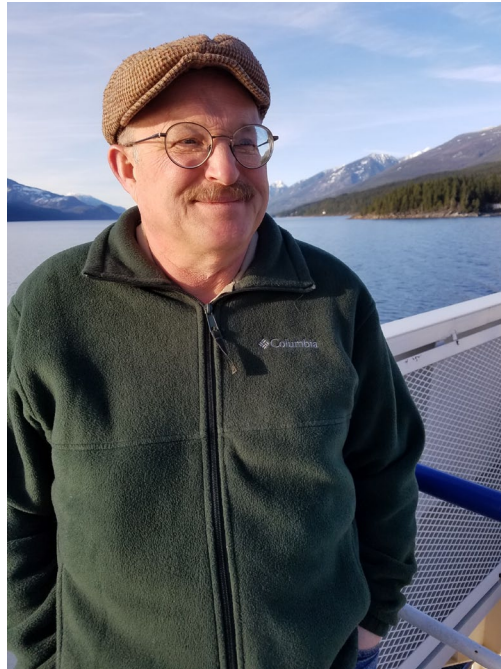


# The Sumpter Valley Railroad Restoration Archives Connecting To Community

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J.B. "BRET" BANE graduated from Oregon College of Education at Monmouth, Oregon with an Associate of Arts degree in 1981. Bret met his wife-to-be Jane while attending college. They married in 1982 and returned to his hometown of Enterprise, Oregon, where they worked in his family's electrical contracting business. Bret joined Sumpter Valley Railroad Restoration in 1998, which is a non-profit group most noted for running the steam railroad, near Baker City, Oregon. Throughout the years he has researched and contributed historical materials to the organization. This led to his appointment as SVRR's archivist in 2013. Now in semi-retirement, he looks forward to having more time to devote to the archives.

To explain the reach and service of The Sumpter Valley Railroad Restoration Archives, and how it connects to community, I believe an introduction to our parent organization and its mission is needed. Sumpter Valley Railroad Restoration Inc. (SVRR) was formed as a non-profit corporation owned by its members in 1971. The purpose for the formation of SVRR as stated in its articles of incorporation are as follows: "(1) To acquire, collect, restore, preserve and maintain for historical and educational purposes a portion of the Sumpter Valley Railway Company right of way, railroad equipment, machinery and track, as a historical site situate in Baker and Grant Counties, Oregon," and (2) To stimulate interest in the discovery, procurement and preservation of whatever may relate to the history of communities and the mining, logging railroading and sawmilling industries in Baker and Grant Counties, Oregon."

The Sumpter Valley Railway (SVRy), founded in 1891, was a narrow gauge (3 feet between the rails) railroad that once ran 80 miles between Baker City and Prairie City. While it carried passengers, mail, and general freight to communities along its route, its principal purpose was to serve the needs of the lumber industry, principally that of the Oregon Lumber Company (OLC). OLC and at least three other companies had extensive three-foot gauge logging railroads that connected with the SVRy. SVRy operated to Prairie City, until 1933 when the line between Bates and Prairie City was abandoned. OLC had a large lumber mill at Bates 60 miles from Baker City, for which SVRy hauled long trainloads of lumber back to Baker City. At Baker City, the lumber was finished, which means that it was planed with smooth surfaces and trimmed to standard commercial sizes. Some of the finished lumber was made into window or door casing material as well as wooden boxes. The finished lumber and other wood products would then be shipped out over the Union



Pacific to markets across the country. In 1947, the SVRy abandoned its mainline to Bates in favor of hauling the lumber by truck. SVRy continued as a transportation company with trucks and one and a half miles of dual gauge railroad. Using a small diesel switch engine SVRy moved the lumber products out of the OLC Baker City mill to the rail connection with the Union Pacific. In 1955 OLC and SVRy were sold to the Edward Hines Lumber Company of Chicago. The new ownership did not immediately make any drastic changes to the operations. The status quo however, was not to last, for in 1961, the OLC mill at Baker and the SVRy were shut down for good.

To achieve the goals set forth in the organization's articles of incorporation, SVRR has been able to acquire three of the steam locomotives and a gasoline switch engine that once operated on the SVRy. Additionally, acquired over the years are a number of original freight cars, three original cabooses, and an original coach. Many unique artifacts large and small related to the SVRy and associated logging railroads are among the organization's collections. SVRR was able to acquire some of the original railroad right of way during the mid-1970s and by 1976 had laid track and was able to operate one steam locomotive at McEwen in the Sumpter Valley. Eventually, the railroad completed rebuilding track into the town of Sumpter, making for a five-mile historic steam train ride.

