



ALL PHOTOS GORDON OSMUNDSON

# LAST STOP

an apparition of steam finds  
new life in the nevada desert

by joe flanagan photographs by gordon osmundson

**ABOVE:** A RESTORED VINTAGE STEAM LOCOMOTIVE ROLLS PAST THE 1907 DEPOT AT THE EAST ELY YARD NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK.

## IN THE ENGINE HOUSE ARE TWO FULLY

**IT IS PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST ENDURING IMAGES OF THE AMERICAN WEST:**



**ABOVE: LOCOMOTIVE WHEEL AND BRAKE SHOE. RIGHT: WORKERS AT THE EAST ELY SITE TAKE ON THE HEAVY WORK OF THE STEAM ERA.**

the steam locomotive churning across the plains, the symbol of ingenuity and conquest hurtling through the arid landscape. The clatter, the hiss, the expulsion of steam call to mind long ago afternoons in the movie house, the lore holding the same mythical power no matter who you were or whether you were in Brooklyn or Chicago or San Francisco. The picture was irresistible. Here was the modern juggernaut to which distance was no obstacle, announcing a new order, declaring the emphatic end of the Old West.

A century later, it was the steam era's turn for a requiem, although with less picturesque associations. It was the 1950s and the old locomotives and the shops that serviced them were being scrapped or abandoned in favor of the new diesel-electric technology.

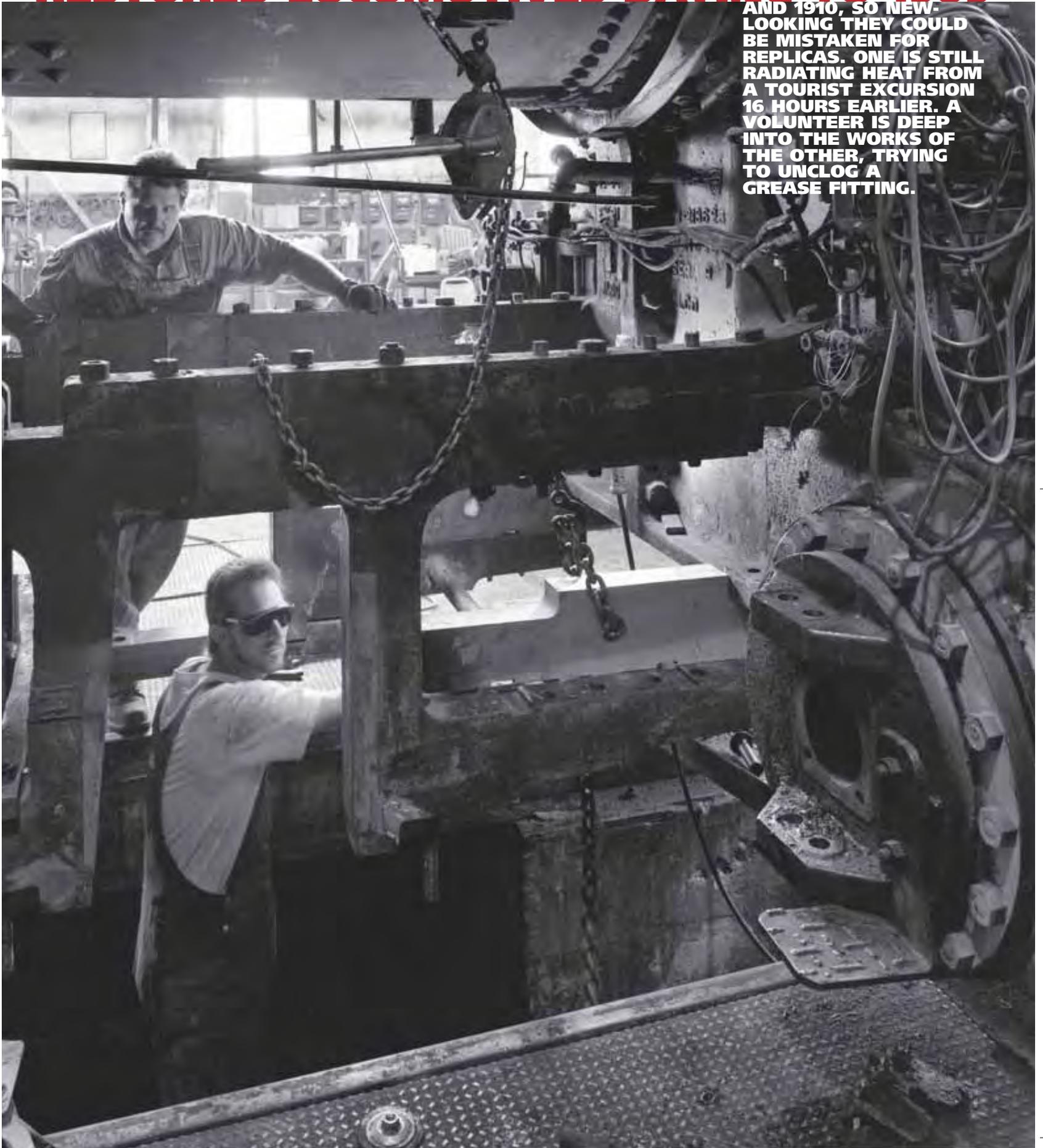
Except that in a remote corner of Nevada, in the lonely wastes of the Great Basin, there is a sizeable piece of history so well preserved that it is essentially a vast outdoor museum. The Nevada Northern Railway complex at East Ely was designated a national historic landmark last year, an honor bestowed both for its importance and remarkable integrity. Announcing the designation, which is the highest honor the federal government bestows upon a historic property, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne described the East Ely Yards as the "best preserved, least altered, and most complete main yard complex remaining from the steam railroad era." Today, it is known as the Nevada Northern Railway Museum, established to preserve and interpret its history to the public.

