

Revelstoke Heritage Railway Society 2020 Annual Report

As for most non-profit organizations, 2020 was a challenging year for the Revelstoke Heritage Railway Society due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Museum's total 2020 attendance was 12,729 people, a marked downturn from the record attendance and revenues we enjoyed in 2019. Likewise, sales at our Last Spike Store in Craigellachie were heavily impacted. For us, the year was a study in adaptation, resilience and hard work as well as accomplishment.

Responding to COVID-19

As the pandemic grew, the Board of Trustees took the difficult decision of closing the Museum in mid-March. The Museum remained closed until it re-opened on June 30th for its summer season with a comprehensive set of COVID protocols in place to ensure the health and safety of our employees, volunteers and visitors. Many of our Board of Trustees were present on June 30th to welcome our visitors back and help us get things right. We re-opened our Last Spike Gift Shop at Craigellachie on the last week in May and while visitation was abnormally low due to a lack of bus tours and cross-border visitors, visitation from BC and the Prairie provinces increased. Both the Museum and Craigellachie maintained their traditional summer hours until the start of the Fall season. Surprisingly, the Museum enjoyed record high attendance in October.

The Society's Annual General Meeting was rescheduled as a virtual meeting and was held on July 14th. We were gratified to have members from across Canada and the CEO of the Revelstoke Credit Union in attendance. No new Trustees were elected. This year we had four long-time Trustees leave the Board – Donovan Gentles, James Walford, Barry Ozero and Dean Handley. The Society is grateful for their many years of service.

To re-open the Museum, it was necessary to develop and implement a comprehensive COVID protocol. This included limiting the capacity of the Museum and its galleries, launching an enhanced cleaning schedule, installing plexiglass barriers, use of Personal Protective Equipment by staff, implementing one-way routing around the Museum, and putting many other precautionary procedures into place. It also necessitated removal of many popular attractions such as videos, touchscreens and the entire Kid's Caboose.

To help offset reduced revenues, develop new programming, and pay for increased operating costs due to COVID and investment in special equipment, the Museum received grants and financial and in-kind donations from several organizations. These included:

- Columbia Basin Trust
- The Government of Canada (Department of Canadian Heritage)
- The British Columbia Museums Association
- Canadian Pacific Railway
- Revelstoke Elks

- Revelstoke Community Foundation
- Apex Janitorial

The Columbia Basin Trust's major COVID grant of \$16,000 helped us address our expenses, develop virtual tours (and this work continues) and learning kit content, and install an automatic opener on the Museum's front door. The Revelstoke Idea Factory designed and built over a dozen small railway signals which we placed around the Museum to help visitors follow the right direction of travel, a very popular and effective addition to our COVID protocols.

We received many supportive comments about the Museum's COVID protocols; visitors felt safe in our Museum and told us we were "doing it right". The vast majority of visitors co-operated with our requirement to share contact tracing information.

After the Museum re-opened in late June, we stayed open for the rest of the year, albeit with reduced days of operation during some periods. While it would have been easier to close, we felt strongly that the Museum could not be of service to its community by being closed.

Infrastructure Projects

Despite the complexities presented by the pandemic, the Museum made progress on several projects.

In August, the Museum's Accessibility Project was completed with the new mezzanine walkway passing its final inspection. This major project was one of its most significant capital projects in the Museum's history and was the result of many hours of volunteer effort and the work of R. Jones Contracting. It was made possible by the generosity of several major donors:

- BC Canada 150 (through the BC Museums Association)
- Columbia Basin Trust
- Rick Hansen Foundation
- Revelstoke Credit Union
- The Magnes Family
- Province of British Columbia (Resort Municipality Initiative Program)
- RBC Royal Bank
- Wal-Mart

Numerous smaller donors also contributed to this project, including through a GoFundMe campaign, and we enjoyed many in-kind donations from individuals and businesses in Revelstoke and the surrounding region. The Walkway posts were locally-sawn from specially-selected premium timber by Jim Graham of Greenslide Cattle Company.

We are very grateful for the support of our donors for this landmark project. With regret, the grand opening celebration of the Walkway was deferred because of restrictions on gatherings during the COVID pandemic.

Rehabilitation of the Museum's roof was started in 2020, thanks to a grant from the Columbia Basin Trust. This involved removing the large corrugated metal panels, inspecting the plywood sub-roof, replacing any deteriorated sub-roof, applying a new rubber membrane and re-installing the panels. The work was accomplished by Jones Contracting and required the use of rappelling harnesses by the contractors, with support on the ground by several Museum volunteers. The second half of the project will be completed in 2021.

During the summer, three Museum volunteers from the Palasz family replaced the decking on the small footbridge at Craigellachie with lumber donated by the Canadian Pacific Railway. Crossed by thousands of visitors each year, this bridge is the only way to reach the Last Spike commemorative cairn.

