

THE LITTLE RED CABOOSE

by Catherine Fredman



Chances are you know a work-at-home parent who was evicted from their office in the spare bedroom to make room for the kids. Some simply relocate their desks. Ten years ago, Dennis Hart moved to a caboose.

It's not surprising that the classified ad saying, "Caboose for sale" caught his eye. His grandfather was a railwayman, and family vacations while Hart was growing up often included a train trip. When Hart isn't running Semaphor Video, a video production company in Ada, Mich., he is reading up on railroad history.



Catherine Fredman writes about personal finance, management strategy and adventure travel. She's especially proud of co-authoring best-selling business books with Intel Chairman Andy Grove and Dell Computer CEO Michael Dell, as well as surviving survival school in southwest Utah, where the native New Yorker learned to catch fish with her bare hands and build a fire without matches.

THE LITTLE RED CABOOSE, continued

Hart's caboose was built in 1929 for the Santa Fe Railroad. On long runs out west, it served as a traveling office, bunkhouse and cookhouse for the crew.

they resemble an old-fashioned wooden caboose but with less maintenance. And he scraped, sanded and painted the outside walls a cheerful red.



The cost of moving the caboose was included in the purchase price. Hart already had a site picked out: a knoll about 100 feet from his house, overlooking three acres of woods. Then he had to turn the caboose into a workable space. He installed plumbing and electricity, including a little restroom at one end of the 10-by-30-foot space. He sheathed the inside walls with tongue-and-groove paneling, so

The result is a comfortable space, equipped with three computers and a high-speed Internet connection, printers, bookshelves, an ergonomic chair and a conference table. Hart's desk has a place of pride under the cupola. In the winter, a gas fireplace sits where the old stove used to be, adding a cozy touch. In warm weather, air conditioning keeps the caboose cool.

Business has been good since Hart bought the caboose, so he has moved his editing equipment into a rented office in town. But he still uses the caboose every day for client contact and creative thinking time. "You can turn everything off," he says. "There are fewer distractions."

One regular interruption comes every afternoon when his daughters, now 15 and 13, get home from school. "They stop by the caboose to talk about their day, then it's back to solitude," Hart says. So conducive is the caboose to creative work that his daughters often come up to do their homework in it - "because they like to get away, too."

Caboosees may have become less obvious on the railroads, but in the Hart Household, this one keeps chugging along.