

Museum review

America on the move

'America on the Move: Transportation and the American Story', National Museum of American History, National Mall, 14th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W., Washington DC. Phone + 1 202 633 3129.

Web site: americanhistory.si.edu.

Janet F. Davidson and Michael S. Sweeney, On the Move: Transportation and the American Story, Smithsonian Institution/National Geographic, Washington DC (2003), 320 pp., US\$35.00.

'America on the Move', <http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/index.html> (visited 22 November 2003, 6 December 2004).

America on the Move, produced by Andrew Ames, History Channel television programme (broadcast 29 November 2003), DVD/VHS video (2003), ninety minutes, US\$24.95.

This long-awaited exhibition and accompanying media from the National Museum of American History (NMAH) have chosen an emphasis on travel and social impact, and demonstrate excellent organising concepts as historians of transport become more concerned with the mobility experience and move away from narrow studies of technology and industry. The museum was heavily criticised by Ralph Nader, among others, for relying on its major sponsor, General Motors, and the entrance to the exhibition hall certainly proclaims GM's sponsorship in large letters. The exhibition does take a generally 'whiggish' approach to the evolution of mobility – things keep getting better and better – but I don't think it fair to blame this on GM; that is the way most historians view change. It is striking, by the way, that part of the exhibition has a photo of Nader and a discussion of his book *Unsafe at any Speed*, yet there is no mention of GM's 1930s president, Alfred Sloan, or the car designer Harley Earl.

There are some quibbles, however. Perhaps the exhibition tries to cover too much, and water and air mobility suffer, by contrast to automobile and railroad mobility. Also, the displays are excessively sanitised. The plastic manure under the plastic urban horse is all right, I suppose, but photographs on the Web site make it clear that graffiti have been removed from the Chicago subway car. Yet the graffiti make an important historical point which should not have been ignored. It is also hard to believe that the giant green Southern Railway locomotive ever shone like this when it was operational. The Hansom is an unusual choice as an example of a carriage, since they were used mostly as cabs, and then only in two or three large north-eastern cities.

The book based on the exhibition is a lavishly illustrated, well written coffee-table affair by Janet Davidson, who is a curator at the NMAH, and Michael Sweeney, a journalism professor at Utah State University. It is a valuable addition to the exhibition, giving further depth to many of its themes and reflecting some of the strengths and limits of its parent. It is quite sensitive to matters of race, ethnicity and gender, and covers railroad workers and longshoremen quite well. It is remarkable to see the National Museum lionise labour-union organiser Harry Bridges, long a victim of overly zealous federal prosecutors. As with the exhibition, the book tends to talk about 'the first American this or that', a sure sign that something was borrowed from Europe, for example the automobile and the ocean liner. Oddly enough this treatment extends even to the steamboat, despite the prioritisation of Robert Fulton. It is easy to understand why a crowded exhibition might not mention this, but a book can do better.

Without wishing to be a determinist, this reviewer would conclude that surely western settlers were driven, at least in

part, by economic motivation, not just 'collective grit and individual determination'? In general, the book's treatment of the west is a strength, although drawing on the ecological insights of historians like Donald Worster and William Cronon would have given these sections more depth. The authors (and the exhibition) have covered the urban experience quite well and there is an excellent discussion of the 'on the road' literary genre featuring such writers as Jack Kerouac, Hunter S. Thompson and Ken Kesey. One suspects, however, that the museum's critics in Congress would not have welcomed them in the exhibition itself.

The book, for all its virtues, seems to be pitched at largely the same popular audience as the exhibition, for it is undocumented and really does not get far beyond the museum materials. This is fine, but perhaps a wasted opportunity? A scholarly work, based on the museum's artefacts and the research that went into the exhibition, might have been a significant addition to the literature. The Web site and video of the television programme, are, in any case, the media by which those of the general public who are interested in the subject but unable to visit Washington are likely to familiarise themselves with the topic. It would be surprising if the viewing audience for the video was not larger than the number of people who read the book. One would also expect that the Web site gets more hits in a day than the exhibition gets visitors, or the total number of people who buy the book. For the public at large, then, surely, the book, if not exactly dead, is perhaps a little unnecessary?

Not surprisingly the Web site features a virtual tour of the museum exhibition, but there are several additional features. The provenance of each element in the exhibition is given and there is an interesting section on how some artefacts in the exhibition, notably the massive Southern Railway locomotive, were obtained and prepared. There are curriculum materials for American school grades four to twelve, and also some children's games. The Web site has several failings, however. While it contains over 1,000 images of artefacts that the

NMAH holds, almost all of which could not be in the exhibition, the search function for those images does not work very well. For example, a search for 'Model T' produced a long list of seemingly every transport model in the museum and a search for 'horsecar' drew the enigmatic phrase 'There was a problem with the database' on the first visit and 'Sorry, no results were returned' on the second. Nor does the Web site take much advantage of the Internet's ability to link everything to everything else. As of December 2004 there were barely twenty links (other than those to sponsors), and these ignored some of the best transport-related sites. For instance, the best on-line bibliography of anything dealing with automobiles and related materials is maintained by the historian Patrick Fridenson at <http://www.univ-evry.fr/PagesHtml/laboratoires/gerpisa/biblio/>. Yet this does not appear.

The History Channel presented its one-hour introduction to 'the amazing new exhibition' on 29 November 2003, sandwiched between a biography of the German general Erwin Rommel and *UFO Hot Spots*. The programme emphasised the preparation of the exhibition, especially the difficulties of getting huge artefacts—for example, a section of Route 66's pavement—into the museum and featured interviews with the Smithsonian curators associated with the exhibition. Some of the interviews are a trifle overblown, such as the preservationist who claimed that they had not tried to make the Winton automobile in the exhibition look brand-new (they came very close), reaffirming what seems to be some confusion between restoration and preservation. Stephen Lubar claims this was the first museum exhibition ever to use road pavements but this is not true: its predecessor had, among other pavements, wooden blocks from the Brooklyn Bridge. Although it is easy to criticise some of the things the curators say, the video is an interesting behind-the-scenes look at the museum for the general public and might also be useful for a class on museum studies.

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