

## Museum review

### **The North Carolina Transportation Museum – Spencer Shops**

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Most of the hundreds of railroad museums in the United States include collections of equipment in varying stages of disrepair, poorly funded and presided over by a small but determined cadre of volunteers. Only a few, perhaps no more than a dozen, possess the resources necessary to adequately interpret the history of transport technology for an audience that includes the general public as well as enthusiastic rail fans.

Of these, the North Carolina Transportation Museum provides the best interpretation of transport history in the southeastern United States. The museum's mission includes all of the forms of transport that affected North Carolina, ranging from dugout canoes to horse-drawn carriages to such forms of recreational transport as kayaks and NASCAR. This breadth is laudable, as it increases the willingness of the state legislature to appropriate funds and exposes visitors to the pervasive importance of transport in their everyday lives. In practice, however, this is overwhelmingly a railroad museum. Perhaps ninety per cent of the indoor displays and all of the outdoor displays are railroad-related. In addition, the exhibits are housed in the largely intact remnants of the Spencer Shops complex of the Southern Railway. It is this space, both backdrop and artefact, that elevates the facility into the front rank of transport museums.

The Southern Railway established a massive repair facility, named for its president, Samuel Spencer, near the rail junction of Salisbury, North Carolina. The complex included a roundhouse built in 1924, and a massive Back Shop, constructed in 1905, along with dozens of other ancillary structures. Changing

traffic patterns and the demise of the steam locomotive led the Southern to end locomotive overhauls in 1960 and close the facility in 1979, ending decades of close association between the shops, the railroad, and the community. The North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources acquired a small portion of the facility in 1977, followed by the bulk of the property, 57 acres in all, two years later.

The community of Spencer (current population 2,800) enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the shops, yet residents were initially reluctant to have a transport museum in their midst (they would have preferred the larger number of jobs associated with light industry). Indeed, the museum has generated very little direct employment in the community, since the State of North Carolina employs only 17 full-time and 5 part-time staff members, while the separate Museum Foundation has 4 full-time and the same number of part-time staff. Likewise, there seems to be a relatively small multiplier effect in Spencer itself, and little indication that the museum's 120,000-130,000 annual visitors linger in the community. Through its Spencer Partnership, the museum has been active in soliciting support from the local newspaper and the Food Lion grocery store chain (headquartered in nearby Salisbury). The Norfolk Southern, the successor to the Southern Railway, provides relatively little financial support. More than 23,000 school children participate in the museum's educational programmes each year, and many teachers integrate their lesson plans and curricula with the exhibitions and programmes. And, predictably, the museum sponsors an annual 'Day out with Thomas [the tank engine]' that draws more visitors than any other event.

Visitors entering the museum drive past a set of entrance gates fabricated from railroad crossing barriers, a telling indicator of the principal focus of this

transport museum. The parking lot gives way to an 1898 small-town depot, relocated from nearby Barber Junction, North Carolina. From the depot, train rides provide an excellent way to view the property and give the volunteer narrators their best chance to interpret the museum to a captive audience (Plate 1).

A few hundred yards from the parking lot and depot, the visitor encounters the first building of the original shop complex, the 1911 Master Mechanic's Office. There is little indication of its original function, as the building is largely given over to museum offices, the ubiquitous gift shop, and the first of the three main exhibition areas at the museum. As its name suggests, 'Wagons, Wheels, and Wings' includes a medley of artefacts lacking any clear organizational coherence. An 1895 trap carriage and a Conestoga wagon on a short stretch of plank road bracket a homemade airplane. Across the aisle sits a dugout canoe that abuts a display ('Piedmont Sets the Pace') whose origin can undoubtedly be traced to an orgy of housecleaning by the Piedmont Airlines publicity department. A helicopter engine and a 1922 fire truck round out the exhibition, giving visitors a glimpse of some beautifully maintained artefacts without providing a thematic or chronological overview of the evolution of transport in North Carolina.

The more effectively organized 'Bumper to Bumper' exhibition, located in the adjacent 1924 Flue Shop, opened in 1990, seven years after 'Wagons, Wheels, and Wings'. A 'road' leads visitors along the evolutionary path of automobiles through the late 1960s. Beautifully restored cars are parked in appropriate diorama-like settings, ranging from a farmyard to a motel parking lot to a suburban driveway. Interpretive panels explain the three different technologies (internal combustion, electric, and steam) that powered early automobiles, yet there are no exhibits to explain how each of these technologies work, nor any coverage of the path dependency that allowed one technology to surpass the others. While the exhibition does place some emphasis of the effects of automobiles on roadside architecture

and on cities, such major topics as suburban sprawl are excluded. A 1961 Corvair pickup is on display, yet without any indication that it was a variant of this car that provoked Ralph Nader to write *Unsafe at Any Speed* and helped launch a highway-safety movement. What is most troubling, however, is that the exhibition makes no mention of African-American motorists in the South. By the 1920s, the car offered middle-class African Americans mobility and a chance to escape segregated rail travel, and persuaded some black entrepreneurs to develop guidebooks and travel organizations that allowed black motorists to navigate southern roads with a reasonable degree of safety. In short, 'Bumper to Bumper' is a superb collection of artefacts, weakly interpreted.

