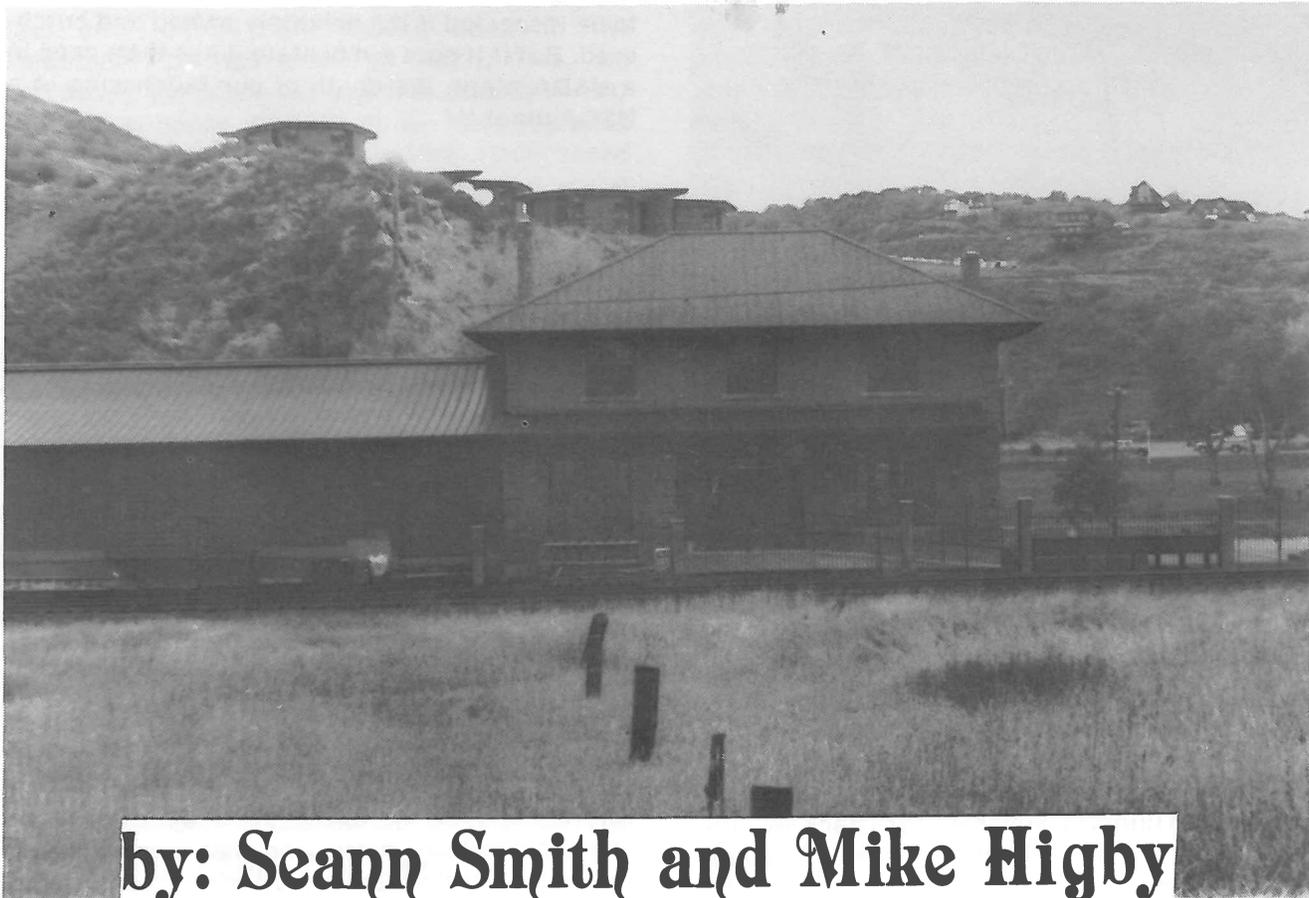


Steamboat's Old Depot: The Arts and Humanities Center



by: Seann Smith and Mike Higby

Traveling by train in the Rockies can be an exciting experience. The somewhat old method of passenger travel combined with the awesome scenery of the mountains gave it an adventurous, romantic quality. In earlier days, traveling by steam engine was an adventure. After long countless hours of continuous motion, the traveler back then must have been grateful to see a depot. Depots were a place of rest and recuperation for both the traveler and the train. Serving as rest and refueling stops or as points of destination, depots have played a big role in developing the West.

