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**Reliving The Railroad**

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**Reliving The Railroad**

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my patient and loving wife, Ashley, who worked hard day after day to make sure I had the time I needed to reach this milestone. She encouraged me constantly and pushed me when the workloads increased and deadlines approached. I thank her for so much, but especially for her determination and unrelenting vigor during the entirety of what truly has been an adventure.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge my family for its steadfast support through the years. Grandparents, Dan and Maxine Lynch, parents, Bob and Dannell, sister, Amy, and uncle and aunt, Bob and Colleen Knauber, all played important roles in seeing me to the finish line and across.

## **Abstract**

### **Reliving The Railroad**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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The Austin Steam Train Association operates a tourist train on a stretch of track in Texas from Cedar Park to Burnet. The diverse assortment of restored cars, some dating back to the 1920s, is pulled most-recently by a diesel engine, No. 442, as Southern Pacific No. 786, the original steam engine, is in the process of being repaired.

The train requires more than \$1 million annually to operate and would have folded long ago if not for an all-volunteer crew. ASTA staffs the crew of at least 10-15 people per train 105-110 times per year and has been doing so for more than 20 years.

During a ride on the train, passengers see a wide variety of scenery, including some relics with historical significance. Among them are several large chunks of granite which fell off trains shuttling the stone decades ago from Marble Falls to Austin for the construction of the capitol building. Trains also carried granite to Galveston after the infamous hurricane hit.

ASTA also provides entertainment inside the train. Themes rides sell out months in advance. Murder mystery trips are always hits but the Wine Flyer is gaining popularity. With a layover in Burnet on the Saturday Hill Country Flyers trips,

passengers take time to explore a new city, have lunch and maybe do a little quick shopping.

ASTA takes the operation of the train seriously and makes safety a priority. ASTA runs the train with fantastic dedication and perseverance and subsequently, generates a rolling work of history for study by families, first-timers and enthusiasts alike on a weekly basis.

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# Reliving The Railroad

With a couple blasts of the horn and a few squeaks, I find myself reaching for one of the metal bars joining the cars together as the train lurches forward. The orchestra of creaks, clangs and intermittent thuds begins to sew itself into a rhythm as the locomotive gains speed. The wind now fills the vestibule through the open windows and I work to keep my balance while trying to nail down good subjects to photograph.

The 4,200-horsepower diesel engine, No. 442, pulling the Austin Steam Train Association's eclectic assortment of restored cars, jerks and yanks us up the stretch of track between the Cedar Park yard and the Wilke Wye in the town of Burnet, Texas. The colors change as I stand centered on the train, staring out the window. Shades of brown are balanced by bright green blurs as we rumble past bushes and tall grass.

We break through the overgrowth near the tracks and I observe our speed relative to the cars driving on the highway that parallels the track. We are nearly traveling the same speed but as the cars begin to pass us, the engineer in mighty 442 works the horn into a familiar tell-tale sequence -- long, long, short, long, as if to say, "Here. Comes. The Train." The Doppler Effect has its way with the increasingly-loud bell sounds punching the air from a pole at the crossing.

We repeat the process once or twice more before settling down to what feels like a ride through the 19th century Texas countryside. With a captive audience and hopefully some willing subjects, I turn to enter one of the cars and carry on with my documentation.

I am hoping to learn more about trains and the people who ride them, even on the tourist line. I want to meet the people who operate them and discover what secrets they have. I aim to explore the almost-mythical ability trains have to make friends of unsuspecting passers-by and keep them for life. I have to know what makes them irresistible to those who will do anything, even risk their lives, to be around trains.

Other than a theme park train and a few airport trams, I haven't ridden the rails for real by the time I connect with ASTA in early January of 2013. I expect to acclimate myself to any small spaces, odd shifts, smells, sound and procedures consistent with train travel. Beyond that, however, I plan to observe the relationship between rail enthusiasts and the equipment from the outside. But unbeknownst to me, I am already being sucked in by the same forces that absorbed the very subjects I want to investigate.