The crown jewel of the present facility is the 37-stall Roundhouse, which opened to the public in 1996. The Roundhouse is divided into four major sections, with an ancillary exhibition area, allowing visitors to encounter this massive (100,000 square foot) space in manageable chunks, without feeling overwhelmed by the sheer size of the building. Upon entering the Roundhouse, the visitor confronts an immaculately restored steam locomotive, tended to by several life-sized mannequins. In front of this locomotive is a ten-foot-long lighted panel illustrating the principles of steam propulsion. The floor of the Roundhouse is concrete, moulded and coloured to represent the original creosote-soaked wood blocks that were removed for obvious safety reasons. Although lacking corresponding lighted panels, a diesel and an electric locomotive parked next to the steam engine illustrate competing power sources, mimicking the theme of the 'Bumper to Bumper' display. All of the railroad equipment is in pristine condition. Visitors observed, commented, took photographs, and happily climbed past the 'Please Keep Off' signs, yet rarely lingered to read the interpretive panels associated with each artefact. A 'Jim Crow' coach with separate compartments for black and white passengers was not enough to help visitors understand



**Plate 1** Barber Junction and restored train

**Plate 2** The Back Shop in the process of restoration



the pervasiveness of transport segregation in the South, nor was a U.S. Army hospital car sufficient to enlighten visitors regarding the pivotal role of railroads in World War II. This superficiality is partially a function of the organization of the Roundhouse exhibits. A dining car, a sleeping car, and maintenance-of-way equipment might illustrate the jobs of African-American railroaders, yet these are located in different sections of the building. A French 'Forty-and-Eight' boxcar (each U. S. state received one as a gift in 1949, and every American railway museum seems to have one) might logically be placed near the hospital car as part of a 'railways and war' exhibition. It is in a situation such as this that a good (volunteer) interpreter is indispensable. I eavesdropped on one presentation that ably incorporated many of the themes that were missing from interpretive panels. However, the quality of the interpretation depends on the interpreter, and the museum's director acknowledged that older volunteers are still somewhat reluctant to include racial issues in their presentations.

The first, sixteen-stall section of the Roundhouse gives way to the Elmer Lam Gallery, which depicts the history of railroads in North Carolina. While the exhibition is arranged chronologically, there is no clear path for visitors to follow, and many are apt to simply mill around or pass through quickly on their way to the next assemblage of equipment. The exhibition panels are generally well done, although they present a somewhat jaundiced (and perhaps quintessentially southern) perspective on railroads and the state, with references to the 'squabbling lawmakers' who impeded early railroad construction. The multiple timelines of early railroad companies are excellent, and would be even better if corresponding maps had accompanied them. The highlight of the gallery is a 1:160 scale model of the Spencer Shops complex, as it existed in its heyday, ca. 1950. Visitors can readily appreciate the massive, sprawling nature of the facility, would probably not understand how locomotives and cars moved through the service and repair process. Aside from a

single display showing, in cross-sections, the evolution of railroad rail, there is little emphasis on transport technology. Also in the room is an EMD Model 567 diesel locomotive engine that, if moved to the Roundhouse entrance, would provide an excellent match with the coloured light board displaying steam-locomotive power.

The next eight stalls house the Restoration Shop. This superb space allows visitors to see highly skilled workers rebuilding a steam locomotive, mimicking the original function of the Spencer Shops – or would be able to see this, had any highly skilled workers actually been at work. On the day that I visited, people bolted through the space as fast as their legs could carry them, while skipping both the fascinating collection of machine tools and parts and the on-demand videos showing earlier rebuilding efforts. When the Restoration Shop is operating, however, it offers a living-history demonstration that few other museums could match.

'Riding the Rails' occupies the final four stalls of the Roundhouse. Several hands-on exhibits depict an engine cab, a Railway Post Office car, and the principles of wheel-rail adhesion, curves, grades, and wheel shape. Two private railroad cars and a sleeping car give a distinctly affluent look at the golden age of rail travel.