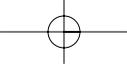
The railroad was established in 1905 as an outgrowth of the Western copper boom. Its cars mostly hauled ore, though there was passenger service too. When new diesel locomotives arrived in 1952, the cars, facilities, and associated trappings of the steam era were left behind, untouched. The effect was as if everyone had simply walked away and shut the door. Remarking on the yards' level of integrity, the national historic landmark nomination describes "furnishings,



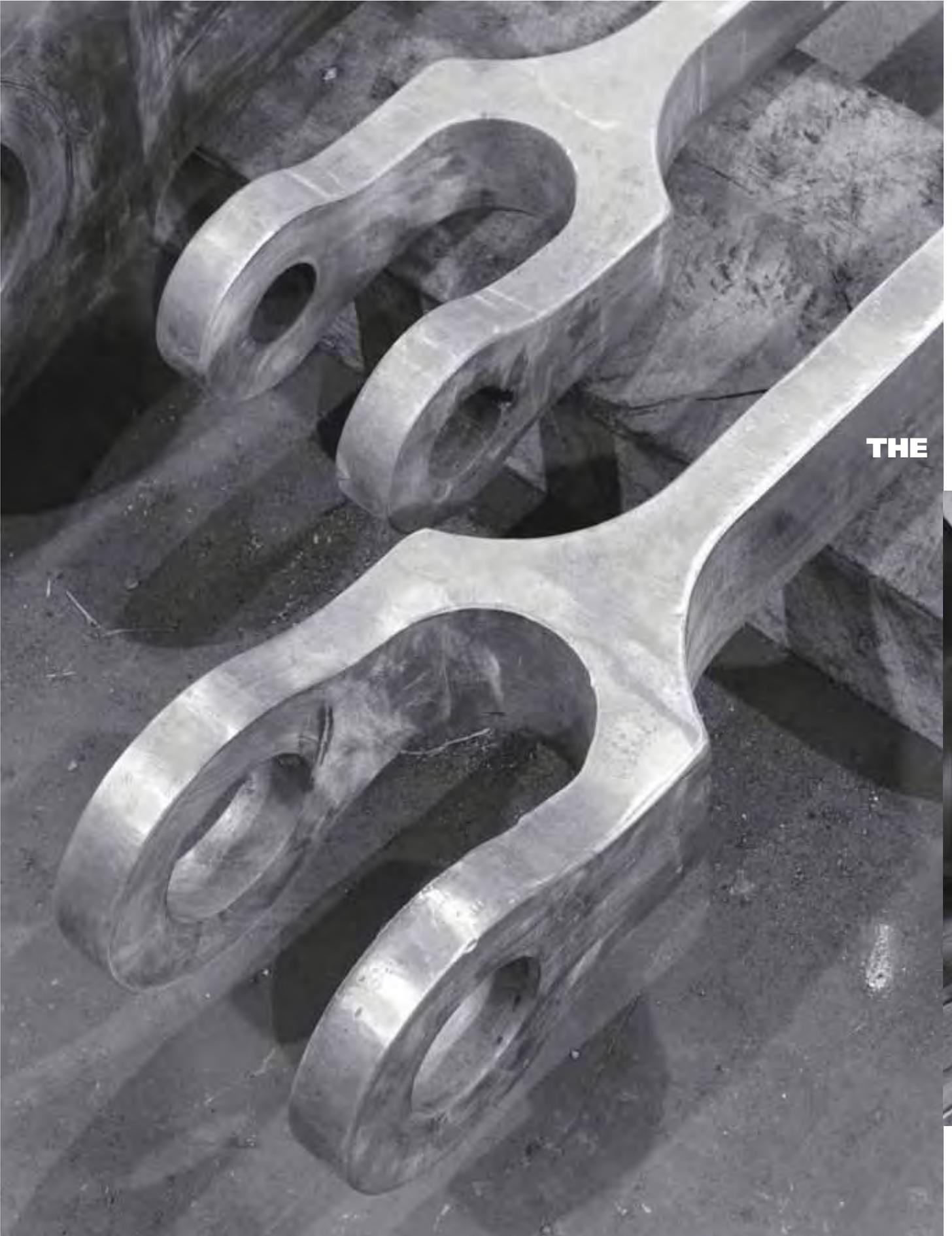
## RESTORED LOCOMOTIVES DATING TO 1909

AND 1910, SO NEW-LOOKING THEY COULD BE MISTAKEN FOR REPLICAS. ONE IS STILL RADIATING HEAT FROM A TOURIST EXCURSION 16 HOURS EARLIER. A VOLUNTEER IS DEEP INTO THE WORKS OF THE OTHER, TRYING TO UNCLOG A GREASE FITTING.

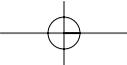




**BELOW:** CLOSE UP OF A PAIR OF ROD ENDS, COMPONENTS OF A STEAM LOCOMOTIVE'S DRIVING MECHANISM.



**THE**



equipment, tools . . . down to the stationery and forms stacked on shelves . . . as they were a half century ago.”

