

## Colorado Railroad Museum pays tribute to trains, tradition

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**GOLDEN** — Before visiting the Colorado Railroad Museum, I thought a “boomer” was a member of the baby-boom generation, like me. I defined “deadhead” as a follower of the iconic rock band the Grateful Dead. And I knew “reefer” as, well, the substance former President Bill Clinton smoked but didn’t inhale.

To railroad aficionados, however, these words have far different meanings.

In railroader parlance, a boomer is someone who has worked for many different railroads. A deadhead is a crew member changing locations between train operations or a person riding a train on a pass. And a reefer is slang for a refrigerator car.

It’s a communication system as colorful as the bright-red Denver & Rio Grande Railroad’s No. 49 caboose on the 15-acre grounds of this museum, which is dedicated to preserving and interpreting the history of Rocky Mountain railroads, specifically those that ran in Colorado and played a crucial role in the state’s development.

Nestled between North and South Table mountains near the rushing waters of Clear Creek, the Colorado Railroad Museum showcases more than 100 vintage and modern locomotives and train cars in true rail-yard style — on outdoor track with antique switches.

The museum’s collection includes early steam locomotives that burned wood, coal, or oil; contemporary diesel-electric locomotives; cabooses; passenger cars; a variety of freight cars from tankers, hoppers and gondolas to stock, baggage and mail cars; and massive snowplows designed to clear tons of snow from mountain trackage.

Some of its locomotives and rolling stock are displayed on standard-gauge track, which has a standard (hence the name) width of 4 feet, 8 inches. Others are on narrow-gauge track, usually defined as being between 2 and 3 feet wide. Because it was cheaper and easier in the 19th century to lay narrow-gauge track along steep, winding mountain routes, much of Colorado’s historic rail equipment is narrow gauge.

Visitors can climb aboard nearly a dozen of the museum’s locomotives and train cars, including the No. 49 narrow-gauge caboose; an 1887 Colorado Midland Railway observation car with wood-paneled walls and cranberry-velvet-upholstered seats that ran on the summertime “Wildflower Train,” where passengers disembarked to pick blossoms along a 120-mile route to South Park and

beyond; and the Chicago Burlington & Quincy Railroad's No. 5629, the museum's largest steam engine.

Built in 1940 and one of only four locomotives of its type still in existence, this standard-gauge "iron horse" ran on a main line from Colorado's eastern plains to Chicago, providing passenger service and hauling heavy freight. No. 5629 represents an era immediately preceding the advent of diesel-electric locomotives, which replaced steam power on the nation's railroads.

Adjacent track holds a silver-and-black Rio Grande Southern Railroad No. 7 "Galloping Goose" locomotive, so named because, from the rear, its swaying cars resembled a line of waddling geese. One of seven originals (three of which are at the museum), the narrow-gauge, gasoline-powered Galloping Goose was built from a freight box mounted on an automobile frame. Designed to self-balance on uneven mountain tracks, the Galloping Goose provided passenger and freight service to remote areas of southwestern Colorado beginning in 1931; it temporarily replaced traditional and more costly steam trains on the route between Durango, Telluride and Ridgway.

The Galloping Goose is literally dwarfed by behemoths like the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad's No. 5771, a standard-gauge, diesel-electric locomotive that powered both the Rio Grande Zephyr passenger train between Denver and Salt Lake City and the Denver-to-Winter Park "Ski Train"; and the equally massive, Colorado & Southern Railway's No. 99201 rotary snowplow. This standard-gauge plow was used from 1899 to 1965 to clear numerous Colorado mountain lines, including the famous "high line" from Leadville to the Climax molybdenum mine atop 11,318-foot Fremont Pass.

Observing a plume of thick, gray smoke rising from the opposite end of the rail yard, my husband Steve and I head in that direction, pausing first to admire the Denver Garden Railway Society's elaborate, G-scale, garden-railway exhibit. This unusual hobby, which originated in Europe more than a century ago, involves blending railway settings with carefully cultivated, outdoor garden plots filled with flowers, shrubs, bonsai-like trees and flowing water. The Denver club's railroad-cum-mining-town layout also includes a raised loop track where members run scale-model trains powered by live steam.

We find the source of the acrid coal smoke outside the Cornelius W. Hauck Roundhouse, where the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad's No. 346 locomotive is being fired up for a "special-event" run on the museum's -mile oval track.

Built in 1881 by Philadelphia's famed Baldwin Locomotive Works, No. 346 is Colorado's oldest operating narrow-gauge steam locomotive. The museum's Denver Leadville & Gunnison No. 191 that ran up the Platte Canyon to the silver-mining boomtown of Leadville is the state's oldest surviving narrow-gauge steam locomotive; it was built in early 1880 and is on display only.

The Hauck roundhouse is named for one of the museum's two founders (the other founder, Robert W. Richardson, began displaying what became the core of the museum's collection in Alamosa in 1948 and is the namesake of its railroad reference library building). A garage-like, restoration-and-repair shop for locomotives and rolling stock, the roundhouse contains five separate bays or stalls, along with a glassed-in gallery where we watch restoration work in progress on No. 318, a narrow-gauge locomotive built in 1897 for the Florence & Cripple Creek Railroad.

Getting these huge pieces of equipment into the roundhouse is accomplished by means of a turntable, a rotating bridge that turns the locomotives and rolling stock around or moves them from one set of tracks to another. The museum's 74-foot-long turntable was built in 1900 and originally used on a Kansas branch line of the Chicago Burlington & Quincy Railroad.

From the roundhouse, we head to the Depot Museum. Designed to resemble a small-town, 1880s-era train depot, this museum-within-a-museum houses an extensive collection of railroad artifacts and equipment, including a reconstructed depot telegraph station where visitors can tap out Morse code; a circa-1870s, narrow-gauge-locomotive, three-chime steam whistle; and a flashy, 23-jewel, lever-set pocket watch carried by a fireman on the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad in 1905. Until the 1960s, when wristwatches were deemed sufficiently accurate, these 23-jewel pocket watches were the only railroad-approved timepieces.

Our favorite display, however, is the Denver HO Model Railroad Club's layout replicating various aspects of Colorado mountain railroading. It's a description that doesn't do justice to this incredibly intricate and extraordinarily detailed exhibit.

Completed over a period of 42 years, this 72-foot-long, 23-foot-wide diorama features working, HO and HOn3 scale-model trains in settings that combine miniature forests, fields, lakes, mountains, mines, mills and rail yards with Victorian-era boomtowns boasting dozens of shops, office buildings, schools, boardinghouses, saloons, hotels, churches, cottages and mansions.

In one community, tiny firefighters struggle to extinguish a "blaze" that threatens to engulf a downtown business. In others, Lilliputian ice-skaters glide across a frozen pond, and carnival-goers ride a revolving Ferris wheel. There's even a drive-in movie.

Visitors can operate the amusements and run the model trains and a trolley for a mere 25 cents a pop. And judging from the number of adults and kids doing just that, these trains get quite a workout.

"I see it! I see it!" a little boy shouts as a train approaches.

Steve and I have been watching another train; as it disappears around a bend, I audibly express my disappointment.

“Don’t worry,” our pint-sized companion says reassuringly. “The train will come back.”

And when it does, I’m reminded once again of how magical these symbols of adventure are — for children of all ages.