The exhibition 'On the Job' is located in a space connected to one side of the Roundhouse. Perhaps the best-interpreted portion of the museum, the exhibition contains life-sized photo cutouts of former Spencer Shops employees operating various machine tools. Signage explains the function of each piece of equipment, while a series of pullout drawers contains smaller hand tools. As the subdued clatter of machinery emanates from hidden speakers, visitors can read job descriptions, learn about the deskilling effects of diesel locomotive technology on shop forces, and appreciate safety issues and work routines on the shop floor. As visitors stand in the 'white' locker room (the current exhibition space) they can look through a glass-block window into the much smaller

'colored' locker room while a motion detector triggers a series of reminiscences by African Americans who once worked at Spencer Shops. Although awkwardly located in a corner, a touch-screen video monitor allows visitors to select different topics and different narrators as they see and hear white and black shopworkers and their wives discussing everything from race relations to community life. Elsewhere in the exhibition room, panels depict community life and labour issues, although there is no mention of labour upheavals like the 1922 Shopmen's Strike. Unfortunately, even though this exhibition space was a rare oasis of air conditioning on a very hot day, few visitors strayed from the main area of the Roundhouse to see it. Like many transport museums, the imposing nature of the artefacts, and the limited attention span of many visitors, left more introspective exhibitions like 'On the Job' at a disadvantage.

Looming over the entire museum complex is the massive, windowless hulk of the Back Shop, destined to be the fourth, final, and most spectacular exhibition area (Plate 2). At the time of my visit (July 2002), the Back Shop was in the midst of Phase 1 building stabilization. The roof had been replaced and the brick walls cleaned. Within the next twelve-to-eighteen months, the museum will install windows and further repair the brickwork. Phase 2 (interior renovations) and Phase 3 (exhibition installation) will complete the \$35 million project sometime between 2005 and 2007. When finished, the 120,000-square-foot Back Shop will roughly double the museum's current exhibition space.

While based on the same mixture of transport technologies as 'Wagons, Wheels, and Wings', the Back Shop's size will allow more comprehensive and focused coverage, much like a series of small museums in one massive space. Many of the exhibits will be hands on, with emphasis on 'high touch' rather than high tech. The Back Shop will ultimately look less like the other museum buildings and more like a science museum because, according to the museum's director, 'that's where our competition is'. Interactive

exhibits will demonstrate various modes of transport and allow visitors to predict how transport technology will function in the future. Children in particular will learn how transport affects them and how goods and services reach them along transport routes. Adults and children alike will be able to participate in a wide variety of educational and outreach programmes.

Exhibition planners are well aware that their facility is as historically compelling as the exhibits themselves. Much of the Back Shop will remain free of partitions, retaining its original cavernous aspect. A second-floor galley along one side of the building will house exhibits relating to railroad technology and the operation of the Back Shop complex as a railroad facility. A 250-seat theatre will provide information on transport technology and on the history of the museum facilities.

If all goes as planned, visitors will traverse the main floor of the Back Shop on a winding 'road' whose surface will change from 'dirt' to brick to blacktop, depending on the era. While moving forward in time, the visitor will make the transition from a rural to an urban environment. The largest artefacts (steam and diesel locomotives, a streetcar, a semi-truck, a DC-3 aircraft, and a medivac helicopter) will be located along the main path. Smaller pathways will diverge from the main road, allowing access to related exhibitions. Buildings within the building will replicate transport-related structures and shelter smaller and more fragile artefacts.

Since the Museum intends to depict, according to its director, 'transportation in every part of your life', exhibits will include canoes, kayaks, sailboats, hot-air balloons, and, of course, the phenomenon of NASCAR, born in rural North Carolina and currently the fastest growing sport in the United States. Plans for the side exhibition areas include displays relating to southern issues, ranging from the use of prison chain gangs to build roads and railroads to the histories of such local and regional companies as the Southern Railway and Piedmont Airlines. The automobile exhibitions will include both the cars themselves and

information on automobile manufacture in North Carolina, modern road-building techniques, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the influence of the Good Roads Movement on transport. Expanded coverage of race issues is also planned, with displays about Rosa Parks and John Henry, among others, used in conjunction with the Jim Crow coach relocated from the Roundhouse. While plans have not been finalized, the former 'colored' changing room in one small corner of the Back Shop may be retained as part of an exhibition on race relations.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the Spencer Shops is that it offers the thoughtful visitor the chance to appreciate the evolution of the museum's design and exhibition philosophy. From the rather conventional and outdated potpourri of 'Wagons, Wheels, and Wings', to the more thematic approach of 'Bumper to Bumper' to the multi-dimensional synthesis of the Roundhouse, the Museum has reinvested itself, for the better, every few years. When the

Back Shop is complete, many of the imperfections of the current museum will have been rectified and this site, already in the top ranks of American transport museums, may well become a world-class facility.

#### **Note**

The author would like to thank Elizabeth Smith, the museum's director, and Larry K. Neal, Jr, the visitor-services manager, for providing information and a guided tour. The North Carolina Transportation Museum, written by Jim Wrinn, with Candice Boyd and Lynn Cox (Lawrenceburg, IN: 2001) offers a good general overview. Duane Galloway and Jim Wrinn, *Southern Railway's Spencer Shops, 1896-1996* (Marceline, MO: 1996) is more of an enthusiast's book than a scholarly monograph, yet it provides an excellent account of both incarnations of the Spencer facility.

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