

## Farewell, Dear Friend

We always called him Mr. Turner. At first, out of respect for the position he held. Later, out of respect for the man who had become our friend.

We first met Mel Turner, General Manager of the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern Railway, via the telephone the summer of 1994 when I called to ask for keychains to hand out at our first Railroad Fair fundraiser. He agreed to the keychains, then asked, "Exactly what are you trying to do out there in Indiana?" And so I told him of the Griffith Historical Society's efforts to create a Historical Park to honor our town's heritage as an interchange point for five railroads. And of our dream to have a real caboose to display. "You wouldn't have one of those lying around that you don't need?" I asked.

After a pause, he said, "Send me a letter." And just before Christmas, he did Santa one better and gave us the caboose. That was just the beginning. When we couldn't afford the insurance that was required so a local volunteer could move our new caboose off the J tracks, Mr. Turner had the railroad move the caboose for us.

He went on to donate and move to our Park an old boxcar that we knew would be perfect for displays and that turned out to be a Pullman troopsleeper that carried soldiers during WWII. Later, a small transfer caboose was going to be destroyed, but we had a special use for it. So, the J moved it to our Park, where it was renovated by a Boy Scout as his Eagle Scout project.

When the 75-year-old Griffith Interlocking Tower was facing demolition, we asked Mr. Turner for the equipment in it. He gave us the whole building! And then persuaded the CN & UP to donate, along with the J, \$10,000 each to help pay to move the building to our Park. The Tower is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

Throughout the year, Cub Scout dens, Head-Start kids, and other community groups tour the railcars and tower. Each September, the cars and Tower are open during our annual Railroad Fair. Each Christmas, hundreds of children visit with Santa in that small transfer caboose that was going to be destroyed and now provides families with a unique and low-cost holiday experience.

It was Mr. Turner who made it all happen. And we will never forget him.

*Karen Kulinski*