintage light fixtures and other valuables holed up in your home.

A number of Pioneer Era houses are "buried" inside later additions, says Peggy Moretti, executive director of the preservation group Restore Oregon.

It's also a custom, when restoring an older house, to install elements culled from ones no longer standing. The 1871 Jacob Kamm Mansion in Southwest Portland has oak pilasters, burlled ash paneling, leaded glass and other decorative features saved from demolished houses.

Early settlers and their ancestors were the original recyclers. Long before modern builders started using salvage materials and repurposing old buildings, our founding fathers did it out of necessity.

Today, historic salvage is big business. More people are interested in sustainability and adding historic character to newer houses. Rejuvenation (called Rejuvenation House Parts in 1977) led the way and Aurora Mills Architectural Salvage is opening a Portland store in early 2015.

"Preservationists always prefer to see a building preserved and reused in place, with appropriate adaptation for modern living, but when all else fails we do want to see the historic materials reused," says Moretti, who installed a salvaged historic window in her 1906 Craftsman to counter a previous owner's misguided remodel.

Stacy and Ramana Waymire, the new owners of the Ashland property where the depot was concealed, had no idea what was behind the wooden facade until they were approached to buy it. Stacy Waymire refers to the find as "the last mystery in Ashland."

Both are priests at the Ashland Zen Center, and since they bought the lot in July, they and center members are handling the artifact as an archaeologist would. They are slowly removing overgrown brush and painstakingly inventorying what remains of the original structure.

Only half of the depot — about 24 feet wide and 60 feet long — was moved via flatbed train car to this lot, according to Ashland historian Terry Skibby.

This wasn't the first time the depot changed locations. In 1888, it was moved when a larger depot and hotel building was completed and it was relegated to a freight depot.

Skibby, a lifelong resident of Ashland, surmises that the unused building was moved to where it stands today in the 1960s, a decade after the last steam engine whistled into town.

Stacy Waymire found an official-looking sign on the old building that stated: Caveat emptor ("Let the buyer beware").

Since it was last seen in public, the depot's pitched roof and extended eaves have been shortened, probably to clear a lower overpass when it traveled on tracks crossing Highway 66.

The original wood floor is missing, but some of the gingerbread siding, corbels and other decorative features remain. The wainscot-paneled interior has been reconfigured to look more like a home, but the original depot restroom is still distinguishable. Sometime in the 1970s, a scrap-wood shell was erected around the structure.

The Waymires purchased the property to build modest housing for the Zen center's clergy and students studying Buddhism. After the discovery of the depot, they wanted to know if it could be restored and lived in.

Stacy Waymire contacted Jim Lewis, who served on the Ashland Historic Commission for 14 years and successfully converted the south wing of the second train depot and hotel into offices near the original train station on A Street.

After crawling under the building and in the rafters to ascertain its structural integrity and condition, Lewis concluded it wouldn't work for the center's need, but a collector,

museum or railroad group might want to preserve it. Waymire hopes to sell it.

"Our intention is to reclaim everything we can, sell items of interest and value to builders and collectors, and recycle the rest," says Waymire, who has photos of bathtubs, antique furniture, woodworking tools and other collectibles in a range of ages and conditions found on the property.

"Repurposing and reusing materials is the nature of our practice and honestly, we are a modest church and we need the money to build new housing," says Waymire, who is also selling firewood cut from the cottonwood trees. "We would love to see this wood heat more people than just ourselves."

She plans to contact antique dealers, appraisers and woodcrafters and hold a public sale in the spring. She can be reached at info@ashlandzencenter.org. In the meantime, Waymire asks that people respect that the structure is on private property and that it's unsafe to go near it.

Local historians are hoping people can see past the old depot's current dilapidated state and visualize what it was and what it could be.

"This building is significant even if it's beat up," says historian Law, who speaks to groups across the state about the railroad workers, most from China, who excavated tunnels through the steep Siskiyou Mountains. "This building is one of the very last Oregon and California Railroad Co. depots left in the state. It evokes life from long ago and it deserves to be saved."

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