



**Vision for the
Pacific Northwest Chapter
National Railway Historical Society**

**By
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Introduction

More than 50 years ago, farsighted railway enthusiasts founded the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society (PNWC - NRHS), the first Chapter west of the Rocky Mountains. Committed to preserving the legacy of a century of railroading, the Chapter has acquired significant collections, including sixteen historic rail cars and a wealth of archival material. Chapter members share their love of railroading through train excursions, programs with guest speakers, the monthly *Trainmaster* newsletter, and an information-rich web site.

Changes in the railroad industry, along with growth and development in the greater Portland area, have precipitated a collections storage crisis for the Chapter (and for other railway heritage organizations in the region). Responding proactively to this challenge, members of the Chapter's board of directors and committee chairs met on April 8, 2006 for a full-day visioning session. Based on their work, planning consultant Alice Parman prepared this draft vision document.

The draft was first reviewed by board members and committee chairs who attended the visioning session. On May 13, Alice met with that group to elicit comments and corrections. A revised draft was circulated to all Chapter members, who were invited to comment at a town hall meeting on June 9. The final vision document, representing a broad consensus, will serve as a basis for the Chapter's subsequent planning and fundraising efforts.

A Record of Accomplishment

Now in its sixth decade of focused and purposeful activity, the Chapter has built a remarkable array of assets, skills, partnerships, and achievements. Tested by adversity, Chapter members have overcome numerous obstacles and setbacks to accomplish their goals. The legacy of the founders (most of whom were railway employees) has passed to a new generation of members, drawn to PNWC - NRHS by their love of trains.

The Pacific Northwest Chapter – National Railway Historical Society is a 501 (c) (3) educational and charitable nonprofit organization. Donations to PNWC are tax-deductible. The Oregon Cultural Trust recognizes PNWC as a partner cultural non-profit organization. The Chapter's threefold purpose, according to the by-laws, is to preserve the railway history and artifacts of the Pacific Northwest, to collect data on the history of transportation, and to encourage rail transportation.

The Chapter is an all-volunteer organization with 300 dues-paying members, including a core group of especially active volunteers. Together, these men and women possess an extraordinary range and depth of knowledge, skills, and experience. They freely share these resources not only to advance the work of the Chapter, but also to support the efforts of sister railroad history organizations.

Nationally known for expertise in running railroad excursions, the Chapter won additional recognition (and made a sizeable profit) by planning and implementing a highly successful NRHS national convention in 2005. An impressive combination of technical know-how and managerial competence has enabled PNWC – NRHS to carry out very ambitious projects with professional excellence.

In the course of many decades, PNWC – NRHS has acquired a substantial collection of rolling stock and other historic artifacts, documents, images, and media. The Chapter has the collective know-how and commitment to repair, restore, and maintain its rolling stock. Although the built-in demands of the rail car collection have forced Chapter members to concentrate most efforts and expense in that area, some dedicated researchers have focused on the archives, where they have made steady progress.

Monthly Chapter meetings feature knowledgeable speakers on railroading topics. Members receive an informative monthly newsletter, *The Trainmaster*. The Chapter's web site, www.pnwc-nrhs.org, connects the membership and reaches out to railroad fans nationally and internationally. Attractively designed and frequently updated, the web site reflects the familiarity of most Chapter members with Internet-based communication.

These assets and accomplishments are characteristic of a healthy, viable organization. PNWC - NRHS has always operated in the black. A responsible and dedicated board of directors provides oversight and direction. Through its programs and collections, the Chapter benefits the public through educational, historical, and recreational opportunities.

Challenges of a new century

Despite this stellar track record, the Chapter now faces a difficult set of challenges. The most pressing problems relate to storage of rail cars, as well as two semi-truck trailers full of parts and other historic material. These large objects are housed at diverse locations in and around Portland. Each of these storage arrangements represents the support of a generous corporate partner. Each is subject to change on short notice.

Most of the Chapter's storage sites are inadequately secured. Rail cars have long been vulnerable to graffiti and other vandalism. Metal theft has risen to unprecedented levels in recent years, fueled by epidemic methamphetamine addiction. These depredations seriously threaten the physical integrity of rolling stock that the Chapter has worked very hard to preserve, restore, and maintain.

