

# RIVERSIDE & GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY

N115 County Road N Wisconsin Dells, WI 53965

## HISTORY OF THE MUSEUM

In 1982, after the death of Elmer Sandley, the Sandley Light Railway Equipment Works closed, and fell into foreclosure and bankruptcy. During the next six years, the Sandley Works was vacant and fell into disrepair.

In 1988, a group of volunteers led by William C. Fitt formed the *Riverside & Great Northern Preservation Society, Inc.* and went to work to save the Sandley Works by turning it into a museum.

During 1988 and much of 1989, the Society, bolstered by volunteers from the Milwaukee Light Engineering Society and The Chippewa Valley Railroad, repaired a mile of roadbed of the Sandley railroad, replacing over 5,000 ties, and returned the buildings on the property to operating condition.

The Society negotiated for the return of two Sandley engines – #98 and #82, both of which remain in service – and a number of Sandley passenger cars. #82 was leased from the Milwaukee Zoo Railroad, which owned the locomotive but no longer used it, and #98 was purchased from the Knoxville Zoological Park.

On October 21, 1989, the Riverside & Great Northern Railway returned to operating status, as Norman Sandley opened the throttle of #98 and took a train load of donors, contributors and volunteers – all riding in Sandley gondola cars – on the mile long trip out to the end of the refurbished railroad.

During the winter of 1989/1990, Society volunteers went to work repairing Sandley passenger cars and extended the rail bed to the end of the main line.

On May 15, 1990 – the 36<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first passenger train to run at the Sandley Light Railway Equipment Works – the Riverside & Great Northern Railway living museum reopened in a ceremony headlined by Ronald Fiedler, Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, and regular daily passenger service began on May 25<sup>th</sup>.

From the beginning, the Riverside & Great Northern has been a living museum. As George Broad put it in the May 1994 edition of ModelTec magazine:

*“Walking through the R&GN's yards, one simply cannot escape the feeling of reality that is there. This is not a tourist attraction, with the rolling stock stored in quonset huts behind false-front building. Here is a railroad, lifted out of time. It is as real as walking through the Rio Grand's yards at Chama, or perhaps the Sandy River's at Phillips, many, many years ago. All the facilities any railroad might need are there: a*

*five-stall roundhouse; a 30' turntable; car, locomotive and boiler shops and sheds. The track layout is cramped, linear and utilitarian. It is real."*

Like all museums, the Riverside & Great Northern has had its ups and downs. In the early years, the museum often hung by a thread financially, and as is always the case with organizations owned and operated by volunteer members, some members haven't always agreed with others as the Society sorted out a path to the future.

The Riverside & Great Northern has had its share of disasters, too.

On July 2, 1995, a fire started around midnight on the outside of the Boiler Shop near the turntable. Fortunately the Wisconsin Dells Fire Department responded quickly. More fortunately still, a Society member who was spending the night on the premises had 15 years of experience in a volunteer fire department. He was able to provide information he knew would be valuable in putting out the fire, and the fire was confined to a relatively small portion of the older wooden building.

The Dells area experienced a series of heavy storms in 2004, and the bridge over Riverside Canyon, midway along the road bed, was washed away as water flooded through the gorge below, creating mud and rock slides that destroyed the bridge foundations. The bridge was rebuilt from the ground up beginning in August 2005, with assistance from government and private sources.

The Riverside & Great Northern is a living, working light railroad museum today. Behind the doors of the museum's buildings, the work of maintaining and operating the railroad goes on, day-to-day.

A few of the original buildings have been devoted to new uses – part of the locomotive manufacturing building houses the museum store, and part of the railway's shop has been turned into a classroom for the museum's "steam school", a five day program providing instruction in steam theory and hands-on experience with steam power. A replica of an Electro Motive Division diesel switcher, built by former president Tom Artzberger, does much of the utility work around the museum.

But the Riverside & Great Northern preserves the Sandley Light Railway Equipment Works faithfully, and both Elmer and Norm Sandley could walk into the museum today and feel at home.

Through thick and thin, the Riverside & Great Northern has endured, grown and developed over the twenty years since a small group of volunteers formed the Riverside & Great Northern Railway Preservation Society, Inc. in 1988. The strength of the Society has always been in its members, who donate thousands of hours of work to the museum every year, allowing the museum to live on as "*a railroad, lifted out of time*".