The depot in Steamboat Springs is one of few on the National Register of Historical Sites. Now owned by the city and leased by the Steamboat Arts Council, the Depot has a long and interesting past. Constructed of brick and rock from Emerald Mountain Quarry on the edge of Steamboat and designed by Denver architects, it cost \$30,000. The money was raised by the citizens of Steamboat in 1908 to ensure that the Moffat Railway would pass through Steamboat

Springs. The citizens were eager to see the first train in 1909. After the Depot was finished and painted green in July of 1918, the schedule to Steamboat from Denver was approximately twelve hours. In the winter time, it often took three days because of the heavy snows in the mountains.

For this story we interviewed two people: Eleanor Bliss, a long time member of the Arts Council who helped with the restoration of it, and Stan Whittemore, the President of the Arts Council.

Eleanor Bliss

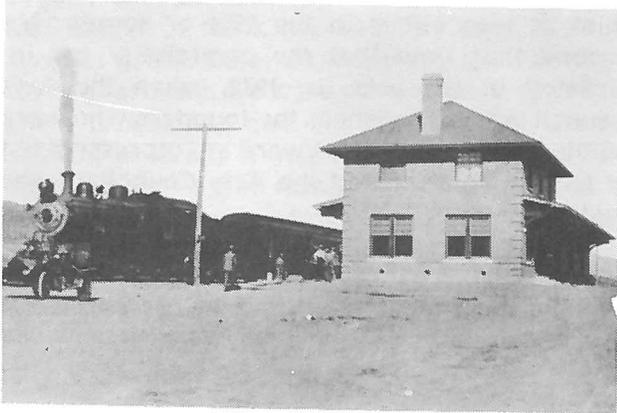
During the years that the depot was in use by the railroad, many people came to Steamboat for the first time. Eleanor recalls the first time she came up by train and saw the Depot.

"It was a regular train depot; it had a waiting room section which we now use as a gallery. There were long benches back to back, and people could sit and wait for the train. What is

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now the office was where the station master was, and he lived upstairs. The long section of the depot, where we have the big art shows and the dance studios, was the warehouse where they unloaded the freight. The express things were in a separate section, and if you look now at the walls you'll see that there's a difference. The express packages were insured, and they had to have a separate locked place to keep them. There was just a wooden partition separating the two.

"I was 24 when I came to Steamboat from New York City in 1924, with my mother, as a Perry Mansfield camper. I came by the 'stage.' I didn't come out the first of July when the session started; I came out the first of August. I had been at a ranch in Wyoming as a graduation present when I graduated from college. We came down to Denver from Wyoming. Then we took the 'stage,' a five passenger car. We left Denver in the early morning and got up here in the late afternoon.



"Depots were a place of rest and recuperation."

"I first got involved in the Depot in 1972 when it was given to the town of Steamboat Springs by the Denver Rio Grande Western Railroad. They weren't using passenger service, and it hadn't been used for three years. The population wasn't affected once the service stopped coming to town, though it did boost the population when it first came, and it helped the economy even more.

"One thing I want to tell you about is the wrought iron fence. When the first arrangements were made with the railroad, one of the stipulations was that we erect a chain link fence to separate the tracks from the depot so that the people coming out of the theatrical performance wouldn't spill out onto the tracks. They wanted protection so the trains could go back and forth without having people on the tracks.

"I couldn't imagine that kind of fence at the Depot. It didn't fit in with the architecture. I knew of a particular fence which had belonged to a very dear friend of mine who had lived in Denver at 1140 Grant Street, and her fence was



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just a hundred feet across the front of the house. When her parents died, my friend fell heir to it and the fence. She loved that old fence, so she moved it out to her ranch that she developed in Littleton. She didn't have a use for it, so she made a picnic area out of it. She enclosed a barbecue pit. It was just sitting out in the middle of a pasture to keep out the horses. In the meantime my friend died, and I knew that the fence was just sitting out there, so I asked the heirs if they wouldn't give it to the Depot. We got Rusty Baker to use one of his cattle trucks, and he brought the fence to the Depot. It needed repairs because over the years it had gotten a dent here and there. Paul Herrmann, a blacksmith, repaired it. It should have a plaque on it to indicate the donors.

"The architect told us that it would take \$30,000 to get the Depot fixed so we could use it. We would have to get the plumbing working, the



"She loved that old fence."