Collections Projects

The Selkirk Spreader, received by the Museum in 2019, underwent several repairs to its roof, cab interior and wings under the leadership of Ed Palasz, a Museum volunteer and CPR retiree. Replacing Spreader's badly-deteriorated roof returned this impressive artifact to its original appearance and will help ensure the Spreader's long-term preservation. This work was funded by a grant from the Revelstoke Community Foundation, as well as the Columbia Basin Trust.

In the fall of 2020, a group of volunteers planned and successfully undertook a project to relocate the iconic 'REVELSTOKE.' sign into the Museum where it could be sheltered from the elements and visible to our visitors. This large sign, which is a rare relic from Revelstoke's historic railway station, is the inspiration for the popular and iconic 'REVELSTOKE.' branding seen throughout the City and in promotions for Revelstoke world-wide. The removal, by volunteers under the direction of Trustee Don Hawker, went flawlessly and it was re-mounted inside the Museum in February 2021.

The Museum completed a project to review and catalogue archival material, funded by Library and Archives Canada. A part-time archivist was hired to review 500 archival objects, improve their cataloguing in our system, identify out-of-field objects and report on conservation issues. This is a small but important step in making our archives more accessible to users and, ultimately available online.

In the fall of 2020, the Museum hired an archival intern, Susanne Haupt, to work on a comprehensive digital cataloguing of the Museum's archival holdings, starting with the earliest-archived materials in our collection. Susanne's diligent work saw 1,000 objects reviewed, scanned and catalogued in Past Perfect by the close of 2020. Her work continued until March 2021.

Exhibits and Interpretation

The Museum saw the installation of several new exhibits and the renewal of some others. Curator Laura VanZant organized “Race on the Rails”, an exhibit about CPR’s Black sleeping car porters; “Lighting the Way”, which showed several lamps, lights and lanterns from the Museum’s collection, and “Serving up Nostalgia” which featured commemorative collector’s plates. Laura is working on several new exhibits for 2021 and beyond.

In 2020 our Curator launched a major project to develop interpretive panels for each piece of our rolling stock collection displayed in our outdoor yard. These panels include an illustration and written text about each piece, and are weather-resistant so they can be used for several years. The panel content will ultimately be accessible from QR codes in the mezzanine floor viewing area, so that visitors can learn about our collection even when the snow prevents access. This project was financed by the Province of British Columbia through the Resort Municipality Initiative.

We also received a large wood display case from our colleagues at the Creston and District Historical and Museum Society, which we put into use immediately.

We published a fourth volume of our popular book series “Canadian Pacific Railway on the Revelstoke Division”. This series is voluntarily written and researched by long-time Museum volunteer and Revelstoke Model Railway Club member Doug Mayer. The volume received critical acclaim once again and was a popular feature on our new online store.

Commerce and Fundraising

After many years of research and planning, the Museum started implementing its Shopify point-of-sale system. This enables the Museum to plan and keep better control of its inventories and also serves as a platform for the Museum’s online store, which opened in time for the holiday shopping season. The Museum garnered impressive sales from its online store which both helped support the Museum and gave yet another way for visitors to enjoy interacting with the Museum virtually. Modern point-of-sale technology and implementation of an online store are “game changers” for the Society’s retail operations. Purchase of the system was made possible by grants from the Columbia Basin Trust and the Revelstoke Credit Union.

The Museum joined Canada Helps, a website-based donations application which enables donors to give using their credit card and obtain an instant tax receipt. This application is reached by the CanadaHelps.ca website, or via a link from the Museum’s website.

Human Resources

The Board of Trustees hired a new Executive Director, Jim Cullen, who joined the Society on March 31st. Cullen’s career spans three decades in human resources, general management and

consulting, with a life-long involvement in railway preservation. We also hired the Museum's first Curator, Laura VanZant, an energetic and talented museum professional from Ontario.

The Museum had two summer students employed under the Government of Canada's Canada Summer Jobs and Young Canada Works programs. Like many museums, we find these government-funded positions integral to our summer operations and the completion of important projects.

Special Events and Awards

The Museum held its popular Family Day event on February 17th which featured a variety of family-oriented craft activities. It was attended by several hundred people and funded by the Province of British Columbia through the BC Museums Association.

During the summer, we played host to one of Arts Revelstoke's "Guerilla Gigs", a pop-up concert with a limited number of socially-distanced attendees. This gave us some useful insights into using our Rotary Park for such events. Regrettably, COVID restrictions forced the Museum to cancel its annual Railway Day special event.

