

Great Falls Tribune

Historic Montana train depot ties small towns together



Steel rails tied the mining towns of Monarch and Neihart together. Now, more than a century later, efforts to preserve a remaining vestige of that long-ago railway is bringing the people of those two small communities together once again.

On Monday, the Montana History Foundation (MHF) announced it will award \$5,000 to Monarch-Neihart Historical Group to help that grass-roots organization in its efforts to save and restore the 112-year-old Monarch Train Depot.

In making the announcement, MHF said the Monarch Train Depot

project was selected as one of 17 award recipients this year, not only because of the building's historical significance of the, but also because of wide community support for the project, plus the Monarch-Neihart Historical Group's level of organization and financial sophistication.

"You can have a fantastic building, but if you don't have community support, it's going to be really hard to save it," MHF Director Amy Sullivan said. "In this case the folks in Monarch and Neihart are really supportive of this project. They have a vision and they have a dream for this place. There is an energy there that is just contagious, and we want to be a part of that."

It is the second major public recognition for the ongoing efforts of the Monarch-Neihart Historical Group in the past two weeks. On May 22, the Great Falls/Cascade County Historic Preservation Advisory Commission (HPAC) presented their 2014 Historic Preservation award to the same organization.

"This small dedicated group of community-minded citizens has saved an historic railroad depot from destruction," wrote Cascade County Commissioner Jane Weber in support of the organization's nomination for the honor. "With quick action and commitment to a cause, the members of the Monarch-Neihart Historical Group have preserved a piece of Cascade County history for future generations."

The old depot was largely forgotten until just a few years ago. Sitting on the far edge of a lot owned by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), it was used for storage and had fallen into disrepair. In 2011, MDT announced plans to tear the Monarch Train Depot down and use the space to store equipment.

The proposal sparked an immediate response from residents who appreciated the significance of the decaying structure.

The original depot was built around 1890, about the same time as the Great Northern Railway was finishing its spur line from Great Falls to the boomtowns of Monarch and Neihart. The original structure burned in 1900, but the need for a depot at Monarch

was so great that a new one was completed in less than two years.

Beginning in 1914, the Great Northern added a 'fish train' to its regular schedule, hauling eager anglers up Belt Creek Canyon in the morning then picking them up again on the return trip to Great Falls. Silver and lead mining in the area was largely played out by World War II, and the tracks were torn up in 1946.

Yet despite the decades-long decline of the old Monarch Depot, a small group of people living along the canyon were dismayed at the potential loss of this historic structure.

Organizers from Monarch and Neihart were eventually able to secure the transfer of the property; first to Cascade County and then to their newly formed nonprofit organization.

The Monarch-Neihart Historical Group even persuaded MDT to provide some funding to help stabilize the building.

The organization's hopes for the depot go well beyond having an empty railroad artifact on the side of the highway with a sign propped up against it.

Volunteers say they would like to see the building turned into an interpretive center with exhibits detailing the history of the depot and its importance in settlement, logging, mining and recreation in the Belt Creek Canyon.

According to Monarch-Neihart Historical Group volunteer Chris Croft, the effort to save the Monarch Depot has united area residents in a way unseen in many years.

"There really wasn't an effort like this in the past that would draw the people together," Croft said. "They were two separate communities. They knew about each other and we interacted together, but I think we're going forward with a whole different and much closer level as we continue down this road and put this all together."

The communities of Neihart and Monarch are 13 miles apart.

Croft said the Monarch-Neihart Historical Group has already completed initial organization and planning for a music festival this summer. The "Monarch Rocks Summer Festival" is scheduled for Aug. 9, and will include a crafts fair, food booths and three bands that will perform for an outdoor concert.

Further on into the future, once preservation efforts on the Monarch Train Depot are near an end, the group would like to continue its efforts to restore and preserve a few of the mining-era buildings still standing in Neihart. The ultimate goal is celebrate the rich history of both communities, and to hopefully establish both Monarch and Neihart as attractive tourist stops along the Kings Hill Scenic Highway.

"The National Forest and the mountains are great," Croft said of the route stretching between White Sulphur Springs and Belt, "but people are looking for more than that. It could serve as an opportunity to stop and learn more about the history and all that the region has to offer."

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