

LIFESTYLES

WEEKEND, MAY 23-24, 2015

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Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A piece of the railroad track from the mainline that ran through the area in 1881 on display at the Maxwell Siding Railroad Museum.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

The Maxwell Siding Railroad Museum in Hermiston has numerous restored railcars and two rotary snowplows.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Old power line insulators rest in a pile at the Maxwell Siding Railroad Museum in Hermiston.



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Work crew cars called "speeders" sit on display at the Maxwell Siding Railroad Museum on Wednesday in Hermiston.

HISTORY ON THE RAILS

Museum caretakers hope to pass on Hermiston's railroad legacy

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

Behind a chain link fence, between a 1913 dining car and a 1912 passenger coach full of railroad memorabilia, a faded wooden sign reading "West Maxwell" can be seen from Hodge Park in Hermiston.

The sign is one of the last reminders of a time long past, when the railroad attracted human inhabitants to the stretch of high desert that would someday become the largest city in Eastern Oregon.

The plan was to name that settlement Maxwell, after the Maxwell railroad siding along the line between Hinkle and Umatilla, but instead Hermiston was born.

"It turned out there was already a Maxwell, Oregon," explained John Spinden.

Few people know that bit of history now, but Spinden and fellow Maxwell Siding Railroad Museum caretaker Connie Maret are fighting to keep the city's institutional memory of its railroading roots alive.

These days it's no easy task — trains no longer run through the middle of Hermiston, and booming growth in other industries has diluted the presence of railroader families in town.

Thirty years ago a former municipal judge named John Bennett rallied about a dozen citizens to create the museum around a handful of donated railroad cars. Now that group is

down to Spinet, 76, and Maret, 81.

"Unfortunately time takes its toll," Spinet said.

They still open the museum on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and by appointment but the two retired railroaders are having trouble keeping up with the weeds sprouting up around the cars and the dust collecting on more than a century's worth of railroad memorabilia. Spinet said he doesn't know how many more seasons he has left in him.

"What's going to happen when I'm gone?" he asked.

He and Maret would like to pass on their knowledge — and the work — to other, younger railroad enthusiasts who could keep the museum going.

Volunteers for the museum are thin on the ground but it still has its share of visitors. On Tuesday a father and son from Canada stopped by and happened to catch Spinet for a tour. And on Wednesday Maret gave a group of special education students from Hermiston High School a railroad safety talk inside the museum's dining car.

Maret told the group about the dangers of putting things on the track, where they can shoot out with the force of a bullet instead of being flattened by a train. Even when the train is at a standstill, it's not wise to play around, he said. During his days as a foreman one of his coworkers heard a pounding noise and discovered a young boy who had been playing in a



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Connie Maret uses a stick to point out train models in a 1913 Pullman heavy weight dining car to a group of students during a tour Wednesday at the Maxwell Siding Railroad Museum.



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John Spinden talks about how the engineers could control the locomotive from the cab of one of two rotary snowplows Wednesday at the Maxwell Siding Railroad Museum.

boxcar in Texas when the train started moving, slamming the door shut and trapping him for two and a half days before arriving in Hermiston.

"That's what happens when you're playing around in something you shouldn't be," Maret told the students.

He gave them a tour of the museum's various train

cars, demonstrating pieces of equipment like the old telegraph station set up in the passenger car and spouting a constant stream of local railroad trivia.

The two gray rotary snowplows facing Highland Avenue are the museum's most unique pieces. One was built in 1910, the other in 1949. The 1949 version is one of only four steam-pow-

ered rotary snowplows built after World War II and the only one of its kind still in existence.

That type of history is what brings reporters from Trains Magazine and train enthusiasts to Hermiston from time to time.

Not everyone is a fan, however. The city's Community Enhancement Committee recently released a report criticizing the display as unattractive and expressing interest in downsizing and cleaning up the museum.

Maret and Spinet hope all of the museum's historical artifacts are preserved, but they also know they won't be around forever to make sure that happens. For now, they keep plugging along, sharing their decades' worth of knowledge about trains, rail snowplows and railroad equipment to anyone willing to listen.

"We feel like a parent showing off our baby," Spinet said, patting one of the snowplows fondly.

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