

# Looking Back

## with The National Railway Historical Society

By Nano Riley

Long before Gandy built the first bridge spanning Tampa Bay, the Orange Belt Railroad was the major mode of travel around the area. The railroad's arrival connected many small communities around Tampa Bay, bringing more people to the Pinellas Peninsula. Road travel was often problematic in those days. Before the railroads, boats transported most goods along the Florida coast from Cedar Key, Tampa and Key West.

During the late 1900s, the railroads that criss-crossed Florida began to shut down as interstates improved road travel, and trains became less popular. However, Heritage Village wanted to preserve some of that important history, so in 1983, the museum acquired the Sulphur Springs depot and a caboose. The depot and caboose were refurbished with help from members of the National Railway Historical Society (NRHS).

Clem Heilen, current treasurer of the NRHS Tampa Bay chapter, remembers when the depot and caboose came to Heritage Village in 1983.

"This caboose was originally orange, but some people insisted all cabooses were red, so it was painted red," he said, "It was being put out of service by the Seaboard Coast Line, and it came down on a flat car from Waycross, GA. It's an important part of history and should be preserved."

Though the depot has Hillsborough County origins, it played a critical role in Pinellas County transportation as the important Tampa and Gulf Coast Railroad junction, as well as a telegraph relay point between Pinellas and Hillsborough Counties, serving residents of Sulphur Springs, a northern suburb of Tampa. The extension opened in 1910, and the depot was built in 1924.

In 1967, Seaboard bought the line, and it eventually merged with the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad and when Amtrak took over in 1980, it discontinued rail traffic to Pinellas. The old Sulphur Springs depot stood idle until it came to Heritage Village

John Eason, a member of the Tampa Bay Chapter of the NRHS, played an important role in getting the depot and the caboose settled in at Heritage Village. He stepped forward again in 2008 when the caboose



**John Eason giving tours at the Sulphur Springs Depot at Heritage Village in 1983 ... and with the newly painted caboose in 2009.**

needed attention after 25 years. Thanks to Eason and his extensive knowledge of railroad history, the caboose no longer leaks, and it is now painted its original orange color. In addition to his valuable work with the caboose, since October he spends two days a week at the Village helping out with maintenance chores.

Today the rails are not the major source of transportation they once were, but thanks to these volunteers, their history lives on at Heritage Village. According to Heilen, the station and the caboose are one of the best railroad exhibits in West Central Florida. "Not many people paid attention as railroads started closing in the late 1900s, and much memorabilia was lost."