

Restored historic Boyertown crane to play role in Colebrookdale Railroad revitalization

Monday March 10, 2014 12:01 AM

By Laura Newberry

In the mid-1800s, the steel crane in Boyertown's downtown train yard gave the borough some of its first opportunities to interact with the rest of the world through the export of iron goods.

The 20-foot-tall mechanism grabbed products off wagons and plopped them onto train cars, its capabilities a boon for the local iron industry.

But as technology improved and the Colebrookdale Railroad fell into disrepair, there was little use for the crane. It sat rusting in the equally forgotten train yard at Third and Washington streets from the 1980s forward.

Visit the crane nowadays, though, and you'd never guess what's it's been through.

Its recent restoration by the Colebrookdale Railroad Preservation Trust and the Boyertown Lions Club has given the crane a shiny coat of paint and a new purpose: to help revitalize the railroad itself.

"As we peeled back the layers of rust it just sort of came to life," said Nathaniel Guest, president of the Colebrookdale Preservation Trust, the organization working to create a passenger rails that runs on the 9-mile stretch of track between Boyertown and Pottstown.

The rail is expected to be up and running this fall, Guest said.

In the meantime, the trust is working to turn the part of the rail yard where the crane is located into a park, which will eventually neighbor the rail's train station.

"The crane occupies a really visible location there," Guest said. "We want to capitalize on that."

The train yard is catty-corner from Boyertown Borough Hall and visible from downtown businesses on Philadelphia Avenue.

Building A Better Boyertown received a \$30,000 state grant in 2009 to restore the crane and train yard, said Adrienne Blank, the nonprofit organization's main street manager.

But the funds expired because of a stalled agreement between the nonprofit and the borough council over what to do with the land.

Blank said it took a vision like the trust's to finally bring the project to fruition.

Roger Lehmann, longtime Boyertown Lions Club member, was one of several community volunteers who helped with the restoration. He spent many hours this winter sanding and painting the crane.

The historical significance of the hulking machine isn't lost on him.

"It's part of the proud heritage of Boyertown," he said.

The crane's genesis dates back to the 1860s, the same decade the railroad began operations.

The crane remained in near-perfect operating condition, Guest said, despite its age and neglect. Most renovations, which were paid for through private donations, were superficial.

Guest attributes the crane's good mechanical shape to the quality craftsmanship put into it by the company that built it, Phoenix Iron Co. in Phoenixville.

The crane is anchored by the company's patented I-Beam that was developed during the Civil War, Guest said. The steel columns were most notably used in the Eiffel Tower and the Washington Monument.

Blank said she sees the crane and train yard becoming a town centerpiece.

"It will have the greenery, the trees, the parking needed for the businesses along Philadelphia Avenue that are struggling with that," she said. "I envision that crane as a drawing point."

Contact Laura Newberry: 610-371-5081 or lnewberry@readingeagle.com.