All Portland-area rail heritage organizations face a shortage of storage spaces for rolling stock in the metropolitan area. Growth and development have driven regional land values steadily higher. Activities within the urban growth boundary are increasingly restricted and regulated. To cut costs, railroads are ruthlessly eliminating switches; this reduces the amount of track that can be used to store rail cars.

Three other railway history organizations now house locomotives and rail cars at the former Southern Pacific Brooklyn Yard facility. Three of the Chapter's rail cars are temporarily stored there while Chapter members complete necessary repairs and renovations. The Yard's current owner, Union Pacific, has told Brooklyn Roundhouse tenants that they intend to expand their freight operations, which will necessitate moving all historic locomotives and rail cars now stored there. Imminent demolition of the Brooklyn Roundhouse and curtailment of yard privileges will place even greater demands on inadequate storage resources.

The archives present another set of problems. Although the leaky roof of the Union Station annex has been replaced, the building lacks temperature and humidity controls to protect fragile documents, images, and artifacts. The Chapter's 1800-square-foot storage space is filled to capacity. There is no room for work surfaces and staging areas that are essential to organizing, cataloging, and maintaining an archival collection. Lack of a systematic retrieval system makes access extremely difficult for researchers.

Member recruitment poses a different set of challenges. To ensure ongoing care of the collections and to continue to run excursions, it is imperative that current Chapter members impart their skills (e.g. rail car maintenance, repair, restoration, and operation) to a new generation of railroad fans. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract new members (especially younger members and participating, active members), because so few people are familiar with trains. In contrast with other industrialized countries, the U.S. government has neglected passenger railroads for half a century. A significant number of Oregonians have never ridden on a train.

A Home of Our Own?

Affiliation with an existing organization, Antique Powerland, offers potential solutions to the Chapter's rail car and archival storage problems, and might also be helpful in recruiting new members.

Antique Powerland was founded as a safe haven for historically important machines. Located on a 60-acre site near Interstate 5 in Brooks, Oregon, Antique Powerland houses diverse collections that include large vehicles, such as trolleys, harvesters, and earthmoving equipment. The Antique Powerland Museum Association (APMA), an umbrella organization for more than a dozen museums and partners, recently completed a visioning process. Their vision calls for an increased public presence that would build on the success of the annual Steam-Up, as well as other events and rental opportunities. Two of the Chapter's rail cars are now on display, with one undergoing restoration, at Antique Powerland (which has a nearby rail line).

Although Antique Powerland's site has room for only a few rail cars, it may be possible for the Chapter to purchase an adjacent parcel that would include rail line access. Such a purchase could advantageously be made in partnership with other organizations now seeking permanent rail car storage. As owners of the largest percentage of the region's historic rolling stock, the Chapter could play a leadership role in the development of a rail car storage facility.

A combination of circumstances may lead diverse railway heritage groups to consider joining forces with PNWC - NRHS. All owners of rail cars are contending with metal theft issues; several organizations are affected by the Union Pacific's pending order to vacate the Brooklyn roundhouse and yard. (In the unlikely event that the OMSI site for the three locomotives doesn't work out, the City of Portland and the three organizations that maintain them would also need a fallback option.)

A task force of Chapter members has begun to explore possibilities at Antique Powerland. Meetings will be scheduled with a land use attorney and a realtor. Some task force members will outline a detailed scope of work, while others continue to inventory collections now in storage.

Also on the immediate to-do list are a definition of the relationship between the Chapter and APMA, and redefinition of existing partnerships. As work progresses, the task force will determine what facilities and infrastructure will be needed at the new site, and will develop associated cost estimates.

What might the Pacific Northwest Chapter – National Railroad History Society look like as an affiliate of Antique Powerland? In one scenario, PNWC might be known as the Oregon Railroad Museum (a name that the Chapter has registered in the State of Oregon). This major attraction would draw diverse, year-round audiences and members. The Oregon Railroad Museum could be an anchor tenant of Powerland, and an energizing and contributing member of the Antique Powerland Museum Association.

The following description suggests how visitors and Chapter members might experience such a museum. (Of course, this preliminary concept is purely imaginary; only after extensive research and planning would the Chapter consider and adopt actual exhibit and program plans for such a facility.)