The complex sprawls over 56 acres. The desert environment no doubt has had a hand in its survival but equally important has been the isolation. Located on Highway 50, “the loneliest road in America,” the yards are halfway between Salt Lake City and Las Vegas. The drive takes you through what is possibly some of the most barren and empty country in the United States.

Though passenger service stopped in 1941 and new diesels arrived in 1952, the Nevada Northern continued running—with much of its old equipment—until 1983, when Kennecott Copper shut down the mine. Today the site is operated by the White Pine Historical Railroad Foundation, which has performed major restoration on cars, locomotives, buildings, and track. The group also runs tourist excursions into the mountains around Ely. It works in partnership with the state, which preserves the original depot and freight barn. The foundation’s executive director, Mark Bassett, a stocky, bearded man who looks like

an old-time train engineer, says “the number one question we get is ‘Where’s the museum?’” He gestures across the tracks toward the old rusting water tower and the mountains beyond. “This is our museum.”

Looking out at the isolated wooden structures alongside the tracks, with parched slopes all around, it is difficult not to think of “High Plains Drifter” or “The Magnificent Seven,” so strong is the atmosphere of the mythical West.

### Living on Copper

**WHEN THE GOLD RUSH OF 1849 PETERED OUT, HOPEFUL PROSPECTORS BEGAN** wandering further afield in search of another strike. They found it in Nevada in the 1860s. The rich Comstock Lode, which yielded unexpected riches in silver, lasted a decade. Those who were too late or

## WEATHERED STRUCTURES HOUSE SAWS, LATHES, AIR BRAKE TESTING EQUIPMENT, ELECTRICAL HARDWARE, FORGES, AND

**A COLLECTION OF SPARE PARTS YOU WILL SEE IN NO HARDWARE STORE ON EARTH. MANY OF THESE BUILDINGS STILL HAVE CALENDARS ON THE WALLS FROM WHEN KENNECOTT PULLED OUT. IN ONE, SMOCKS STILL HANG ON A HOOK. IN ANOTHER, A RADIO IS STILL TUNED TO THE STATION FAVORED BY THE FOREMAN. A FLICK OF A SWITCH FILLS THE SHOP WITH LIFE.**

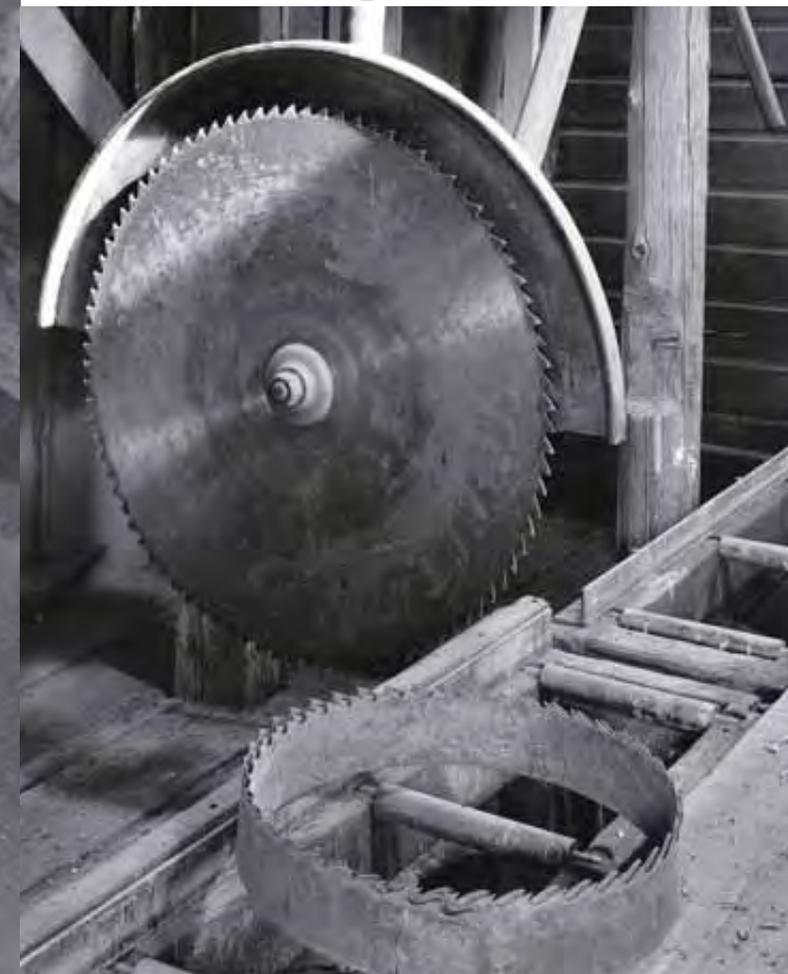
unlucky ranged into the Great Basin to see what they could find. Isaac Requa, a mining magnate who had struck it rich with the Comstock Lode, established mines around Eureka, Nevada, 75 miles west of Ely. In 1869, the transcontinental Central Pacific Railroad was completed farther to the north. Requa’s idea was to build a small railroad running from his mines in Eureka to a junction with the Central Pacific. Independent “short line” railroads were multiplying in the area to take advantage of the new volume of east-west traffic on the big line to the north.

For about a quarter century, Isaac Requa’s Eureka & Palisade Railroad did well, but then the Eureka mines played out. In 1897, he sent his son Mark east to the area around Ely with a mining engineer to look for gold and silver. What they found was copper.

