

# Rusting rail history

**Railroad enthusiasts fighting to keep town's ties to roots alive**

BY JADE MCDOWELL  
EO MEDIA GROUP

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 people 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 Spin-

den. 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 Spinden, 76, and Maret, 81.

"Unfortunately, time takes its toll," Spinden said.

They still open the museum from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays 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. Spinden 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. Last week, a father and son from Canada stopped by and happened to catch Spinden for a tour. The next day, 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.

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-powered 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 Spinden 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," Spinden said, patting one of the snowplows fondly.

## TAX

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45 percent goes toward operating the Hermiston Conference Center; 25 percent

offsets the cost of programs such as the senior taxi vouchers, economic development, street maintenance and other general fund programs; 15 percent goes to develop parks; and 15 percent goes

toward recreation program grants for other entities.

Morgan said the tax was first implemented in 1991, but the distribution has been amended through the years. In the 2013-14 fis-

cal year, the tax generated \$436,000, and it brought in more than \$2.5 million total in the eight years before that.

"It's definitely having a positive impact," he said.

## MICHAEL:

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a secretary has evolved in the district, and she was transferred to Sunset Elementary for five years before she moved back to Highland Hills as lead secretary.

"It's really a great job," she said. "I love the children. It's perfect for me, and the district has been very good to me. So, I didn't see a need to leave."

While Michael has worked for nine different principals through the years, change in administration has not required much transition.

"You know, the district has expectations," she said, adding, however, the different principals have brought their own flair to the job. "But really, they're led by the district office."

The thing that has changed significantly in the last 35 years, Michael said, has been the technology. When she first started, the secretarial staff was using technology much different than today, adding it was similar to a manual typewriter. The first computer she ever used in her job was an Apple 2E, largely due to fascination of the school's principal's with the technology.

"it just took right off," she said. "He just understood it."

Now, the school district is

able to track a great deal more student information, and Michael said the process is much faster than it was before because everything is stored in a district-wide database.

"It's just so much easier," she said. "You can track everything, once you learn the curve. It's sometimes a learning curve."

Knowledge of technology, she said, may dictate when Michael hangs up her secretarial hat in the school district.

"I've always said, before I retire, I will learn the iPad," she said, adding stu-

dents are using all sorts of technology with which she is unfamiliar, including iPads and iPads.

Michael said she has made a little progress to that end; she worked on it this past weekend and has successfully set it up. She will return to Highland Hills next year, she said, but she does not know if she will stay long enough to earn another five-year rhinestone.

"You never know what life brings, but the school district's been a great journey for me," she said.

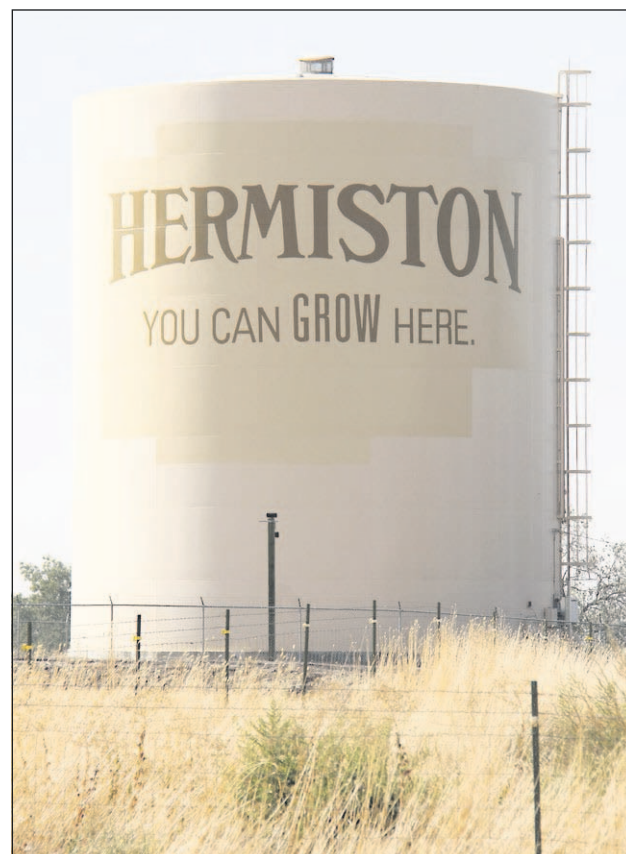
She said the children are

the best part of her job, and by working as a secretary so many years, she has established lasting relationships with some of them.

Michael said every Christmas she receives a phone call from a former student who is now an adult living in Texas.

In addition to the connections she's made with the students and their families through the years, she said she frequently receives artwork and flowers from the children.

"You get a perk every single day," Michael said.



SEAN HART PHOTO

This photo of the Hermiston water tower shows the logo that was painted over the old watermelon and the two-toned background caused by the oxidation of the old paint that was not re-covered. City Manager Byron Smith said the tower will be entirely repainted by the end of this year with a new graphic that has not been finalized.

## TOWER:

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at that and say, 'I like it' or '(I) don't like it.' We'll get some consensus about that before we finish."

Smith said the project will be completed by the end of the year, and work will probably begin this summer or early fall. He said city officials are also trying to develop a plan to use the brand elsewhere.

"We're trying to see if we can coordinate it with a larger roll out of some more branding changes," he said. "Hopefully the painting of the tower would come as one of many things: maybe a revamp of the website, a redo of the letterhead and billing papers — just try to get that brand more visual out there."

Smith said the brand would be helpful in attracting people from outside of the area and in providing a recognizable city image within the region.

"What we're trying to do is help people remember Hermiston," he said.

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