The duplex my wife and I rented when we moved to Austin two years prior to the beginning of this project is only a handful of blocks from a popular track running along, and in one place splitting, U.S. Highway 1, or MoPac, for Missouri Pacific Railroad. From my living room, I can hear the low frequency sound of the engine passing and the proverbial rumble secures every other sound in the room to the floor.

Freight trains frequent this line and Amtrak has a few routes that pass through. I wonder why I don't know more about trains and ask myself why I am not more curious. I know my dad spent some time as a brakeman on a train in Montana as a young kid before completing flight school and making a life of flying. I remember the stories he tells of that brief stopover with the railroad and they appeal to me, so why haven't trains taken me over way aviation has. To this day I run outside to watch a helicopter or jet fly over the house but I don't bother with passing trains.

For someone without a pilot's license, I possess a wealth of knowledge about aviation and can't explain what I find so intriguing about the industry. I do, though, suspect and hope to confirm in some way that what draws me to aviation also draws these foamers to trains.

Before my project comes to a close, I sit down with three ASTA regulars and attempt to find some answers or at least clues to pair with observations to help me reason some answers. Longtime volunteer Mike Barnes, staff member Janaye Melsha and

president and chief operating officer of the association, Dr. Robert “Doc” Schoen, each lead me deeper in to the culture of rail enthusiasm. Barnes tells of the beginning with confidence and tempered excitement. He speaks with a calm I don’t very well understand considering of some of the accounts.

The Austin Steam Train Association does not come to life ex nihilo. Rather it rises to local fame slowly when two prominent men living in the Austin area, a businessman and enthusiast, Arthur U. Boone, and a historian, Joe Dale Morris, jump on an opportunity to animate the past as an interactive learning experience. In the mid-70s, Southern Pacific stops operating in the hill country and sells Austin 163 miles of track running through the area. Twenty years prior to this, when Southern Pacific makes the jump to diesel from steam powered locomotives, the company donates steam engine No. 786 to the city. This beautiful behemoth sits on display in Brush Square downtown for decades before Boone and Morris decide to make that initial run at restoring the retired engine and set it on the rails.

The 786 is a Mikado-type engine, 2-8-2 according to the Whyte notation for classifying steam locomotives. The numbers indicate the number of wheels and where they are placed. The center digit tells how many drivers are on the engine. Drivers are large, powered wheels that actually move the engine. The first digit in the order refers to any wheels in front of the drivers and the third number denotes the number of wheels behind the drivers. For every two, there is a single axle, so the 786 sports two small wheels up front, followed by eight drivers (four on each side) ahead of a second set of smaller wheels. The most common type of steam engine in America at the time, ultimately dubbed the American type, is the 4-4-2.

Southern Pacific No. 786 is made by the American Locomotive Company’s Brooks Works in late 1916 and weighs in at 143 tons for a medium size ranking in its

time. Her rebirth, as it might seem, is conducted by Westinghouse Motor Co. in Georgetown, Texas, in 1990. The two year operation concludes not long before 786's first trip in mid '92 which runs from Austin to Burnet. Barnes is on that ride.

I got on it, the first time it made a trip to Burnet, this was non-paying passengers, which was an interesting day -- as my wife describes it, the trip from hell. We had to be there at about 8:00 or 8:30 in the morning. We didn't leave there until about, probably 11:30, maybe closer to 12:00 noon because they were bringing the engine down from Georgetown where they'd done all the work on it and Union Pacific forgot to schedule a pilot engineer to ride in the engine because we were riding on their track. So they had to wait and find somebody.

Barnes says he spends a good portion of that trip installing seats in the coach cars because they still haven't been placed since being removed for reupholstering. These cars are not air conditioned so a July ride is no picnic.

Southern Pacific No. 786 runs with great success for six and a half years but falls victim to a crack in one of her cylinders which forces her keepers to pull her from service for what becomes a long, tedious repair process. Only now, are major pieces of 786 being trucked back to Texas so a reassembling sequence can begin.