SVRR connects with several communities beyond the community of local residents. SVRR's historic steam train experience is a destination for the tourist community. Many tourists passing through northeast Oregon visit the Oregon Trail Interpretive site outside of Baker City, the Sumpter Dredge State Park, and ride the SVRR train. SVRR serves the community of steam train and history buffs, providing not just an opportunity to ride behind and view unique historic equipment, but also to become members of SVRR and volunteer on our operating crews. Crew members share historical facts about the area with our passengers, helping to fulfill the goal of educating the public. Similarly, a regular part of SVRR's outreach is operating "school trains." These are specially scheduled train rides for groups of school children on field trips. School groups are not confined to the local area but have come from as far away as Portland, Oregon, and the Tri-Cities, Washington. Teachers accompanying students are given lesson plans, so they can provide historic and cultural learning opportunities for their students. Each year SVRR connects with the local and tourist community through special events such as Halloween and Christmas theme trains. And each autumn SVRR hosts its fall colors special events, which includes charter days for photographers. These events usually have two steam locomotives in operation and various combinations of prototypical freight cars, for them to photograph along the line. SVRR connects with an esoteric community world-wide. These are serious railfans, who photograph steam trains all over the globe, and in some cases, travel from as far away as Europe and the British Isles to attend SVRR's photographer charter events.

Over the first 30 years, SVRR acquired numerous small artifacts, hundreds of historic photos and company records from SVRy and the associated lumber companies. Some of the core members of SVRR held this material in trust, as there was little opportunity to store it in one central location. In 2001, with some of the original core members getting on in age and the volume of material that had been donated growing each year, the SVRR board of directors created an archives department. The Archives Department includes a volunteer




archivist and a dedicated bank account for the Archives. A small committee works with the archivist providing advice with decisions. Robert Bergstrom, a retired engineering professor from OSU, took on the task of organizing, inventorying, and getting the SVRR Archives material stored in appropriate archival containers. After completing his work, his accession list, in 2005 took up four pages in an Excel document. The original material he processed was calculated at 8.3 cubic feet. The archives have continued to grow to the extent that the Excel document is 122 pages long. The documented material is estimated at 129 cubic feet with a considerable amount of material on-hand yet to inventory and add to these ever-growing totals. The SVRR Archives has become the caretaker for a sizable book and periodical collection related to railroad and local history which contains over 1000 volumes. Because of its growth, the SVRR Archives program is planning a dedicated building to be constructed at SVRR's railroad base of operations near McEwen in the Sumpter Valley.

Our archives serve the community of SVRR members. And from time to time SVRR's archivist writes a short article or supplies a photo caption, in SVRR's quarterly newsletter *The Stump Dodger*, sharing new and historical information with SVRR's membership. SVRR Archives is a resource for technical information on our railroad equipment. SVRR's archivist responds to member requests for historical information, which assists the operating crews in their dialogue with passengers. Once the permanent home of our archives is built, our book collection will be organized as a lending library for our SVRR members. This service will form a stronger connection between our SVRR members and their historical and community archives.

SVRR Archives also serves the community at large. It provides a trusted repository for SVRR related photos and small historical items. Indeed, many families that have ties to the old SVRR or associated logging companies, have entrusted us with unique materials. These donors have a lasting connection to our archives. To make SVRR Archives a living entity, one that is real to as many people as possible, as opposed to a seldom visited, seldom heard from, dusty cache of old photos and papers, we share our photos and materials with members and non-members alike. One way in which we have been able to connect to several communities worldwide is through internet-based discussion groups interested in railroad and logging history. Railroad history enthusiasts include numerous sub-groups: those who combine an interest in railroads and logging for example, or those who are focused on narrow gauge railroads. There are several internet sites where we post photos from our archives—*Train Orders* and *Narrow Gauge Discussion Forum* are two examples. Facebook has several similar groups: *Pacific Narrow Gauge*, *Logging Railroads of the Pacific Northwest*, *Steam In The Woods*, and *From The Album*. We post photo scans with captions daily on one or more Facebook group sites—often leading to meaningful discussion and good publicity for SVRR Archives and the SVRR community. Participation in these groups has led to additional donations of photos and dialogue with people the world over. Our posts with groups on Facebook have been shared beyond the community of rail history buffs, to other Facebook groups. One example is *Forgotten Oregon* which connects us to the community of people who are interested in the State of Oregon's history.



An archive can find many ways to connect to multiple communities. The SVRR Archives is thriving beyond its doors to local, state and worldwide communities, connecting people and cultures to historical information and events. 

### **Additional Resources**

Sumpter Valley Railroad Archives

<http://sumptervalleyrailroad.org/railroad-archives.html>

Train Orders

<https://www.trainorders.com/>

Narrow Gauge Discussion Forum

<http://ngdiscussion.net/phorum/list.php?1>

Pacific Narrow Gauge

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/pacificng/>

Logging Railroads of the Pacific Northwest

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/398268110643399/>

Steam In The Woods

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/SteamInTheWoods/>

From the Album

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/914145539012129/>

Forgotten Oregon

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ForgottenOregon/>