“So they dug under the river and connected us to the sewer line.”

electricity working, and the boiler. People didn't think we could raise the \$30,000, but we knew, with some effort, that we could do it. We gave a hundred dollar a plate dinner and raised several thousand dollars from that. It was our first big fund raising event and was very successful. Then we just got money wherever we could. People worked with us. We had volunteers down there scrubbing and painting. We had to get a new roof; the roof leaked like a sieve. Ann Love, who was then the governor's wife, was very interested in our project, and she helped us get the material from Johns Manville. But we didn't have skilled workers, so what we did was just put it on over the old roof. Eventually down the years we had to tear all of that off and start all over again because it started leaking again. It had deteriorated terribly over those years. It had been locked up and left and nothing worked. It was a mess. It was just dirt and dust. Dead mice, live mice, and spiders were all over the place. I helped clean it up. Not only did we have to clean it, but we did all of the construction work on it too. You see, when it was given to the town, the town didn't have any money to do anything with it. There were people who wanted to buy it for a restaurant, and others had different ideas. There were a lot of people that wanted to sell it. That was when the Arts Council was first formed. We needed a home so I had an architect come in and take a look at it, see what it would take to put it in at least usable shape, not restored, but just workable. For instance, the sewer emptied into the river and that is just a no-no. I knew something had to be done about that because there was no sewer on that side of the river. We had people donate two holding tanks which we buried by the Depot. We had to have a sanitation man come by, empty them, and that had to be done after every function. Finally, many years later, the city extended their sewer line down to Dream Island on the other side of the river. So they dug under the river and connected us to the sewer line, which was a great asset.

“It still isn't completed yet, and we have spent

over \$300,000 on the Depot, but a lot of it was because we had to do things over. You know that they were just amateur; it was always 'bandaid work.' Then the awful thing that happened was that the city building inspector came down and said it wasn't safe. The roof was going to fall in on everybody because the walls were bulging, and they locked it up on us.

“So we had another big drive to get the doors unlocked, and we called it, 'Save the Depot.' We all went around with t-shirts at the 4th of July parade. We just carried around tin cans for donations to help save the Depot. We finally got enough money and rebuilt some of the walls and put in big steel bars to reinforce them. It was difficult even though we had a lot of support. We still have problems; we're always short of money.

“Later, I tried to show the connection between the Arts Council and the arts taught at Perry Mansfield Camp because that was the beginning of the appreciation of the arts in Steamboat Springs. Perry Mansfield was the beginning. I think it was either in the '50s or somewhere around that time that the community got interested in the arts. In 1972, when the Arts Council was established, the founders who were on the board of directors were an impressive list of locals. That started the Arts Council; I was just one of them.”

If you have ever visited the Depot, you probably have noticed an odd wooden structure outside. Eleanor recalls how it was acquired. “It was in an exhibit way back, early on. Nobody can



“We just carried around tin cans for donations to help save the Depot.”

remember who the man was that made it. It was for sale for \$200. When the exhibit was disbanded, he never came to claim it, and he told us that if we could sell it for \$200, we could have the money. No one has ever bought it, and it still sits outside. Everybody wonders what it is, but it now belongs to the Arts Council. If somebody offered us \$1,000 we would sell it.

“One of our problems is security because the

warehouse section is open for the dancing classes and in the evenings they have other events. The things on display, in the other room, are valuable. We have lost several things on display down there. Now they have a gate that goes between the two sections. We can close up the galleries, and we now have security for the windows. That was expensive: several thousand dollars, but we feel we are secure now.

"We do not have any insurance covering theft of art works, and that is understood by the artists. Curtis Zabel had one of his little sculptures taken a couple of years ago, and there was some jewelry stolen. One amusing thing, we had an exhibit last year, it was a Routt County exhibit, and there were quite a few things put in from Craig. There was a painting by one of the artists, and it was hanging right next to the door, where you come in from the river side. The painting was stolen, and we phoned the girl who had done the art work. She said, 'Imagine that, they took my painting!' She was flattered. So we got out of that one. Lots of people haven't quite felt that way about it. Now we hope to book first-rate exhibits here from the Smithsonian and other museums.

"Another problem at the depot is space. We can't fit in a lot of things because of space. We wanted to put in a theatre, but we need enough space for a real theatre. I think their seating capacity is 90. That isn't enough to support it.

