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Turning point

In Fillmore, a 1906 turntable to be installed for area's trains

By **Holly J. Wolcott**, Correspondent
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Lying belly up in a downtown train maintenance yard is a massive black slab that will further secure Fillmore's place in railroad history.

The small riverbank city -- already a history buff's paradise with its early 20th century Main Street and vaudeville style theater -- plans to soon install what will be one of the state's only operational train turntables.

Anchored by a center pivot and steadied by outer rail, the 80-ton steel apparatus is basically a giant Lazy Susan that can turn locomotives and railroad cars around or situate those units for tight spaces, like a narrow roundhouse stall.

While turntables were vital during the steam engine era of the 1800s and early 1900s,



Mike Burley, Star staff

Rick Swanson, right, a board member of the Santa Clara River Valley Railroad Historical Society, and Pat Askren, the society's president, check out the turntable at Fillmore's maintenance yard, where it was unloaded after a long journey. The 1906 turntable will be installed for use.



Mike Burley/Star staff

Fillmore Fire Chief Pat Askren looks at the device that will soon be used to rotate trains. "I can hardly stand it," Askren says of seeing the turntable every time he passes the maintenance yard. "Once we put it all together it's going to be great."



Mike Burley/Star staff

Rick Swanson, left, a board member of the Santa Clara River Valley Railroad Historical Society, and Pat Askren, the society's president, inspect the

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they eventually became unnecessary with the advent of diesel engines that can both push and pull trains.

turntable in Fillmore's maintenance yard.

"These things are few and far between," said Dave Wilkinson, who owns the Fillmore & Western Railway Co. and is widely credited with the idea to buy the 1906 turntable from the Canadian National Railroad. "Most of them have been pulled up and destroyed or they're in railroad museums."

Wilkinson, whose railway will benefit most from this rotating platform, added during a recent interview that having a turntable in Fillmore is "pretty amazing."

When one learns the detailed pilgrimage of the 96-foot-long relic, Wilkinson's comment becomes an understatement. As any train enthusiast will explain, finding certain railroad equipment is never a smooth ride, and this project was no exception.

It could be argued that the fate of Fillmore's newest acquisition was sealed when the Southern Pacific Railroad built its line through the Santa Clara River Valley in the late 1800s and named the town after railroad superintendent J.P. Fillmore.

"This was the original main line between Los Angeles and San Francisco, and it's what made this area a major commercial hub," said Rick Swanson, the spokesman for a nonprofit group that works to preserve the railroad corridor.

Well into the 1950s, the line through the valley was used to haul carloads of local citrus, and by the 1990s, Fillmore & Western was established, tourist trains had started running and filmmakers began arriving regularly to shoot motion pictures.

In 1993, Swanson, Wilkinson and others formed the Santa Clara River Valley Railroad Historical Society, and by 1995, the group had a plan to create a local railroad hub with a roundhouse and an interpretive center.

Historical and practical

It was decided the first phase would be installing a turntable, not only for historical significance but also as a practicality for rotating the vintage cars owned by both the historical society and the Fillmore & Western.

"This is one of those things that when we first started doing it we

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didn't realize what an enormous job it would be," Fillmore Fire Chief Pat Askren, the society's president, said.

Society members slowly put the word out in the railroad collector's community that they were searching for a turntable. First, they found one in Kansas City, but upon closer inspection it was deemed unsalvageable.

A short time later, another turntable was located in San Diego but the owners refused to sell. By 1996, Wilkinson had found the 1906 beast in tiny Capreal, Canada. The Canadians wanted \$15,000 for it.

Although society members were selling fireworks each July along Highway 126 and working diligently to raise more money at their annual spring rail festival, the money to buy the turntable arrived one day in the form of an anonymous donation from a local railroad aficionado, who wrote the society a check for \$15,000.

In mid-1997, society member Roy Payton, a civil engineer who worked on railroads in Argentina, went to Canada and watched for two days as the turntable was removed from the ground, separated from its electrical motor and loaded by two massive cranes onto two, 80-foot flat cars.

The money already raised by the society was used to pay \$15,000 to Union Pacific, which agreed to haul the turntable to Fillmore in what Swanson said was the longest single load ever hauled by train across the country at the time.

The trip from the Canadian city near Montreal took six weeks. For three of those weeks, the turntable sat in the Mojave Desert as Union Pacific officials handled traffic congestion and used the line for other commerce trains.

"I remember taking a trip to Las Vegas, and I was so curious that I drove out to the desert to see the thing," Swanson recalled.

A hero's welcome

That July, after being routed through Los Angeles, the turntable was greeted by Fillmore's railroad enthusiasts during a big celebration. It was eventually unloaded into the maintenance yard, where it has been worked on ever since. Volunteers and others have welded its parts together, painted it deep black and rewired the motor to meet U.S. electrical standards, Swanson said.

When it becomes operational early next year, Fillmore & Western's vintage trains -- which already attract more than 60,000 tourists annually for mystery theater dinners and other themed treks -- will no longer have to travel to Montalvo to turn around on a wye track.

Additionally, the turntable is expected to draw railroad enthusiasts from across the country, curious to see one of the West's remaining rotating bridges in action. Officials know of only one other operational unit in Southern California. That one is in Redondo Beach.

"It's a rarity to have one of these, and from my understanding, train buffs from all around will want to come," Deputy City Manager Tom Ristau said, adding that no city money was being used to fund the turntable project.

Next month, construction companies will be able to bid on the installation, which is being paid for through a \$250,000 federal interstate commerce transportation grant obtained by the historical society.

Work to start in January

The company with the winning bid was expected to start digging by January, and society members hope the turntable is operational by March or April.

"I can hardly stand it," a giddy Askren said of seeing the turntable every time he passes the maintenance yard. "Once we put it all together it's going to be great."



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