

Historic railway captures holiday spirit

By Anne Knowles, Northern Nevada Business Weekly

Candy canes have proven to be a sweet dessert for the V&T.

With its main tourism season over, the Virginia & Truckee Railroad Co. moves into holiday events such as its Christmas-themed ride starting this week as well group trips for businesses, nonprofits and families.

“Our main business to keep the doors open is our summertime excursion trains,” says Tom Gray, who with his 91-year-old father Robert, owns the historic steam engine line.

But a secondary revenue stream, especially during the colder months, is provided by specialty routes such as the Candy Cane Express, where elves serve hot chocolate and deliver letters to Santa. Another popular trip is the Polar Express, based on the children’s movie, in which parents and kids board one of three evening trains in their pajamas for an hour-long ride from Carson City to the North Pole. “This is our second season and it’s sold out,” says Gray. Group rentals for fundraisers, wine tasting, tourism promotion, weddings and other corporate or personal events make up a third stream of revenue. The rail line is often used by the Nevada Commission on Tourism, which has found Virginia City’s old west authenticity to be a major draw to visitors.

“We had Chinese travel writers who wanted to see the West, specifically Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon,” says Gray, who served a Chinese meal on the train and stopped for photos with gunfighters and wild horses. “This was six years ago and it was then hard to tell what the Chinese knew about the United States, but they loved the gunfighters, the west. They did exit surveys of the Chinese visitors and Virginia City ranked

as high as the Grand Canyon.”

The V&T, for example, has hosted events for AAA to help its managers better recommend the area to customers, NV Energy is showing appreciation to employees who volunteered with the United Way and as a prize auctioned off for PBS fund raiser, says Gray. A few of the railroad’s seven passenger cars have been used as backdrops for calendars produced by motorcycle makers Harley Davidson and Yamaha as well for movies including “Water for Elephants.”

The Candy Cane Express runs Nov. 23 and 24, Dec. 1-2 and 8-9, at the F Street Station in Virginia City at noon and 2pm.