In the absence of No. 786, diesel engine 442 enters service as a more-than-capable substitute. Schoen explains the difference between the two pullin' machines.

The Four Forty-Two, what a great engine. We got that engine, didn't pay much for it, cleaned it up. It's been a great engine for us. In terms of operating, man it's like driving a bus. It's simple. It really is, as long as you understand train management or momentum management. Getting

Four Forty-Two over the road is much, much easier and much less labor-intensive than getting 786 over the road.

So often I see trains approaching or leaving. I never spend much time next to one or have time to study a clear profile of an engine. But when I stand next to 442 in the yard, I am completely stunned at its length and sheer mass. I recall the way I feel standing next to an F-15 fighter jet, considering the way it cuts through the sky and exercises so much power and maneuverability yet seems as large as a million-dollar yacht from a few feet away.

Having never really examined the construction of a diesel engine, I note its structure, where the stairs are located, the paint scheme -- with a little help from Barnes, I am even able to identify the pair of engines themselves, nestled between the wheels under the cab which really handle the heavy lifting. My assimilation into rail enthusiast culture continues.

The inaugural shock to my system occurs when I set foot on the train for the first time. I climb the short staircase and enter the Eagle Cliff, a suite car with a few compartments and a small kitchen with a dining area. I anticipate signs of restoration mixed with a few scars of authentication, but I am absolutely taken by surprise when the smells hit. A distinct musty smell fills my nostrils and slows my movement through the car. Of course this strange smell is localized to this car, I figure, and the rest feel no different than riding in the cab of an F-150. Wrong.

One of the qualities of this train I soon find supremely endearing is the variance in smell from car to car. The coach cars smell different from the luxury cars and the luxury car smell different from one another. For one car to take such a radically different smell from another bends the corners of my mouth up slightly as I feel truly placed in a previous time.

Melsha says her favorites are the coach cars.

“They were made in the 1920s and they have the most history to me and they’re what I would consider the most authentic train car because that’s what you picture when you think of a train,” she says.

Barnes adds, “They were originally built by and for the Pennsylvania Railroad as commuter cars. At one time they were air conditioned. There were a whole slew of them. They were called P70s. One of our financial backers, Mr. Boone, bought those for the railroad.”

Like Melsha, Barnes says he likes the old coach cars best.

“My thing is, particularly if you’re riding behind a steam engine, if you want to hear what a steam engine is doing, sit in one of those, because the windows are open. The old story about the little engine that could, that’s the way the steam engine sounds. It’s repeating a four-cycle sound because you have a cylinder on each side.”

When I first slide the heavy door to the side, bend around the bathroom at the head of the car and move toward the front row of seats in one of the coaches, I see basically what I have seen every time I start searching for a seat on a Southwest Airlines flight. As I seat myself, peek out the window and naturally position my feet on the flip-down foot rail, however, I start to feel the excitement build. I have plenty of room to situate myself and wish I was riding in the early 20th century, taking my seat for granted.

Having never driven the route or visited Burnet, I wonder what I might pass along the way. I have only antiquated memories of tracks from my childhood to guide me as I try to imagine where this predestined path is sending us. I enjoy seeing some industry and heavy machinery parked off our right flank as we roar down the track. I care less about the houses, old and new, because I feel I can see that from my truck just as easily but I

can't ignore the reactions people living in those house give the train -- this train they must see every week.

An entire youth baseball team turns to wave at us at one point as we interrupt their practice. Several small children bouncing on a trampoline stop and turn their heads toward us, waving and laughing. These kids are drawn to the train as well. I am still not fully aware of my condition but I am growing closer to realizing I care about this train and others far more than I ever through I would. I am experiencing my first encounter with trains at the age of 28. Both Melsha and Barnes have their first encounters early in life.

Melsha lives in Florida at the time and says her mom always tells her trains are in her blood and that her great grandfather once was a conductor for the New York Central.

