



History revealed during renovation of rail station



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Capi Lynn, Statesman Journal

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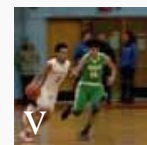
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Robert Melbo is not one to be derailed, even when



(Photo: Courtesy of ODOT)

faced with the daunting task of correcting history.

After months of research on Salem's historic train station, including the nearly renovated baggage depot, he has uncovered some significant inaccuracies.

The station was destroyed by fire only once, for example, not twice. The fire occurred in 1888, not 1885, as it is recorded in most published accounts in recent decades in newspapers, online and even in books about railway history.

"This illustrates what happens when misinformation gets out there," said Melbo, state rail planner for the Rail & Public Transit Division of the Oregon Department of Transportation. "It can be continued forever unless it's challenged."

Melbo, who worked in the railroad industry for 33 years before joining ODOT in 2001, was just the man to do it. He had some help from ODOT librarian Laura Wilt.

ODOT is partnering with several agencies, organizations, and individuals to restore the baggage depot just south of the Amtrak station on 13th Street SE. ODOT owns the buildings, which are both on the National Register of Historic Places, and the property.

Up until recently, it was believed that the baggage depot, added at some point to the 1889 station, had survived a fire in 1917 just before the United States entered World War I. Melbo set out to verify the information through newspaper archives, and what he discovered was a different history.

Salem has had continuous rail service at the site since 1871. The 1889 station replaced the original one, which was destroyed by fire on April 14, 1888.

The Evening Capital Journal reported a spark from an engine caused the fire and that every portable article in the building was saved with the exception of the safe, which was too heavy to move. The building, however, was burned to the ground.

The Oregon Statesman suggested it was a "visitation of Providence," noting the city was in need of a new depot anyway. "The importance of Salem as a passenger and shipping station certainly entitles us to a fine new depot building," the article said.

The replacement was completed sometime between September and November of 1888, according to a search of [Salem newspaper archives](#), although it has always been referred to as the 1889 station. It appears to have opened without celebration or fanfare.



Toddler rescues twin from fallen dresser

0:33

Previously thought to have been lost to a fire sometime in 1917, the station was moved a couple hundred feet to the north so the present-day station could be constructed on the same site. One explanation Melbo found for the possible mix-up is a fire reported in January 1918 at a nearby hotel.

"Maybe somehow that morphed into it being the station," he said.

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Later news accounts reported that after completion of the new station, the old station was to be torn down, all but one wing, which was to be moved to "a point 100 feet south of the new building and converted into a temporary express store room. After the war it is planned to put up a permanent building for this purpose on the same style of architecture as the larger one."

The remaining section survived, though, and is being renovated today.

While trying to set the record straight, Melbo came across an entertaining series of articles and editorials that seemed to offer further proof there was no second fire. The city was on a crusade in 1916-17 to convince Southern Pacific to build a new station worthy of Salem's stature as the state capital and a major business hub.

"The way they were ranting and raving about the station," he said, "if the damned thing burned down, they would have been celebrating."

The 1889 station was referred in newspapers as a cow shed, a pest house, a passenger corral and a "wickeup," a rudimentary shelter used by Native Americans.

"It is abundantly clear that folks in Salem believed the state's capital deserved a more classy railroad depot than the one they had," Melbo said.

They also may have thought it was their turn.

According to Melbo, between 1908 and 1914, Southern Pacific built new masonry depots in Eugene, Albany, Corvallis, McMinnville and Forest Grove.

Other discoveries included the existence of a covered, open air waiting area at the north end of the 1889 station. It is included in a sketch in a 1918 report by the Interstate Commerce Commission evaluating the Oregon & California Railroad property, which became Southern Pacific.

During renovations on the baggage depot, a giant concrete foundation was unearthed

near the building while crews were excavating for utilities. The cement structure was 10 feet wide, 10 feet long and at least 5 feet deep. Next to it were large concrete footings.

It was determined to be the foundation that would have supported the estimated 40-foot-tall water tank that once served steam locomotives that came through Salem. Railroad historian Ed Austin provided an early 1950s photo of that water tower.

One thing Melbo hasn't been able to pinpoint is what year the 21-by-60-foot baggage depot was added to the 1889 station. After examining early photographs and scouring newspaper reports, he has narrowed the time frame to between 1891 and 1899.

Much of the information he has gathered and corrected will be used by Austin to create historical panels that will be on permanent display near the restored building, which will become Salem's new Greyhound bus station.

"Forward This" appears Wednesdays and Sundays and highlights the people, places, and organizations of the Mid-Willamette Valley. Contact Capi Lynn at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or 503-399-6710, or follow her the rest of the week on Twitter @CapiLynn and Facebook @CapiLynnSJ.