It would have been a disappointment but for a convergence of circumstances, notably the technical revolution happening at the turn of the century. The advent of electricity brought an unprecedented demand for the metal. New inventions like the steam shovel made strip mining possible. This meant that low-grade ore, once not worth the trouble to excavate using traditional shafts and tunnels, was now valuable.

Mark Requa, who bought a number of claims in the area, started a railroad. Like the Eureka & Palisade, it was a short line running north to the Central Pacific. Ely was the southern terminus. From Ely, the

**LEFT: RADIAL ARM SAW IN THE CARPENTER’S SHOP.**



tracks ran another 10 miles west to the mines. He also built a smelter in the nearby town of McGill. The first years were profitable, so much so that investment bankers from New York, the Guggenheim brothers, put money into the smelter and mines. Soon they were interested in the railroad as well, and in 1906 they bought out Mark Requa.

As copper mining boomed, Ely and the surrounding towns grew. Immigrants from the East flocked to the area to work in the mines or on the rails. The Nevada Northern, as the new line was called, soon had a healthy business running passengers between local towns and to and from the junction with the Central Pacific. "Shift trains" carried workers between Ely and the mining camps and ran students back and forth between their hometowns and the high school in Ely.

The Nevada Northern did a brisk business hauling freight, too. Livestock, produce, and manufactured goods filled the wooden box-cars as they creaked and swayed through the high desert. At its peak, the railroad was running some 32 trains a day carrying passengers and freight. Another 64 ore trains rolled through the yard daily. "In the 1930s, we were bigger than Vegas," says Bassett. The railroad,



## **LOCOMOTIVES, PASSENGER CARS, A YELLOW CABOOSE, ASSORTMENT OF OTHER MACHINES SIT IN STAGES OF RESTORATION. A LADIES' PASSENGER CAR HAS HAD ITS ORIGINAL RED VELVET SEATS RESTORED. THE WINDOWS ON THE MEN'S CAR HAVE STAINED GLASS WITH ORNATE BRASS KEROSENE LAMPS AFFIXED TO THE CEILINGS.**

according to the national historic landmark nomination, "was a major economic influence on the development of eastern Nevada."

As the automobile gained prominence and more roads were paved, passenger service dropped off, then ceased altogether in 1941. The railroad and mining operation were acquired by Kennecott Copper in 1933, which continued a routine relatively unchanged through the decades.

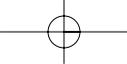
The railroad made good use of what was already on site. Little was thrown away. When Kennecott brought in brand new diesel-electric locomotives in the early '50s, it kept a pair of the original pre-WWI steam locomotives for backups. Ore cars from the early days continued to roll into the 1980s, as did the freight cars. Wide leather belts powered the saws in the carpenter's shop until the very end. The sense of antiquity pervades every aspect of the railyard, from the heavy mechanics to the paperwork, and along with the primitive landscape, produces an eerie sensation of time having stopped.

**ABOVE: DOORWAY TO A RESTORED CAR FROM 1872.**

By the late 1970s, inexpensive Asian copper was flooding the international market, and Kennecott shut down the mines and the smelter. The impact was severe. Bassett says "the major employer had left the community and you had no money here. It was like, 'Will the last person leaving town please turn off the lights.'"

It wasn't long before the idea of an historic attraction surfaced. Three classic locomotives sat in the yard's giant barns. Original passenger cars were there, too, some going back to the 1870s. Advocates approached the state to see if it would take on the complex as a historic site. "We couldn't take on such a big, expensive responsibility," says Nevada historic preservation officer Ron James. With an expected renovation cost of some \$8 million, his office demurred (though it eventually took control of the depot and freight barn). The city council approached Kennecott and simply asked if it could have the complex. Surprisingly, the answer was yes.

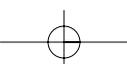
In 1984 the town took over the facility and formed the foundation. The freight barn and depot were taken over by the state and are now operated separately from the main yard as the East Ely Railroad Depot Museum. "Nevada has shown a substantial financial commitment to the restoration," says Director Sean Pitts, spending more than \$2 million rehabilitating the buildings with plans to spend another \$3 million over the next two years.



