NSRM Develops a New Educational Resource Through a Recent Major Donation

Along with its restored 19th Century railroad cars and locomotives, the Nevada State Railroad Museum in Carson City has added an exhibit that depicts Nevada railroads during the 20th Century. It is an HO-scale (1/87th actual size) model railroad that volunteers and staff are creating at NSRM. Work began in mid-2006 and continues.

The exhibit is equipped with locomotive and railroad-car models donated by the family of the late Kel Aiken, a long-time member of the Friends of the Nevada State Railroad Museum. Mr. Aiken's hundreds of models include passenger and freight cars and steam and diesel-electric locomotives of the Southern Pacific, Union Pacific and Western Pacific railroads. Using these models, the museum can demonstrate railroad operations in Nevada as they were during any selected decade throughout the past hundred years.

The Museum already had more than a dozen highly detailed, HO-scale models of Virginia & Truckee, Southern Pacific, and Nevada Copper Belt equipment. After being stored for up to twenty years, these items have been incorporated into the model-railroad exhibit project. Among them is a model of V&T locomotive No. 25. After identifying the real No. 25 with its model, visitors can use the models to compare No. 25 with later locomotives. "This kind of comparison is a helpful way to put our V&T equipment into historical context," said Peter Barton, Director of NSRM and Acting Administrator of the Division of Museums, Nevada Department of Cultural Affairs.

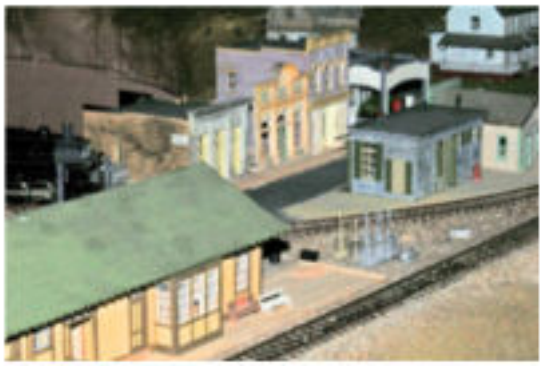
Volunteers operate trains on weekends and group-tour days. At other times a push-button enables visitors to operate a train on demand.

The Aiken models enable the museum to depict the changing traffic of 20th Century Nevada railroads, from ore, livestock or ice-cooled California produce to 1990s container shipments, with locomotives to match. In addition to railroad equipment, the Aiken family donation also included raw materials for scenery-making and a wide variety of structure and vehicle models, which also date from a range of decades.

A twelve-foot-long exhibit case on an adjoining wall supplements the model railroad through

rotating exhibition of representations of 1,000-foot-long trains. Exhibit labels explain not only evolving railroad technology, but also the changing economy of Nevada as illustrated by what the State's railroads have transported at varied periods in the past.

The objective of scenery and structures in the NSRM model railroad exhibit is to suggest, through appropriate natural and built-environment features, a generic Nevada scene. Along with locomotives and railroad cars, a variety of detail elements can be changed to suggest different eras of Nevada history. Depending on the era being depicted, road vehicles, signs, mine structures and locomotive servicing facilities can be exchanged; outhouses and an automotive service station can be included or removed; and the depot (left foreground) can be active, vacant, or shown as a non-railroad commercial building. Except for the depot, everything in this picture was donated to NSRM by the Kel Aiken family.



Model structures not only serve as a backdrop for model locomotives and cars, but add to the Nevada context of the entire exhibit. For example; mine, ranch and stockyard structures – with adjacent railroad loading spurs – indicate types of railroad freight traffic that originated in Nevada.

Scale-model locomotives at the Nevada State Railroad Museum range from 1905-built Virginia & Truckee Railway No. 25 (left, front) to diesel-electric locomotives of every post-World War II decade.