Tracks always crossed in front of my parents' house. I saw them all the time. The freight stopped coming and the rail was almost abandoned. But then, when I was about 14, somebody started a railroad, a tourist railroad, and brought in a steam engine. I was fascinated by this thing and they would park it by the crossing, just a block away from my house.

Melsha says she's determined to get a job on that railroad the next year when she turns 15. She doesn't want what she calls a lame job, working in a grocery store for example.

"I want to do something fun. I want to do something entertaining," she says. "I'm an outgoing person and I like meeting new people. So I thought, 'Hey trains. That's awesome. I could meet people.'"

Melsha lands a job on that railroad the following year and begins her journey as a rail enthusiast. Her transition to ASTA when she moved to Texas was seamless. Barnes, on the other hand, found the tracks through his father's business.

I was raised in south Arkansas. We lived on a branch line of the Missouri Pacific Railroad. My dad was in the lumber industry -- he had a saw mill. He would move the saw mill around and one time it was located about eight or nine miles away from our home. One of my brothers and I would ride out with him in the morning when he was going to ship a load of lumber out, and the train would stop. It came daily. We would go get on the caboose, pay the conductor a quarter and ride back home.

Barnes reconnects with trains in Texas while stationed at Fort Hood in 1988. He reads a couple articles in the Austin American-Statesman about the upcoming restoration of the old steam engine.

“That’s what got my interest,” he said. “I came out one day when they were working on the cars. I got to talking to them and got started in it.”

With Melsha and Barnes helping answering questions during the ride, pointing out landmarks and telling me stories, I feel I am on the fast track to this mysterious enthusiasm. My follow-up questions are becoming more and more in-depth. I find myself using some of the terminology I learn between rides as trains pass elsewhere in the city. I realize I have fallen over the edge when I start explaining to my wife what I learn.

I am somewhat snapped back to reality when the train reaches Burnet. For a while, I forget the train has a destination. I pass the line of small shuttles waiting for passengers beside the train and walk through Burnet’s historical district to a small Mexican restaurant. I have lunch, snap a few photos, then return unashamed to marvel at this brightly-colored stream of rolling history for the remaining two hours of the layover. I watch the brakemen water the train. With the passengers wandering through the city, I move from car to car, making mental notes of the smells and unique characteristics of each.



For certain, I most enjoy the lounge cars, the City of Chicago in particular. The retired Amtrak car features a checkerboard arrangement of triangular tables in the common area adjacent to a sealed kitchen bordering some compartments. The color scheme centers around a rich blue which feels very inviting and the monochromatic images of yesterday's Chicago on the wall of really set the mood.

Years from now, I will tell the story of my first real encounter with trains as one which came later in life than it does for most. I will say the trains lured me in with visual promise and a historical appeal then set the hook with a widespread massage of my senses and an amazingly involved system of operations and regulations. As the shuffling of aircraft on a carrier deck is sometimes referred to as a ballet, so is a train's every move. Anytime a train is set in motions, careful choreography is taking place.

"For each train, you've got an engineer, you've got a head-end brakeman, at least with diesel, and he handles a lot of the communications in the cab with the dispatcher," Scheon says. "On the rear, you've got your conductor and your rear-end brakeman -- basically four people to run the train."

The first time I watch the train back down the Wilke Wye so we can head back to Cedar Park, I learn a lot. The procedure is called a shove and both the very front of the train and the rear are busy places. The rear-end brakeman sets the switches and runs ahead to hold traffic at unmarked crossings. The conductor speaks directly to the engineer via handheld radios, providing updates of car lengths which the train can safely back down the track. The conductor calls out an update at an interval of roughly 3-to-8 seconds and the number of car lengths safe to move backward is subject to change.

I later learn these crews are not professionals hired from other railroads to operate the ASTA trains. They are trained after volunteering time to ASTA.

“Our crews are basically homegrown,” Schoen says. “When I joined in 1990, I didn’t know anything about railroading. We all learned the rules, did our classroom time. It’s a lot of on-the-job training. It’s homegrown, but it’s well-regulated in terms of what we teach people, when we teach people and how we test people.”

