

President's Car by Mike Brestel

NMRA President

Howell Day Museum Update

I understand that some questions have been raised concerning the Museum Committee's decision to move the Howell Day Museum to Sacramento, California, as described in my column in the March 2007 *Scale Rails*. Apparently it was not enough for us merely to mention that a thorough search for a permanent museum home was undertaken, nor did I stress strongly enough that the museum is a separate operation, having its own board of directors and involving no members' dues dollars. So here's a fuller report on this topic.

I checked with Charlie Getz, a member of the Howell Day Museum Committee, and a member of the NMRA Board of Directors, to get an accurate report on what the committee went through in finding what we plan to be the permanent home for the museum. Here is part of his reply:

Most members do not know that selecting the location generated some heated debate on the committee. We did explore other venues, including Denver, St. Louis, Strasburg, and Kansas City. We also investigated staying in Chattanooga, but the city did not offer any incentive to stay. We all agreed that the lack of any financial incentive, the difficulty in reaching Chattanooga from most of the country, and the lack of space in the headquarters building make the Chattanooga location a non-starter.

The purpose of the Howell Day Museum is to serve the public, and we have pledged to our members that the museum will be self-supporting. Our collection and exhibits will be of a quality that our members will want to attend, but our primary focus must be on the public to (a) be financially successful, and (b) spread the word about our hobby. Chattanooga might offer that opportunity in a downtown location, but it could not compete with the visitor numbers or the built-in railroad interest in the Old Town Sacramento area.

Old Town Sacramento has over 3,000,000 visitors per year. The California State Railroad Museum, a world-class railroad museum with which we are partnering, has over 600,000 paid visitors per year. Partnering with them to save costs and bounce off their advertising is a no-brainer as far as I'm concerned! They want us there, and they're willing to give us a lot to get us there.

Only the Colorado Railroad Museum expressed similar interest, but they did not have land available for our use and their visitor draw is not nearly as high. The other places we investigated had nothing to offer us, and did not have nearly as many visitors. This was no secret deal, nor was it an impulsive act! We are partnering with a world-class operation that very much wants us there. Who else is willing to work with us the way the State of California and the CSRM are?

Some members have complained that Sacramento is "too far away," but let's look at that for a minute. For most of us, we have two choices if we want to visit either Chattanooga or Sacramento: flying or driving. I'll leave it to others to compare the joys of driving through the mountains of Tennessee or across the Great Plains and two mountain ranges to California, burning \$3.50-per-gallon gasoline all the way. When I go somewhere, I usually have to fly due to time considerations.

Even though I live only 400 or 500 miles from Chattanooga, an airline flight there costs about twice as much as one all the way to the left coast. Others I've talked to, whether they live on the Eastern Seaboard, in the Midwest, or elsewhere, tell me the same thing: they can get to Sacramento for far less money than to Chattanooga. In fact, I can fly to England for less than to our Headquarters!

What this tells us is that geographic location is not as important for locating our museum as are other factors, including attendance potential and financial incentives. In nearly every significant way, the Sacramento offer is a great one for us, and makes the CSRM an ideal location for the Howell Day Museum.

What about the Library and Headquarters?

The next logical questions that keep coming up are, if we move the museum and its collection to California, what happens to the Kalmbach Memorial Library and to the HQ operation? Let's look at those one at a time.

At the moment, our library and its collection and two employees fit very well into our headquarters building. As discussed earlier, it's a little tough for most of our members to reach, but Brent Lambert, Thomas Mossbach, and the material they oversee are as close as a computer or telephone.

Unlike the museum, which is self-supporting, the library absorbs a significant portion of our dues dollars each year. Some members are happy to have the library be part of our budget, while others think that far too much is spent in maintaining the operation. The Board of Directors has historically supported the library, while doing what it could to keep the library's costs under control.

There is a possibility that we will have the opportunity to merge our library with that of the California State Railroad Museum, one of the largest and finest in the country, and that this merger would give our membership and the industry access to a larger and better collection than is currently available. It is also possible that through merger we can significantly reduce the costs of operating our library. Of course, if this merger did occur, the CSRM would expect us to move our library collection and operations to California to merge with theirs.

Brent and Thomas are aware of this possibility, as is the HQ staff. They know that nothing has been decided at this time, and that no changes will be made unless the BOD is convinced that the action would benefit our members. This decision could be made fairly quickly, or it might stretch out for several years. We have made it clear to our library staff that we value their efforts, and that they are welcome to stay with us until a decision is made, and perhaps beyond.

While there are very good reasons why it may be advantageous to move the library to California, we can see no reason why it would make sense to transfer the NMRA HQ out of Chattanooga. The primary functions of our HQ can be performed anywhere, since nearly all of our membership stays in touch with them by computer or over the telephone. The cost of living is far higher in California than in Chattanooga, as is real estate and office space. Our highly trained and efficient staff is in Chattanooga and has no desire to leave the area, and we have no desire to lose them. There is simply no good reason to move our HQ operations out of the Chattanooga area.

There may, however, be some compelling reasons to move our staff and operations to other facilities within the Chattanooga area. Our building and grounds were recently appraised at over \$1,000,000. Contrary to rumors I have heard over the years, we have clear title to this property. The Tennessee Valley Railway Museum, which is located on land just behind our building, has the right of first refusal, but they would have to meet our price if we were to decide to sell to another buyer.

If the library and the museum were elsewhere, we would have no need for all the space our current building provides. We could buy or rent a space more appropriate for our current needs elsewhere in the Chattanooga area, and the money realized by the sale of the building and property could be used to rebuild our investments to the level where they were before they had to be used to cover the operating deficits of the mid- to late-1990s.

A million-dollar infusion into our investment portfolio would go a long way toward lessening the stress on your dues dollar, and would give us the opportunity to put more money where it can do the most good, such as into standards and conformance work, membership growth and retention, region and division support, and the like.

I know that many of our members gave a lot of money to retire the debt on our building over the past thirty or more years. I was one of them. The money that was donated in support of the building has allowed us to be in a position today where we have some options for our future.

I am aware that the issue of the building is an emotional one for many of us. But I ask everyone to remember that the building is not the NMRA. The NMRA is, among other things, our history, our goals, and our traditions, but it is above all our people. If we can serve our membership best by staying in our current building, we should do that. But if our best service to our members and to the hobby can occur if we sell our building, then that's what we should do.

Most people I know are not living in the same houses they occupied 35 years ago. They're not driving the same type of car. Some are in different scales or gauges, or have built new layouts. They have moved, changed, and adapted as their needs have changed.

What was right for the NMRA in 1972 is not necessarily the best we can do in 2007. I cannot tell you what we will do in response to all the changes that have overtaken us over the last quarter century and more, as well as what will come in the days ahead. But I can promise you that, as we consider what to do with the library, our office functions, and our current headquarters building, your Board of Directors and officers will do our best to make the business decisions that will give the NMRA its best opportunity for relevance and growth in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mike". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial letter.