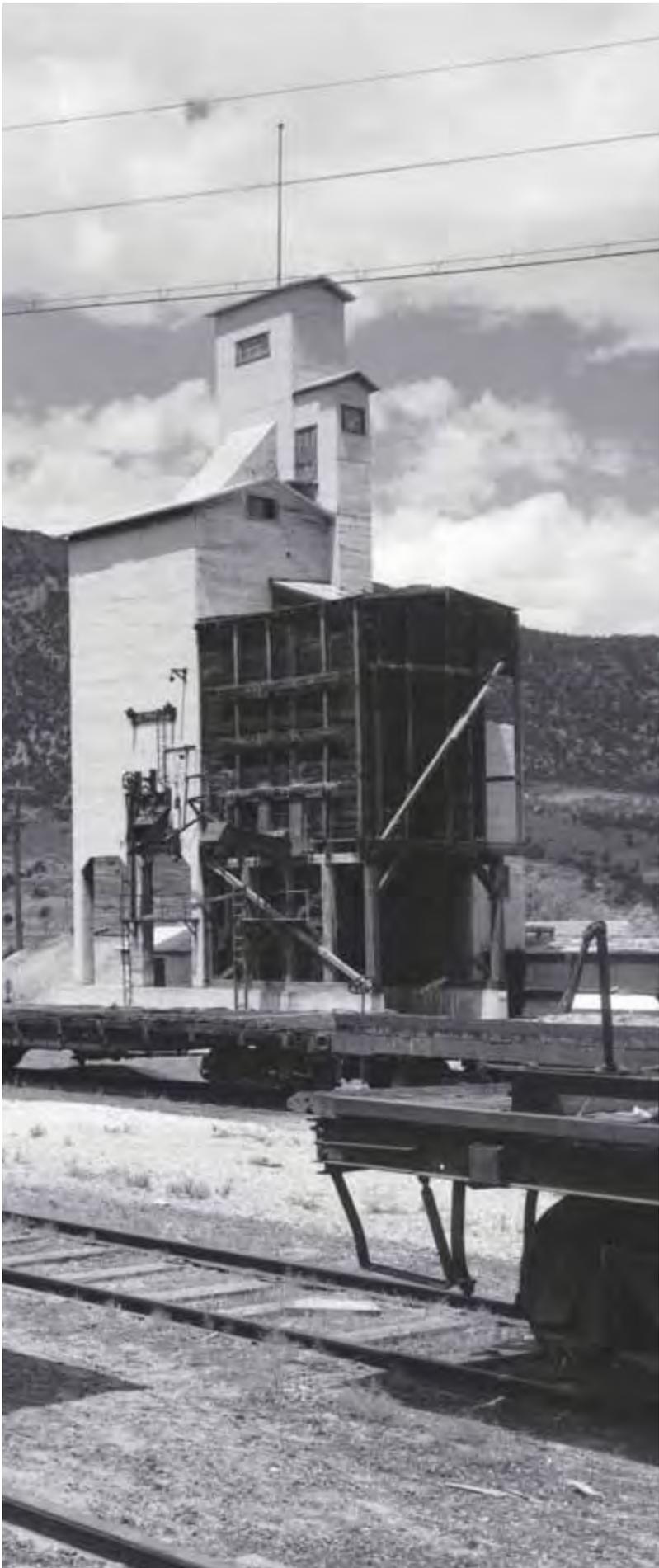
**BELOW:** CARS IN THE YARD'S MASSIVE BARN.



**AND AN**







**ABOVE:** A WORLD WAR I-ERA NORTHERN NEVADA FREIGHT CAR SITS IN THE YARD WITH THE COALING TOWER IN THE BACKGROUND.

### Inheriting a Legacy

**MARK BASSETT SWINGS OPEN THE HEAVY STEEL DOORS TO A BRICK BLOCK-**house, which, though it is stacked floor to ceiling with ledgers and documents, carries not a whiff of mildew. “Welcome to the high desert,” he says. All manner of administrative and technical documents can be found here, spanning the decades, all of it in nearly pristine condition. A pay ledger from 1909 details disbursements to employees, the names and amounts filled out with a Victorian flourish.

Bassett describes the difficult early years of the museum. The amount of work was staggering and the money scarce. There were three employees and whatever goodwill could be generated in the form of volunteers and donations. By 2001, it looked like the museum wasn’t going to make it. Bassett arrived the following year with experience in helping to revitalize the historic downtown of

**LIVESTOCK, PRODUCE, AND MANUFACTURED GOODS FILLED THE WOODEN BOXCARS AS THEY CREAKED AND SWAYED THROUGH THE HIGH DESERT. AT ITS PEAK, THE RAILROAD WAS RUNNING SOME 32 TRAINS A DAY CARRYING PASSENGERS AND FREIGHT. ANOTHER 64 ORE TRAINS ROLLED THROUGH THE YARD DAILY.**

Laramie, Wyoming. He brought the Main Street approach espoused by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, using imaginative yet practical ways to lure people and businesses back to dying towns.

The museum began a vigorous marketing campaign, casting a wide net for assistance. Bill Withuhn, curator of transportation for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, acted as a conduit to the larger preservation community (he also regularly visits the complex to give presentations). Gordon Chappell, a historian with the National Park Service, was brought in to write the national historic landmark nomination. The museum also pursued grant money and intensified its outreach to potential donors.

Today, the museum has over 1,900 dues-paying members. A 2 percent tax on hotel rooms—which are legion in this last-chance town—generates \$150,000 annually for the railroad. The state is a main source of revenue, having awarded over \$1 million to the museum to date. Recently, the foundation broke the \$1 million mark in annual revenue—not including grants—a feat for an organization that had eked along on a steady \$250,000 annual budget.

This close to the Utah border, there is what James calls a “cultural aftertaste” of Mormonism, and this is a blessing for local heritage. “Even today,” he says, “you still feel the Mormon bedrock in the community; they’re really good at preserving history.”

The Nevada Northern now runs three trains a day for tourists. Full time employees have grown to fifteen. Volunteers number over a hundred. A walk through the yard conveys the enormity of managing

such a place. Lonely wooden buildings sit in isolation along the rails, once used for storage, shops, and various offices. Most are painted red, with a coal stove pipe protruding from the roof. Here in the desert, there is little wood rot, though the paint has become so dry it has taken on the quality of an alligator's hide.

While modern locomotives are built with standardized parts, their steam counterparts were custom-made. Railroads were self-sufficient. At Ely, if they couldn't fix a broken part, they made a new one. The weathered structures house saws, lathes, air brake testing equipment, electrical hardware, forges, and a collection of spare parts you will see in no hardware store on earth. Many of these buildings still have calendars on the walls from when Kennecott pulled out. In one, smocks still hang on a hook. In another, a radio is still tuned to the station favored by the foreman. A flick of a switch fills the shop with life.

