

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--RAILROAD MUSEUMS--MALLORY

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LOCOMOTION

**Romancing the rails
at Texas train museums**

OR

Two Longs and a Short
Highballin' it through Texas train museums!

OR

Two Longs and a Short
Museums toot the whistle of railroading's colorful past.

LEAD-IN (optional)

A century ago, the Web changed everything. It quickened communications, carried commerce at unheard-of speeds, created opportunity for all...and fortunes for some. Unlike today's World Wide Web, however, this Web knitted the nation together not with digital lines, but with rails of steel.

BEHIND the yellow line where the train stops, I peruse the historic Santa Fe Depot. Its red Spanish tile roof, whitewashed stucco walls, and brown brick trim lend a Southwestern flair. The spaces between the structure's seven Roman arches cradle the letters "T-E-M-P-L-E."

Through the arches I see the waiting room, a warm and welcoming place. Rich-grained oak pillars, green terracotta tile wainscotting, and gray marble floors offer elegant respite for passengers awaiting Amtrak's Texas Eagle train.

Alongside the tracks, I stroll past vintage locomotives and rail cars (railroaders call them "rolling stock") and stop at steam engine #3423. The 48-foot-long, 16-foot-high, 319,000-pound-

heavy mass of metal dwarfs me. I wonder what folks in the horse-and-buggy days must've thought about such behemoths--the largest, loudest, most powerful machines around.

Later, upstairs in the depot's 10,000-square-foot Railroad and Heritage Museum, director Mary Irving provides some perspective.

"Trains were an awesome but welcomed sight. They were the engines of prosperity," she says. "Settlers shipped entire households on trains, not just a few pots and pans like in the covered wagon days. The train brought civilization to the Texas frontier.

"Trains also brought information. People came here to learn who was elected president. They watched who came and went, and who got or sent what packages. It's where the action was."

Fresh from the spit and polish of last year's \$3.8 million facelift, Temple's depot and museum ranks largest among several recent railway restoration projects funded by federal grants (through the Texas Department of Transportation) and matching local money.

In Wichita Falls, the Wichita Falls Railroad Museum shows off 13 engines and cars beside the 1909 Wichita Falls & Southern Railroad depot, restored in 1997 as offices. In Marshall, the refurbished 1912 Texas & Pacific Depot--complete with museum, gift shop, and Amtrak office--reopened last November. In Teague, the renovated 1906 Trinity & Brazos Valley Railway Depot, home of the Burlington-Rock Island Railroad Museum, should reopen within months.

The four museums are among a dozen or so statewide which proudly toot the whistle of railroading's colorful past. (See page XX for a complete list.)

Through historic photos and period memorabilia, their exhibits chronicle how railroads steamrolled across Texas beginning in the 1870s. They show how towns prospered with rail service...and often withered without it. They detail individual railroads, large and small, whose names reflected their destinations--such as the Texas & Pacific, the Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (Katy), and the Fort Worth & Denver City.

The museums also showcase rolling stock--from steam and diesel-electric engines to Pullman sleepers and diners, boxcars, tank cars, and cabooses. Some pieces ran on legendary Texas streamlined trains--like the Zephyr, the Sunbeam, and the Rocket. These "hotels on wheels" stirred patrons' imaginations during railroading's heyday of the 1930s and 1940s.

And almost all of the museums sit on or near working rail lines. So while learning about America's train story, if you're there when the train comes through, you can also feel the rails rumble and hear the horns blow.

Galveston Railroad Museum

Coupling the past with the present is the stock and trade of the Galveston Railroad Museum and Center for Transportation, the Southwest's largest train museum. And well it should: Texas railroading began on Galveston Island.

In 1853, the state's first steam locomotive, the "General Sherman," arrived by ship at the Port of Galveston. The Civil War stymied rail development. But, in time, eight lines served the port--hauling agricultural products from the interior to the coast for export and, in return, shipping machinery and finished goods back inland. (Near the museum, at the port's unloading facility, you can still watch grain being transferred from rail cars to ships.)

Train buffs--such as Louisianians G.A. Breaux Jr. and Dave Abramson--obsess over the museum's 40 pieces of rolling stock as if youngsters opening their first Lionel set.

"I'm taking notes so I can build my own HO-gauge scale models," says G.A., scrutinizing a 1904 self-propelled, steam-powered crane car that once hefted 60-ton loads (including derailed cars). "He's into freight. I'm into passenger cars," adds Dave, eyeballing the "Glen Fee," a sleeping car built in 1926 by George Pullman, the pioneer of good eating and comfortable sleeping on the rails.

Average enthusiasts, like me and first-time visitor Donna McCollum of Houston, simply like to see how people used to travel.

“We’re curious about old trains,” says Donna, as she and her husband, Mike, browse through the 744 “pigeon hole” mail slots (complete with posted, addressed envelopes) of the Illinois Central Railway Post Office car #100. “Trains are glamorized so much in the movies.” Indeed, RPO #100 looks as if it just rolled off a movie set because it housed scenes from the 1998 film, *The Newton Boys*.

Foreign visitors from rail-savvy countries feel especially at home at the museum, which opened in the 1980s in the refurbished 1913 Union Station. In the Nickel Plate diner (dining car #125 of the New York, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad), Englishman Keith Pope pokes about the kitchen.

“I’ve ridden cars like this in Britain and around the world,” he remarks. But not, doubtlessly, at the prices on a 1930s menu posted in the car: “Lobster Cocktail” (35 cents) and “Chilled Radishes” (10 cents), plus entrees of “Roast Young Capon with American Stuffing” (60 cents) and “Broiled Lake Trout” (50 cents).