"We have workshops in the Depot all of the time. They have a darkroom there to use for photography upstairs in the old bathroom. We have big plans for the future. The development committee is looking down the line five to ten years from now. We have outgrown the Depot, no question about that. But we can't build onto it because the railroad didn't give us enough land. We are fenced in, so there's no way, and the Depot is under the National Register of Historic Places. Anything that you add to it has to be compatible with the Depot, so we're restricted. There isn't any old building around that's suitable, but the long range plan is to build a facility which will house not only a theatre but galleries and workshops. We've had the offer of land, but now I think it's gone. I think it had a time limit; we were supposed to build something on it. We couldn't get the money. There are people looking to get a bond issue to help pay for this. I'm not adverse to that. We do need space; the place isn't adequate for a theatre.

"The Arts Council is leasing it under the city, and that's one of the problems that started at the very beginning when we had to make arrangements with the city to use it. They gave us a lease for a dollar a year so that we could do all the restorations and to spend all these thousands of dollars on it. They only gave us a five year lease. We wondered how we were going



"Everybody wonders what it is."

to raise the funds. So I went to the city council. I said, 'You can't do that; people are going to give tax deductible money to restore this building, and after five years you're going to take it back! You will have a restored building from the funds that were raised by the Arts Council.' So they prolonged the lease up to 30 years to the year 2002.

"Then after we started having productions and art shows, the city came back and said, 'We want more money,' and started charging us \$400 a month rent. Then the city council wanted to change the lease. We had to give them the \$400 a month rent on top of paying for all the repairs. Now we're trying to get an intermediate lease, that they gave us so that we could take fifty cents on the dollar off the lease. In other words, when we had someone give us \$5,000 for something, we could take \$2,500 off of our lease. So over the years, up until now, we didn't pay any rent, because we had the donations. Now the big things are gone; we have security problems and things like that. It's running out, and we're going to have to pay \$400 a month again. We can't do that, and the programs we put on seldom pay for themselves. We're now trying to get the city to pay the utilities; the lights, water, heat and those things. It's been hard getting donations this past year because of the bad economy, and people just aren't spending their money. It's our membership we are trying to expand, and we know we are getting a lot of support through the business community, for example, the banks and stores. They realize we are an asset. The Resort Association is also helping us a lot because they can advertise. Even though they enjoy the

Depot, and go to things down there, not everybody joins, and that's too bad because an individual membership is only \$15 and there is no reason people can't get \$15 worth of pleasure down there. Of course we don't run anybody away; anybody can come and enjoy the exhibit and come to the functions. But if they really want to support, they should join.

"The town usually accounted for most of our money. Now we're counting on the economy to return. If we could get people that own condos, that come out to ski for a few weeks, to get involved, make them realize that we could be an asset for their problems with getting things rented and so forth, we would do a lot better."

Eleanor concluded her story with the current problems she is working on with the Depot. "We're still making repairs. The boiler was in very bad condition, and just the other day I had a call for an offer of a 30-year-old boiler from the theatre; that is a pretty new boiler as boiler systems go. When things happen like that, people know we are in need of things so they call us and they involve me. That boiler proved to be incompatible, so we had to get another boiler which is now working.

"We are still looking for volunteers to help. If you want to go down to the depot they're always looking for babysitters for the exhibits. If you have a few hours you can help, the phone number of the depot is 879-4434 for people who want to volunteer their time. Just call and say that you'd be interested in helping. We always can use someone to mow the lawn or address envelopes or answer the phone or babysit the exhibits."

Stan Whittemore

Next we interviewed Stan Whittemore, the new President of the Steamboat Springs Arts Council. He told us about the current functions of the Arts Council at the Depot. First he told us how he became involved.

"We've lived here for five years, and I have been involved for four years. We visited Steamboat off and on prior to moving here and knew what the Arts Council meant to the community, and that's why we became involved. My wife and I both were asked to be on the board. They figured they would have both of us if one served, and it certainly turned out that way."

How did you get voted president?

"I had been Chairman of the Membership Committee for three years and as far as the presidency, the nominating committee asked if I would serve as president. I accepted the nomination; the nominations were closed, and I became president. I think they felt there was the energy and the desire to put in the necessary time to keep things going.

"We have just completed, financed by a grant,

a security system for the Depot. We also have the ornamental iron gates that divide the gallery and the baggage room area. The smaller gallery, where art shows are presented, and the large baggage room area for special large shows are not protected. With this security system we will be able to attract more elaborate types of arts and crafts and touring shows that, until now, have been hesitant to come here.