With continued restrictions on gatherings and events, the Museum was unable to host its traditional Christmas special event. However, a special COVID-friendly program was developed in which visiting families looked for "Cornelius", our Elf-on-the-Shelf, and entered a draw for a family membership. We also gave out goodie bags with a simple holiday craft, a package of hot chocolate mix and holiday cookies. As the COVID pandemic wanes, we look forward to the Museum once again being a popular hive of activity for Revelstokians.

The Museum received a "Travellers Choice Award" from TripAdvisor, based on our consistently high ratings by travellers.

Our Volunteers, Board of Trustees and Employees

We wish to take this opportunity to recognize our volunteers, Trustees and employees for their very hard work, time and dedication to the Museum, particularly under the incredibly trying circumstances driven by the COVID pandemic.

At the risk of overlooking someone, we want to thank our cadre of volunteers. This starts with our Board of Trustees, a group of very dedicated men and women who are entrusted with the long-term sustainability of the Society: Roger Eddy, George Hopkins, Kevin Dorrius, Pauline Hunter, Don Hawker, Pam Doyle, Wendy Harper and Dave Love. They all participate in Board committees and many put in volunteer hours in everything from 50/50 draws to special events. In particular, Trustee Don Hawker donates an awesome number of hours of his time. Keeping our Museum facilities and grounds well-maintained are: Ed Palasz, Ed Koski, Rob Mellish, Rod Battersby, Troy Ferguson, Barry Ozero and Jacob Geyer. In our collections department we have Miriam Williams who works on cataloguing our photographic collection, and Geri Crawford and

Fern Hansen, who work on our archival and three-dimensional objects. Doug Mayer researches and writes our ever-popular book series and leads the Revelstoke Model Railway Club, whose members' many volunteer hours and modeling skill add animation and motion to our Museum. Revelstoke's Rotary Club provides bedding plants for our front planters and tends them over the summer.

We have many suppliers who are generous with their time and talents including BDO Canada, Jones Contracting and Apex Janitorial, to name just three.

Our employees in 2020 really came through for us in difficult circumstances. Our Curator Laura VanZant moved to Revelstoke in May, hit the ground running and never stopped. At the Last Spike, we employed Judy Tomey, Jennifer Lobb, and Kip Hutchison. In Revelstoke, our Museum Store team of Jess Byman, Kate Baron, Anita Wood, MJ LeBuke and Julia Dorrius made our visitors feel welcome. We said a fond farewell to Anita Wood, who retired in 2020. Our Museum Store team was backed up by our Young Canada Works and Canada Summer Jobs summer students Bailey LeBuke and Janine Arellano. And our book-keeper, Megan Lund, kept our finances in order.

Looking Ahead

Museums are in the “forever” business. That is, we work to ensure the things we have preserved – artifacts, stories, and our communities' culture – will be around forever. We have the obligation and privilege of taking a long view of things, but in the meantime we must deal with the immediacy of challenges like the times we are living through now.

The Society has many opportunities in the years ahead, once the uncertainty of the COVID pandemic is more manageable. Some of those opportunities include:

- launching restoration programs on some of our significant equipment which is displayed outside;
- developing and presenting a series of new exhibits and regular programming, particularly education programs;
- expanding our array of on-line offerings, particularly our website and video tours;
- continuing to expand and deepen our use of the PastPerfect collections management system;
- improving our interpretation, using a variety of new entry points into the mountain railway story to engage a much broader audience.

These are big ambitions, none of which will happen overnight. We are mindful that the Museum's inception was a bold act of civic vision and grass-roots support. All of these opportunities will require the support of our stakeholders and much work by the Society to advance our business model into new areas of earned income and expanded fundraising activities.

In Closing

We have said this before: it is hard to imagine a better place than Revelstoke for a railway museum, situated between two iconic railway places – Rogers Pass and Craigellachie – and in an authentic railway town where trains are still its heartbeat. The Museum is both an important cultural cornerstone for Revelstoke, and an important tourist attraction. We are grateful to our members, our communities, our donors and stakeholders for their support of our work.

Revelstoke is a legendary place, in part for the ruggedness of railroading in the most difficult and complex terrain Canada has to offer. Time and again, Revelstoke's history includes stories of challenges and great difficulty. We are excited to be part of what makes Revelstoke a great place to live and visit and are committed to weathering the current economic storm and anticipating better times ahead.

Appendix I: Revelstoke Heritage Railway Society Board of Trustees 2020-2021

President: Roger Eddy (*ex-officio* member of all committees)

Vice-President: George Hopkins (Collections Committee, Finance Committee)

Treasurer: Kevin Dorrius (Finance Committee Chair, Governance Committee)

Secretary: Pauline Hunter (Exhibits and Programs Committee Chair)

Trustees: Pam Doyle (Collections Committee Chair, Governance Committee)
Wendy Harper (Fundraising and Marketing Committee Chair)
Don Hawker (Buildings and Grounds Committee Chair)
Dave Love (Governance Committee Chair)