Historic vehicles transport visitors from Powerland's entry area to the Oregon Railroad Museum. The building looks like an early 20th century train station, complementing the style and period of Powerland's historic town setting. As visitors approach the museum, they see one or more historic rail cars through a large window, along with period signage announcing the next departure. As a train whistle wails, the conductor calls "All aboard..." Entering the museum lobby, visitors feel as though they are about to leave on an exciting journey to an unknown destination.

The lobby evokes the ambiance of a 1940s train station. Visitors line up at the ticket window to purchase tickets, and shop for souvenirs at a period newsstand. A "coat room" offers optional dress-up clothes for all the family; period coats, jackets, uniforms, work clothes, vintage suitcases, and other props allow visitors to become passengers, or take the roles of various railroad employees.

From the lobby, visitors walk out onto a series of platforms. Here they can explore historic rail cars that are rigged for accessibility, and staffed by knowledgeable car hosts. An attractive roof protects rolling stock, platforms, and visitors from rain and sun.

Each car showcases a different aspect of railroad history and operations, inviting visitors to go behind the scenes of train operations. They learn how the safety of passengers and crew is assured, how freight is loaded and unloaded, how a conductor manages ticketing and seating, and how the restaurant and bar car are run. They get an inside look at overnight sleeping options, communications and signaling systems, waste management, and more. They can explore every aspect of a caboose. These and other topics are conveyed through succinct text (mostly first-person quotes) and historic images, as well as through conversations with volunteers.

Sounds enliven the visitor experience inside the rail cars. One cycle lets visitors listen as a train starts up, gains speed, passes through a tunnel, blows its whistle, clears a grade

crossing, brakes, and comes to a stop. Visitors eavesdrop on dramatized conversations among conductors, porters, cooks, passengers, and crew members.

Interpretive text and images are displayed on discreetly located graphic panels. To avoid cluttering up the historic rail cars, panels are mounted in hidden places where visitors can discover them. Each time they enter a new space, open a door, or look into a cupboard, visitors stumble on intriguing reminiscences, candid photos, period postcards and advertisements that bring the historic railroad experience to life. Period photos, graphics, and memorabilia are displayed on the “station platforms” themselves. These thematic exhibits trace the history of railroading in the Pacific Northwest, from the earliest days to the present.

The museum uses varied interpretive styles to reach a wide variety of audiences. Interactive and hands-on opportunities appeal to youngsters, and to people of all ages who learn best by doing. Engaging styles of visual communication ensure that non-English speakers enjoy their experience, and come away with new understanding of the core messages. A small “newsreel” style theater features a variety of video programs on all aspects of railroading, produced from original footage in the Chapter’s collection.

New audiences drawn to the Oregon Railroad Museum include families from Central and South America; immigrants from Russia, who bring lifelong knowledge of trains as a prime means of transportation; and people who support railroads as a mass transit alternative to car culture. For many, this is their first visit to a museum. After a few visits, some will want to join, volunteer, donate...and even become board members.

Families can check out backpacks filled with activities, games, and touchables. A self-guided treasure hunt leads them through some of the cars in search of clues to solve a mystery. (Volunteer car hosts are in on the secret and can provide hints and information.) Homeschoolers and school groups participate in self-guided or volunteer-led role-playing activities. Taking the roles of crew members, they cooperate to carry out routine operations of a train journey. In the process, they solve problems using principles of mathematics and science. Finally, they learn principles of railroad safety by conducting an inspection and running an emergency drill.

In partnership with other rail heritage organizations, the Oregon Railroad Museum offers a variety of excursions. At the simplest level, school groups and general visitors can take a short train ride around the museum grounds. This mini-excursion might involve role-playing, with passengers aiding the crew in taking tickets, spotting and interpreting signals, etc.

Near the station platform, a “roundhouse” serves as the Museum’s maintenance and restoration shop. A glassed-in barrier with two-way speaker capability allows visitors to watch work in progress. A volunteer explains what’s going on, and visitors can ask questions of people who are working on the rail cars. Student apprentices and interns, fulfilling their community service requirements while learning a variety of skills, are an important part of the Museum’s maintenance and restoration team.