"The Arts Council will benefit from the proceeds of this year's Snow Ball dance which is sponsored by the Steamboat Springs Ski Corp. Every year they have a different benefactor for the proceeds from the Snow Ball. We are very



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grateful to the Steamboat Springs Ski Corporation for their support and the many good things they do for the community of Steamboat Springs. The Snow Ball is a dance that is annually held in mid-February at the Sheraton Ballroom with casual elegance the dress.

One of the future plans of the city is the "Garden of the Arts." Stan told us more about the "Garden of the Arts," a cultural center. "As far as the prospective 'Garden of the Arts,' we have met with the City Manager, Harvey Rose, and indicated our desire to work with the city in the development of their plans. There will be a consultant working to put this all in the proper perspective, and that is where we will have our initial input. We understand there may be land available when all these 'dreams' materialize."

He told us about other events that the Arts Council has planned. "The Cabaret is held every spring to help the locals get through mud season. This year it will be May 8th and May 9th. The setting is Cabaret style, and the various acts are all local talent; it is one of Steamboat's most popular events. On April 4th we have the Cleo Parker Robinson nationally acclaimed dance group performing at the high school. This is sponsored by The Bottleneck and should be a great show. During the summer we have the National Geographic Photographic Workshop,

the Los Angeles Dance Workshop at Perry Mansfield, and a new series of workshops in conjunction with the Scottsdale Artists' School. All these workshops do so much in popularizing Steamboat Springs, with participants coming from all over the United States.

"In addition, at the Golub Gallery this spring, we have a glass art show; the Routt County Youth Art Show; the Colorado Art Show; and the Extended Care — Horizons, Senior Citizens Art Show. Then in July we have the large summer art show taking up the whole Depot and Art in the Park in mid-July. All of this takes many hours of volunteer efforts, but the rewards come in the benefits to the artists in all modes and the offerings for the people of Steamboat Springs.

"For many of our events we do have business sponsors, and they are invaluable to us. Also, our membership income is most important to our operating expenses, and without our individual and business memberships we could not operate. This is where Steamboat Springs is so great. Our citizens and businesses do support organizations like the Arts Council, the Werner Library, Colorado Mountain College, the Winter Sports Club, Three Wire Winter, and many other worthwhile groups.

"Our operations never seem to have a slack season. There are more events in the fall, the Christmas craft sale in November, our Christmas store in December, the Holiday Fine Arts Show over Christmas, and so on through the winter.

"Naturally, all this activity requires a lot of direction and administration along with the general operation of the Depot. This requires quite a budget and keeps our board and the many volunteers very busy trying to break even. I do not think the public in general realizes what a continuous, ongoing effort this entails. We need to work on this in our public relations. We do have many members who give as their means allow, and how grateful we are for this!

"Our 'family' is one of which anyone could be very proud: The Steamboat Dance Theater, the Quilters, the Weavers, the Writer's Group, the Columbine Chorale, the GALSCo Theater Group, the Woodworkers, Mt. Madrigal Singers, Community Concert Association, Visual Artists, Emerald Mountain Recorder Society, and Extended Care-Horizons painting classes.

"The Steamboat Arts Council is the envy of many other Arts Councils in Colorado. The Depot is now listed on the National Register of Historic places. The City of Steamboat Springs through the city council realizes the invigorating role we play in the cultural environment. They have been most supportive in helping with our operations, and this is most appreciated."

Next Stan told us his role as President. "As to my role as President, I feel it necessary to keep



"Our operations never seem to have a slack season."

up with all committee activities, to encourage public and volunteer support, and to make certain our operations are efficient, worthwhile, and contribute to the quality of life in Steamboat Springs. Our new Director, Lynne Greco, is doing a wonderful job, and she is such a help in every aspect of our operation. We, too, are fortunate to have valuable guidance in our finances, long range planning, building up-keep, visual and performing arts — all volunteers giving many hours for the community. This makes the President's job much easier, and how I do appreciate this!"

In doing this story, we learned a lot about the Depot and the Arts Council. We learned that the Depot is not only a relic of the past, but it is a functional building. It still serves the community as it has done in years past, even if in a different way. It serves as a center point in which the community can get together and enjoy the variety of cultural and artistic events that are offered. The Arts Council is a great asset to the community and the artists of Steamboat Springs. It will function with the Depot for many years to come.



"The Depot is not only a relic of the past, but it is a functional building."