

## Museum review

### **The Pennsylvania's Altoona shops**

*Railroaders Memorial Museum and Horseshoe Curve National Historic Landmark, 1300 Ninth Avenue, Altoona PA 16602. Phone +1 814 946 0834, fax +1 814 946 9457, e-mail rrcity@aol.com, website www.railroadcity.com*

The Railroaders Memorial Museum was founded as a tribute to the men and women of railroading, specifically of the Pennsylvania Railroad and the town of Altoona. If you come expecting a roundhouse full of gleaming rolling stock you may be disappointed, because few locomotives or cars are on display. Rather, the museum places railroading in the context of the community and focuses on the daily lives of the railroad's workers and families.

Altoona, located at the foot of the Allegheny mountains in western Pennsylvania, was the base of the main locomotive works and engine repair shops of the Pennsylvania Railroad. During the Golden Age of steam locomotives the 'Pennsy' – as the railroad was colloquially known – employed more than 17,000 workers in its Altoona shops. There was a saying that 'every time the shop whistle blew, all the houses leaned toward the railroad'. But after the diesellisation of American railroads the Altoona shops were heavily rationalised and the city faced economic difficulties. Upgraded from an earlier facility of many years' standing, the present Railroaders Memorial Museum is part of a project to reinvent the town as a heritage tourism site. The museum combines local history with a broader history of railroading while paying homage to the people of Altoona.

Housed in the Master Mechanic's Shop (one of few remaining original buildings), the museum has crafted immersive settings filled with audio soundscapes, video 'living histories', and cast figures known to the staff as 'livescapes'. The sets include, for example, a newspaper stand

with a young newsboy commenting on daily life, a neighbourhood bar where workers gathered after their shift, and a worker's home with a one-way telephone line direct from the railroad office. The mannequins were cast from museum employees, most of whom are descendants of the railroad workers they depict. Many of the labels and soundscapes are based on oral histories taken from workers and townspeople. The Railroaders Memorial Museum is leading the trend in placing artefacts in their historical settings and using authentic voices to relate local history. It is well worth the trip to see a transport museum confronting social history head-on.

Moving up from the reception and orientation areas on the ground floor, the first floor of the museum is divided into two main sections. Altoona at Home concentrates on the extended community life outside work while Altoona at Work gives a more traditional explanation of different types of railroad work. The second floor has a collection of several smaller themed sections, including the seemingly requisite model railroad. Although not impressive technically, this display is informative in conveying the scale of the Altoona facility. The Report to the Shareholders section contrasts the PRR's public image with the private reality in Altoona; when you reflect on the power of the Pennsy in the town, ponder why the president of the line is the only mannequin in the museum featured in colour. One of the most interesting and unusual sections of the museum is the Test Labs, which highlights experiments and equipment used to make PRR the 'Standard Railroad of the World'.

Although the Railroaders Memorial Museum has interesting and informative history exhibits, it cannot shed the celebratory nature inherent in memorials. A twenty-seven-minute introductory video shown in the ground-floor theatre, *Altoona at Work: an Era of Steam*, is a



The Railroaders Memorial Museum

glorification of Altoona's Golden Age and lacks detail, depth and critical analysis. At the same time, it very much appealed to the local audience. Several audience members recognised people in the video, which sparked reminiscences about life in Altoona.

In the Altoona at Work section the labels are filled with exclamatory adjectives. I toured the museum with a former railroad brakeman who found the romantic and commemorative tone of the exhibits unpalatable and unrealistic from his experience. Yet another visitor let out a loud scream of 'Awesome!' that echoed through the hall: the screamer was an eleven-year-old boy, already a diehard railway enthusiast, who had no complaints concerning the museum's labels. This highlights the underlying tension in appealing to multiple audiences – locals, buffs, and historians – who all have different expectations of the museum.

Striking a balance between critical history and civic pride is a difficult task for any museum that depends on support from local visitors and railroad enthusiasts. Museums that focus on local history or a specific industry often struggle with the dilemma of balancing resonance and wonder in their exhibitions. Stephen Greenblatt argues that an exhibit should combine the ability of an object to 'reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the

complex, dynamic cultural forces' (resonance) with the power to 'stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention' (wonder). Railroad museums suffer particular difficulties with this because the objects themselves often overpower broader themes.

The Railroaders Memorial Museum's immersive settings should serve as a model for shaping a story and establishing resonance with the visitors. Visitors clearly see how the railroad influenced every aspect of daily life, from the colour of the houses (PRR Tuscan Red) to the local baseball teams (the Altoona Apprentices). With these contextual settings, transport history is extended to include domestic and community narratives.

The museum has more difficulty providing the wonder. In railroad museums wonder usually flows from gloriously restored locomotives, especially steam engines. To its credit, the museum does have an impressive K-4, one of the larger steam locomotives built by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Unfortunately it is miles away, in the workshops at Scranton, awaiting restoration. Another possible source of wonder, the vast machine shops are mostly destroyed. The museum tries to compensate by using models and replicas, but for a large-scale engineering marvel you need to travel a mile and a half to the museum's companion site,

Horseshoe Curve National Historic Landmark.

Horseshoe Curve is the reason for the town of Altoona and thus, indirectly, why a railroading museum is located there. In the mid-nineteenth century the Pennsylvania began surveying for a direct east-west line across the state. The Allegheny mountains created a natural barrier between two ridges that would have required a climb steeper than 1 in 25 (4 per cent) to surmount in a direct line. Civil engineer J. Edgar Thompson proposed a detour that took the track in a 220° arc at a grade of no more than 1 in 58 (1.72 per cent). During this massive engineering project, 450 Irish immigrants changed the landscape of the mountains using picks, shovels and black powder. Horseshoe Curve opened on 15 February 1854 and quickly became the primary route through the mountains for the entire mid-Atlantic region. It still accommodates over 100 trains a day.

Admission to the Railroaders Memorial Museum includes access to Horseshoe Curve, which has a small museum and a funicular from there to the tracks of the curve. On summer days many local rail buffs pack a picnic lunch and watch the trains pass. Seeing passenger and freight trains rumble by only a few yards away was the highlight of the visit for the aforementioned eleven-year-old.

As a research facility the Railroaders Memorial Museum is the repository of the Samuel Rea (president of the PRR 1913–25) collection of blueprints, which include diagrams of real estate, track charts, rolling stock and engine parts. There is also a selection of the Pennsy's business records and timetables, both employee and public schedules, and vol-

umes of reports from the railroad's research and testing labs. A strong oral history collection brings together the history of the town as well as of the workplace. Although in the past some colleagues have complained that academic research at the museum's library and archive was difficult, and staff inaccessible, new director Scott Cessna wants to create an open environment to encourage research. A collection that Cessna is particularly eager to have a qualified researcher examine is the museum's holding of photographic equipment. He is also in the early stages of establishing an internship programme with nearby Juniata College.

Visitorship continues to increase, but it suffers from the persistent rumour that the museum is about to close. The museum is not along a well travelled highway, nor is Altoona one of the nation's hottest tourist spots. But the future is looking up for the Railroaders Memorial Museum. It has recently received two grants totalling \$3.2 million. The funds will be used to finish the restoration of the K-4 and to expand the rail yard to include a 100 ft turntable, storage bays and additional rail cars. Director Cessna is enthusiastic and plans to continue setting these wonder-filled objects in a context that provides resonance. Cast figures of workers will be loading blocks of ice in the tops of cars, firemen will be shovelling coal, and conductors will be directing passengers. Even though the railroad was the centre of Altoona, the Railroaders Memorial Museum is a reminder that people were the centre of the railroad.

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