Bassett laments the passing of the technical know-how. He cites the decline in high schools offering shop classes. "We're trying to recapture these skills," he says. The National Railway Historical Society

**BELOW: EQUIPMENT FOR TESTING AIR BRAKES; THE DISPATCHER'S DESK AS IT WAS CIRCA 1907; LOOKING DOWN THE RAILS AT THE YARD'S MAIN STRUCTURES. RIGHT: COACH SHED AND CARPENTER'S SHOP.**

In the engine house are two fully restored locomotives dating to 1909 and 1910, so new-looking they could be mistaken for replicas. One is still radiating heat from a tourist excursion 16 hours earlier. A volunteer is deep into the works of the other, trying to unclog a grease fitting. A third sits off to the side awaiting restoration. The employees are cross-trained in all the skills needed to operate the machines. The dawn of the diesel era is preserved in a pair of brightly colored 12-cylinder

## **THE SENSE OF ANTIQUITY PERVADES EVERY ASPECT RAILYARD, FROM THE HEAVY MECHANICS TO THE PAPERWORK, AND ALONG WITH THE PRIMITIVE LANDSCAPE, PRODUCES AN EERIE SENSATION OF TIME HAVING STOPPED.**

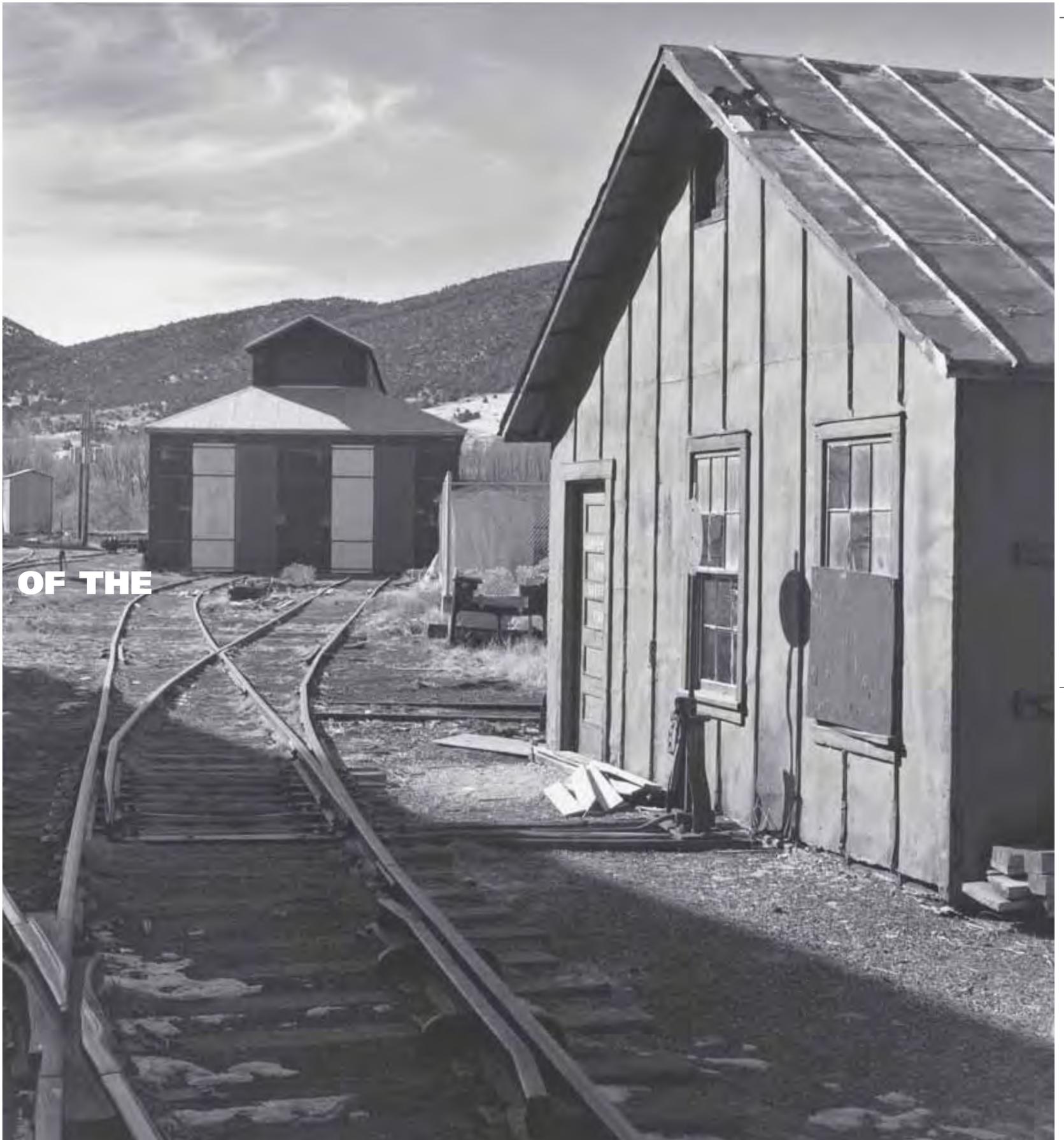
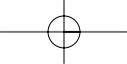


has a rail camp program for teenagers, and the museum has seized the opportunity. "They learn basic metal working and problem solving," says Bassett. They've also been treated to the experience of laying railroad ties and driving spikes with a sledgehammer.