The Museum also benefits from the skills and resources of other museums and partner organizations affiliated with Antique Powerland. They have access to the facilities and products of a sawmill, machine shop, blacksmith shop, wood shop, and other workplaces. Dozens of highly skilled and experienced artisans are ready to share expertise and lend a hand. In turn, the Chapter brings extraordinary knowledge and experience to Antique Powerland and its affiliates. Through collaborative programs and shared acquisitions, PNWC and other Powerland museums will be able to show visitors how railroads interacted with other workplaces and industries, such as logging camps and timber mills.

A critical mass of lively programs and knowledgeable people continually attracts new members, including families and youth, to the Chapter and to the Museum. The Museum exposes a new generation to trains by means of its exhibits, excursions, and special programs associated with Steam-Up and other Powerland events. Some of these visitors will get interested enough in trains to give of their time and energy. These are the caretakers of the future, motivated to learn heritage technologies and skills. Their commitment will support restoration and maintenance, keep excursion trains rolling, and preserve a priceless legacy.

This heritage is also embodied in the Chapter's archives, which will benefit greatly by incorporation with Antique Powerland's extensive archival collections. A climate-controlled storage facility is planned for APMA. Through collaboration with other affiliate museums and organizations, the Chapter can obtain professional assistance with planning and oversight of a volunteer-driven collections management effort. The services of a knowledgeable archivist will likely attract non-Chapter volunteers and student interns to the project, as well. Once the vast and extraordinary archival collections of APMA's diverse affiliates are organized and available to researchers, this archive will become a scholarly resource both regionally and nationally.

Fallback storage options

There is a chance that land acquisition near Antique Powerland may prove unaffordable, or that affiliation with Antique Powerland, or other railroading organizations, will turn out to be unworkable. The Chapter is committed to finding a home, and will make every effort to do so. As the search continues, it may be possible to store displaced rail cars (for an indeterminate period) at diverse locations in the Portland area. However, after years of effort a resourceful Chapter member has managed to locate only six backup storage spaces. Each has limited access and inadequate security; there would be no possibility of repairing or maintaining the cars at these sites. The cost of moving rail cars to these fallback sites is unknown, as is the storage cost.

Options for the excursions program

Excursions are an important focus for PNWC - NRHS. No matter where the rail cars are stored, Chapter members care passionately about being able to operate them. Excursions are the lifeblood of PNWC - NRHS, both financially and motivationally. Chapter members excel at planning, selling, and running excursions by rail. These special events provide matchless

opportunities to educate the public, including many people who have never before ridden a train. Excursions also attract new members to the Chapter, and keep ongoing members motivated and involved. As one member put it during the visioning session, “If we can’t operate, why keep the cars?”

Continued operation of excursions is contingent on the ability to purchase high-priced liability insurance. As of now, the Chapter benefits from the willingness of a public sector partner, the Port of Tillamook Bay, to provide insurance coverage for excursions.

A possible alternative would be to increase the number of excursions, making purchase of an insurance policy (minimum cost: \$50,000) worthwhile for the Chapter. There is a market for Pacific Northwest excursions, as attested by numerous offerings by for-profit companies, as well as by the non-profit Southern Appalachia Railroad Museum. Corporate team-building exercises and social events involving employees’ families are both good matches with excursions.

Another option might be to redefine the Chapter’s role in excursions. For example, PNWC could collaborate with excursion companies and/or with passenger-carrying railroads. The Chapter would provide access to a database of customers, logistical know-how, operational expertise and manpower, and knowledgeable, experienced car hosts.

Worst case scenarios for rolling stock

The Chapter will do everything possible to maintain rolling stock in operating condition, with secure storage. However, if permanent storage space cannot be found, it may be necessary to downsize the collection of rolling stock. Scrapping is expensive. A far better outcome would be to find new institutional or private owners for historically significant cars—through donation or sale.

A number of NRHS chapters have only one car in their collection. The Chapter could consider choosing a few rail cars of exceptional historic significance to store, maintain, and if possible, operate.

Even if the rail car storage and operation cannot be sustained and it proves necessary to divest rolling stock, the Chapter could reinvent itself as a museum and archive at Antique Powerland.

Planning for the Chapter’s future

This vision document suggests an approach to solving pressing problems faced by PNWC – NRHS. This preliminary plan outlines next steps, along with fallback options in case preferred alternatives don’t pan out.

