

San Dimas museum gives visitors a taste of railroad history

By J.D. Velasco, Staff Writer

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San Dimas is a city that actively embraces its history.

And it doesn't get much more historic than the Pacific Railroad Museum.

The museum is housed inside a former Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway depot built in 1934 and is operated by the Pacific Railroad Society, a group dedicated to memorializing the role railroads played in Southern California's history.

Dave Housh, museum curator, said San Dimas owes much of its early success to the railroads, which brought settlers in and shipped citrus out.

"This would have been a hub of commerce to the town," he said.

Eventually though, the importance of the depot waned and it was shut down in 1967.

In the intervening years, the depot was used as the headquarters for the San Dimas Chamber of Commerce and, later, as a senior center.

In the mid-1990s, the city built a new senior center and the Pacific Railroad Society jumped at the chance to have a home for its museum.

"San Dimas is a good place to be," said Marti Ann Draper, PRS president. "They're a historic-minded community."

Draper is a second-generation member of the society, which was founded by her father, uncle

and six other men in 1936. The group now claims roughly 450 members.

Draper has never strayed far from the railroads. In her younger days she worked as an attorney for the ATSF Railway. She later moved into private practice, but found herself drawn back to the industry.

"I was lonely for the railroad," Draper said.

So 13 years ago, she became a conductor for Amtrak, a position she holds today.

"I tell the little kids I'm the boss of the train," she said.

When she's not working, Draper joins Housh and other volunteers manning and maintaining the museum.

Visitors to the depot are greeted by historic photos, model trains and antique railroad equipment, including a restored and operational mechanical flasher once used at

railway crossings.

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The Pacific Railroad Museum and library is inside the old train station in San Dimas. (Keith Birmingham / Staff Photographer)

Upstairs, the museum holds a library of several thousand railroad-related titles - more than the museum can easily store.

"One of our problems is space," Housh said. "We're selling books at a reduced price."

But railroads aren't just an academic pursuit for group members. They also ride the rails in a number of historic train cars they've obtained and restored.

The group purchased its first railcar in 1940 and now owns nearly 20, including Pullman sleeper cars, a funeral trolley and a tiny 1941 diesel locomotive once used by the armed forces.

None of the cars are kept at the San Dimas depot, but every now and then the group hitches the cars to an Amtrak train to go on an excursion. Draper said the next excursion, which has been only partially planned, will be in December.

"It's open to anybody," she said.

The museum is also open to anybody, free of charge, three days a week.

It is open Mondays and Wednesdays from noon to 5p.m. and Saturdays from 10a.m. to 4p.m.

Housh said he's also willing to show people

around outside of normal hours if they call ahead.

"Anyone who wants a tour, I'm game to set one up," he said.

The Pacific Railroad Museum is located at 210 W. Bonita Ave. For more information, call 909-394-0616 or visit www.pacificrailroadsociety.org.

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