Age of Steam Railroad Museum

Up in Dallas, first-class rail recipes grace the menu of a twice-yearly event called “Dinner in the Diner” at Fair Park’s Age of Steam Railroad Museum. The soiree serves up cocktails in a 1914 Santa Fe parlor car, followed by period cuisine in an elegant 1937 Katy Railroad dining car.

“People love our special events. They love to experience the nostalgia of trains first-hand,” says executive director Bob LaPrelle. The museum’s annual Festival of Trains features guided tours of cars not normally open, as well as locomotives in action.

For the Train Whistle Fair, Houstonian Ron Berberniss plays his steam-powered collection of 200 whistles and a calliope. On a regular basis (weekends in summer and for tour groups) the museum’s own whistle meister Paul Kurilecz fires the boiler and demonstrates a dozen steam whistles for enthralled visitors, many with fingers in their ears.

“They’re really loud, because they had to be.” says Paul. “In the days before walkie-talkies, the engineer up front needed a whistle loud enough for the brakeman to hear signals in

the rear of a train which could stretch a mile long. Each railroad had a unique whistle sound, so crews could recognize their own trains,”

Common whistle signals, Paul demonstrates, include two long blasts (release brakes and proceed), three shorts (ready for a “whistle stop” at the next station), and two longs, one short, and one long, the warning signal still blown at rail crossings.

Opened in 1963, the Age of Steam houses exhibits and a gift shop in Dallas’ 1903 Houston & Texas Central Railroad depot. But what draws rail fans are the 27 pieces of rolling stock, a major collection of “heavy metal.”

The heaviest (1.2 million pounds) is “Big Boy,” Union Pacific’s 1942 steam locomotive #4018. It chugged a million-plus miles before retirement at age 20. The museum’s newest locomotive giant, acquired two years ago, is the 1967 Santa Fe engine #97, a 3600-horsepower diesel-electric which highballed first-class passengers at 90 an hour on the Super Chief from Chicago to Los Angeles.

“Star” among the museum’s sleepers is the 1926 “Goliad,” an early air-conditioned car used in several movies, including Marilyn Monroe’s “Some Like it Hot.” Another noteworthy sleeper, the 1910 “Glengyle,” remains the nation’s oldest Pullman all-steel, all-compartment sleeper. It gained sad notoriety as part of the 1945 funeral train of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Perhaps the saddest duty of all fell to the museum’s Pennsylvania Railroad locomotive #4903 which pulled the funeral train of Senator Robert Kennedy from New York to Washington on June 8, 1968.

Railroad & Heritage Museum

Back at Temple’s Railroad & Heritage Museum, a second-floor observation alcove affords me a grand view of Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad’s rail yard, where workers switch freight cars. The BNSF’s predecessor--the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe--built the depot in 1911 as its Southern Division headquarters. The alcove’s radio scanner even lets me overhear the jargonned banter of dispatchers and train engineers.

Across from the alcove, in the communications room, I try my hand at old-fashioned railroad communications--telegraphy...aided by digital technology!

First, I type my "telegram" into a computer which transcribes it into the dots and dashes of Morse code, the language of the telegraph. On one end of a long table, I then use an authentic telegrapher's "key" to tap out the short "dots" and long "dashes" of my message. The key connects to an equally-authentic electromagnetic "sounder" at the other end of the table, which sounds out my tick-tick-ticking.

The museum's exhibit on commerce features the 1894 Wells Fargo desk where local agents processed shipments of everything from gold to circus elephants. It also notes a volatile shipment of shotgun shells that unexpectedly exploded in the heat of the Central Texas summer.

Nearby, shipping crates from the early 1900s display myriad practical items ordered from an early Sears & Roebuck catalog and shipped by rail to local families. Austrian-made china and an 1891 pump organ--also shipped by rail--remind me that the train brought the finer things of life as well.

The museum's train equipment room examines the industry's nuts and bolts. It describes various styles of steam locomotives--from the "Mikado" (steady on sharp curves) to the "Texas" (powerful with heavy loads). Another display explains why diesel-electric locomotives replaced steamers after World War II (they were cheaper to operate, since they required less maintenance and smaller crews).

One unique exhibit presents some of the 168 hidden cases of engineer's tracings discovered behind a false wall during the depot's restoration. These blueprint-like plans, handwritten in India ink on wax-covered linen, describe work done on Santa Fe buildings and tracks all over Texas.

An exhibit entitled "Segregation on the Texas Railroads" recounts the role of rail hand minorities. Mexican-Americans typically worked in construction, maintenance, and gardening,

while African-Americans served as flagmen, janitors, and, by the end of the 19th century, as cooks and porters for the newly-adopted diners and sleeping cars.

Historic photos all across the museum depict common scenes of a bygone era-- railroaders laying lines, engines under full steam, and passengers awaiting trains. Throughout the exhibit rooms, you hear the recorded "chug-chugs" and "whoo-whoos" of a locomotive.

Above the recorded sounds, I hear a real-life "whoo-whoos" growing louder down by the tracks. I rush outside to see Amtrak's Texas Eagle arrive on its way from San Antonio to Chicago.

The silver, streamlined beauty rumbles into the station, vibrating the ground. I instinctively step farther behind the yellow line as the hunk of metal screeches to a halt. What a thrill, even in this super-sonic age!

Passengers get off and get on with their coats and carry-ons in hand, just as they've done here for nearly a century. Then the train pulls slowly out of the station.

I ponder the power of the railroad. I think of older generations who grew up riding and working on trains. I think of younger generations who enjoy countless movies, books, and songs about trains.

Then I hear the long, low moan of the train's horn fading into the distance. It washes over me, as it always does, with that "far-away" feeling of wanderlust.

No wonder people still like trains, I think, as I head upstairs to peruse more museum displays. And, I decide, with so many railroad museums keeping the locomotion legacy alive, they probably always will.