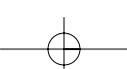
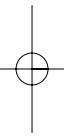
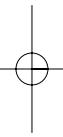
### **American Classics**

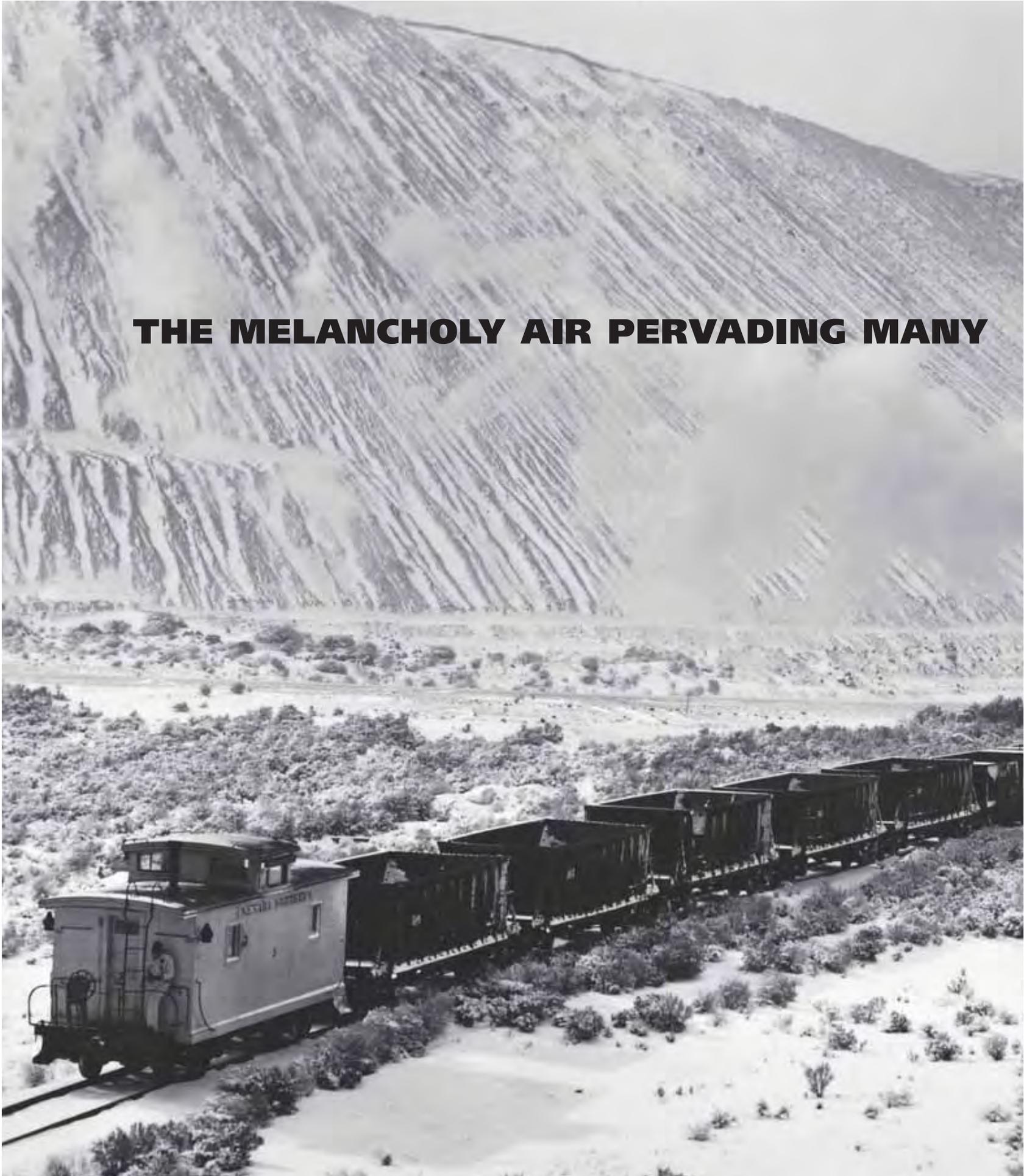
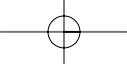
**THE SHOWPIECES OF THE MUSEUM ARE IN A PAIR OF MASSIVE BUILDINGS** with enormous windows, skylights, and roofs 60 feet high. The effect is ecclesiastical. Locomotives, passenger cars, a yellow caboose, and an assortment of other machines sit in stages of restoration. A ladies' passenger car has had its original red velvet seats restored. The windows on the men's car have stained glass with ornate brass kerosene lamps affixed to the ceilings. The oldest of the cars goes back to 1872. Some of the work is done by staff and volunteers. Some requires specialists, and this is where isolation exacts its price. Salt Lake City and Las Vegas are both about 240 miles distant. Says Bassett, "You have to make it worth the trip to get them here." Though the challenges are daunting, the smell of new paint and the gleam of polished brass are encouraging signs.



