The Origin of the CABOOSE

The caboose was the last car placed at the end of all freight trains regardless of their usage. A uniquely American tradition, the use of cabooses began in the 1830s, when railroads housed trainmen in shanties built onto boxcars or flatcars.

In the 1880s, the spread of the automatic air brake system invented by George Westinghouse eliminated the need for brakemen to manually set brakes. Even in the United States, technological changes began eliminating the need for cabooses before the turn of the century.

The origins of both the car and the word are surrounded as much by legend as by fact. One popular version dates the word back to a derivation of the Dutch word "kabuis," which referred to a ship's galley.

Other names given the caboose were cabin, hack, van, or brake-van. Cabooses had many derogatory nicknames as well, including crummy, doghouse, bone-breaker, snake wagon and hearse.

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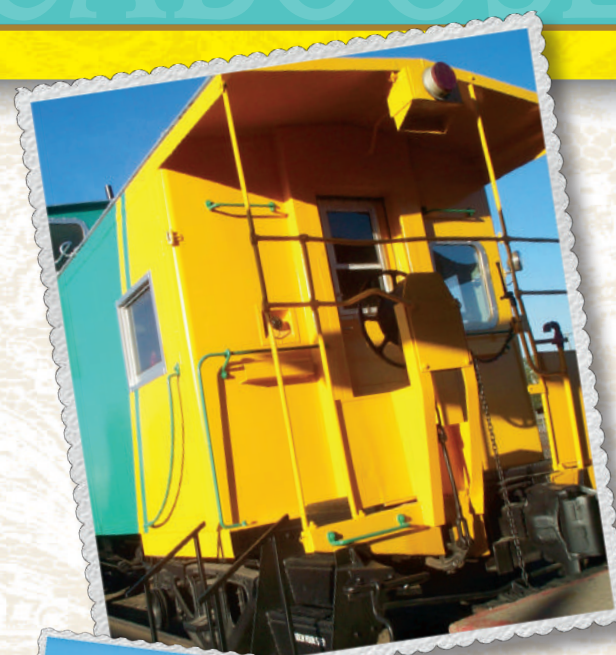Box 524 · Ritzville, Washington 99169

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Caboose Styles

Cabooses came in different designs. This Northern Pacific Railway caboose is called a wide-vision cupola. Two other popular styles were the regular-width cupola and the bay window. Some cars were combination caboose-passenger cars used on mixed freight/passenger trains which operated primarily on branch lines.

While most were painted the familiar red, some were painted gray, blue, yellow or green depending upon the preference of the railroad.

In the beginning, the caboose was heated with wood burning stoves which were later replaced by coal and eventually oil or diesel fuel. For lighting inside and signaling outside, kerosene lanterns were used until replaced with generator-charged batteries for electricity.

The caboose was equipped with almost everything necessary for protection, safety, and emergency train repairs. Such items included air hoses, coupler knuckles, belts, track spikes, tie plates, spare brake shoes, and many assorted tools and lubricating oils and greases. Safety devices included flags of different colors, fuses, torpedoes, and lanterns.

Uses for the Caboose

The caboose served several functions, one of which was as an office for the conductor. The conductor was responsible for the overall operation and safety of the train. A printed "waybill" followed every freight car from its origin to destination. The conductor kept the paperwork in the caboose. The caboose also carried one or two brakemen and a flagman.

In the days before automatic air brakes the engineer signaled the caboose with his whistle when he wanted to slow down or stop. The brakeman, who rode in the caboose, would then climb out and make his way forward, twisting the brakewheels atop the cars. Another brakeman riding in the engine would work his way toward the rear. Once the train was stopped, the flagman would descend from the caboose and walk back to a safe distance with lanterns, flags and other warning devices to stop any approaching trains. While underway, the trainmen would sit up in the cupola and watch for smoke from overheated wheel journals (called hotboxes) or other signs of trouble.

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Conductor's Home Away From Home

It was common for railroads to assign a caboose to a conductor for his exclusive use. Conductors took great pride in their cars. The men decorated their car interiors with many homey touches, including curtains and family photos. Some of the most important additions were ingredients for cooking meals that became a part of American folklore. Augmented with such comforting features, the caboose served as a home away from the trainmen's home terminals.

Ritzville's Caboose

Ritzville's caboose was given to the City of Ritzville by the Burlington Northern Sante Fe Railroad. It was spotted on its present section of track in August 2004. Hundreds of man-hours have gone into the restoration of this caboose. It is open for viewing from Memorial Day through Labor Day, Tuesday through Saturday, 11:00 am to 3:00 pm.