Once the Chapter chooses a viable direction and begins to move, it will be vital to undertake a series of interrelated planning efforts in the areas of collections, business planning, interpretation, and marketing/communications. Chapter members will contribute greatly to development of these plans, and will ultimately determine their contents. To ensure a high-quality result, however, it will be essential to retain professional consultants to facilitate each process and to draft the planning documents.

- Collections

Development of a **collections policy** should begin as soon as possible, under the guidance of a professional archivist. A collections policy specifies the nature and scope of the organization's assets. It sets out standards and procedures for accession, management, storage, and use of the collections, as well as for deaccessioning items that don't fit the Chapter's mission, or are redundant. The collections policy provides a means to decide how to allocate scarce resources of money and space, and to politely but firmly decline unwanted donations. Find a consultant who can also provide a basic conservation assessment; documentation of the need for improved collections storage is an aid to fundraising.

- Business model

Development of a consensus-based **mission statement**, expressing the organization's identity and purpose, should be a priority for PNWC. A mission-driven, consensus-based **business plan** guides decision-making about all aspects of operations and fundraising. It is an indispensable tool that will keep the Chapter on track both financially and programmatically. During a period of organizational transition, the Chapter should review and update the business plan annually. When selecting a consultant to facilitate the business planning process, look for candidates with experience in nonprofit management. Nonprofit businesses differ from their for-profit counterparts in significant ways; your consultant should be aware of the opportunities and pitfalls that are unique to nonprofit funding strategy.

- Interpretation

An **interpretive plan** is a vivid description of the Chapter's public interface as an exhibiting, educational, and research institution. Drawing on the strengths of your collections and membership, the interpretive plan presents an inspiring, yet realistic and doable prospectus for an Oregon Railroad Museum. A written narrative, concept sketches, floor plan, and target budget convey the content, look and feel, types of visitor experiences, and project scope that add up to a successful visitor attraction. An attractive presentation format makes this versatile document useful for both fundraising and "friendraising".

- Marketing and communications

As plans become more solidified, a **marketing/communications plan** assists the Chapter in telling its story to a broader public, including potential donors and sponsors. Nonprofit marketing goes beyond the standard menu of branding and logos. The plan should focus on institutional identity, with recommendations for making your programs and collections accessible and meaningful for people of all ages and backgrounds. Start looking now for a well-qualified marketing consultant who understands nonprofit organizations...and who loves trains.

Chapter members can aid the planning effort by gathering information and impressions from railroad museums. Related institutions such as history and science museums may also yield good ideas for PNWC – NRHS. The Internet enables virtual visits and communications with sister institutions nationally and internationally. Members who travel can share their firsthand impressions by email, at program meetings, and in the *Trainmaster*. Chapter field trips can take groups of members to nearby museums, such as Antique Powerland, the Columbia River Maritime Museum, or the California State Railroad Museum. Arrange to meet with staff and volunteers. Talk with visitors. Learn from others' successes—and from their mistakes.

The Chapter joined the Oregon Rail Heritage Foundation (ORHF) in 2001 in support of their mission: secure a permanent home for the City of Portland's locomotives; preserve the Brooklyn Roundhouse; and establish a Rail and Industrial Heritage Museum. Four other volunteer railroad-related organizations are also Foundation members: the Northwest Rail Museum, Pacific Railroad Preservation Association, Friends of SP 4449, and Friends of OR&N 197.

The Chapter's membership in and support of the ORHF has re-established a good working relationship with the members of these organizations. This vision will help the Chapter support, and seek ways to partner with, our sister rail heritage organizations. After this vision document has been distributed beyond Chapter membership, it may be appropriate to convene sister railroad heritage organizations for an information-sharing session. The message could be: Here is our vision—what roles would you like to play?

Conclusion

The Pacific Northwest Chapter – National Railroad Historical Society is to be commended for taking an important first step in organizational planning. This is a pivotal moment in the Chapter's long and successful history. Unless the Chapter's mission and message engage a new generation of members, the patiently accumulated heritage of many decades could be lost.

Beloved artifacts, exceptional levels of knowledge and skill, a spirit of camaraderie, dedicated volunteers, and a unique program of educational activities make this organization intrinsically valuable to Oregon. The potential of PNWC – NRHS as a professionally run museum offers even greater rewards to a much larger and more diverse constituency.

A consensus-based vision that is inspiring, yet realistic and doable, will put the Chapter on the right track for the next 50 years.