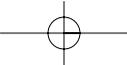
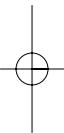
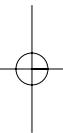


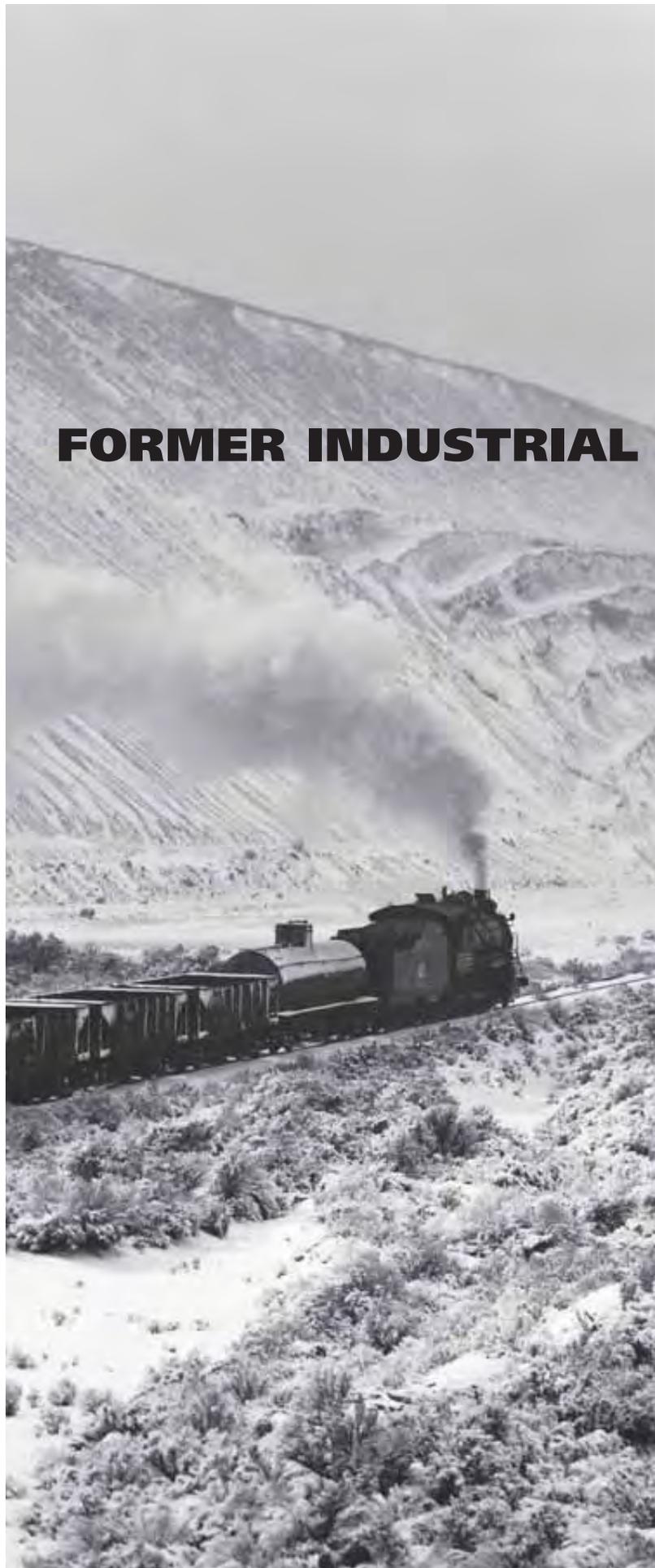
**OF THE**





**THE MELANCHOLY AIR PERVADING MANY**





## FORMER INDUSTRIAL SITES IS TEMPERED BY WHAT'S OUT OF SIGHT OF THE COAL TOWERS, THE DRY BROWN MOUNTAINS, THE LONELY VISTAS. BECAUSE OF THE PARTNERSHIPS, BECAUSE OF THE VOLUNTEERS, BECAUSE OF THE DEDICATION, THE PLACE HAS NEW LIFE. IT'S CONFIRMED BY THE PERCUSSIVE SOUND OF AN AIR WRENCH COMING OUT OF THE ENGINE HOUSE, REACHING THE EARS ACROSS A LONG EXPANSE OF TRACKS.

acetylene torch ignites. With all the activity it would be easy to forget that this is a national historic landmark, except that posted on a board by the door is the Railway Labor Act of 1951, and beside that, Kennecott Copper circular number 63 from January 1922, warning employees of the consequences of “disloyalty, dishonesty, desertion [and] intemperance.” Both are original artifacts of their time.

Out in the yard, Bassett reflects on what the place means in the larger picture of history. “The railroad was completely intertwined with

American life,” he says. The depot—especially in a place like Ely—was the portal to the outside world. This was where mail arrived, where you met visitors, where things from faraway cities came to your doorstep. The depot’s symbolism came to transcend its function.

The immigrant story is pervasive too. A flood of newcomers came to try their luck in the wide-open West around here. They too left their imprint on the story of the railroads and the mines.

“You get an incredible look into the lives of people,” says Pitts. A tour through company records reveals the horrific accident rate. “We fail to understand that labor was a commodity. If you lost labor you just went out and got more . . . railroading was the second-most dangerous profession in the United States at the time. Mining was the first.”

The melancholy air pervading many former industrial sites is tempered by what’s out of sight of the coal towers, the dry brown mountains, the lonely vistas. Because of the partnerships, because of the volunteers, because of the dedication, the place has new life. It’s confirmed by the percussive sound of an air wrench coming out of the engine house, reaching the ears across a long expanse of tracks. And it is no doubt what prompted the Smithsonian’s Withuhn, weighing in on the landmark nomination, to say, “It’s a living American treasure . . . I’ve been in this business for over two decades, and there’s nothing like it.”

For more information, contact Mark Bassett, Nevada Northern Railway Museum, 1100 Avenue A, P.O. Box 150040, Ely, NV 89315, [nnry1@mwpower.net](mailto:nnry1@mwpower.net). Also visit [www.nevadanorthernrailway.net](http://www.nevadanorthernrailway.net).

**LEFT: AN ORE TRAIN ROLLS THROUGH THE HIGH DESERT OUTSIDE ELY, NEVADA.**