Melsha summarizes for me the progression one takes from an entry level operations position all the way to conductor at the top of the ladder. The first step is the G-core class, which teaches the general code of operations. This includes signal rules, safety rules and other important information pertaining to Capital Metro, since ASTA runs on Capital Metro’s line. An airbrake-and-train-handling class followed by a signals test comes next and clears those who pass to be student brakemen where they learn the ropes and eventually run the position alone.

Similarly, student engineers work to become engineers and student conductors ultimately run the show, but reaching these heights, according to Melsha, can take years. Even though the engineer actually operates the train, the conductor serves as the undisputed boss and overrides the rest of the train crew.

I have some trouble at first, identifying the conductor because ASTA has a position called trainman. The trainman dresses as a conductor but acts more as a character and interacts with passengers, answering questions and playing the part. In Florida, where Melsha works before she takes her job at ASTA, she rides occasionally as a show conductor, which she says is that railroad’s version of a trainman.

The crew aboard ASTA’s train is largely volunteer and Schoen says the unique characteristic is vital to the railroad’s success.

“We’ve got about a \$1.1- to a \$1.2-million dollar budget that we do every year. That’s what we spend, that’s what we need to take in to operate. If we had to pay for a

staff every time we went out, we couldn't afford this. We'd have been gone a long time ago."

For an all-volunteer crew, I am deeply impressed. I find no member of the crew off-putting or reclusive. Each person engages me and willingly answers my questions, telling stories and offering fresh points-of-view. I find a retired civil war military man's house and learn about the large chunks of granite beside the track. I am told these massive blocks fell off cars carrying the stone from Marble Falls to Austin during the construction of the capital building and to Galveston after its infamous hurricane.

Not only is ASTA's COO aware of the vitality of the volunteers to ASTA's operation, he is thankful and greatly and genuinely appreciates them.

"It takes no less than 10 to 15 volunteers per train to get that train over the road. How many trains do we run a year -- I counted 'em up -- around a hundred and five to a hundred and 10 trains a year," he said. "So we staff a hundred and five to a hundred and 10 trains a year and we've done that the last 20 years. That's a heroic effort on the part of our volunteers."

I can't disagree with Schoen's sentiment toward the volunteers though I am now fully enamored with trains and understand why so many people are willing to give up a few Saturdays to spend time on this fantastic rolling and functional museum. For myself, the metaphorical transformation is complete. I am hooked and that is OK. I suppose the best way to uncover the motives of a rail enthusiast is to become one.

Having learned about the association, its engines, cars, crew and a little about the budget, I am left curious only about the passengers. The riders are a mixed bag for sure. As I make my first trip through a car, armed with cameras under each arm, I see what I expect as expressions are concerned. About half of those who turn to look continue to look. The others either resume their activities or wait for me to pass before peeking my

way again. This is standard behavior and to a photojournalist, feels very normal, but it doesn't give me many clues as to what, if anything, makes these people different and unifies them.

I strike up conversations when I can. Some passengers want no part of my meaningless banter. Others welcome the chat and we enrich one another's day. Melsha mentions the railroad gets riders from all over, varying in levels of enthusiasm. I hope to find one such party and hit the jackpot in a middle-aged couple riding in a coach car. These two claim to purchase tickets to each ASTA ride as soon as they become available -- as far out as possible. They really love the specialty rides, particularly the murder mystery ones but also note the Valentine's Day ride.

The woman comes to America from Europe and tells me all about her travels through the tightly-packed countries by way of rail. Overseas, the scenery changes and the speed of the trains naturally increases but the essence of the ride remains the same.

True to her word, I see the pair on every subsequent ride along with a few other familiar faces. I can find no central tie, no underlying circumstance drawing this particular crowd together, but I am able to extrapolate a few tent poles of the curious dynamic. The high school- and college-aged passengers tend to appear in groups and seem to enjoy interacting with each other far more than the train to the point that I wonder if they are even aware of their surroundings.

Parents-with-kids is another common sight, especially in the concession car, outfitted with traditional gift shop gear and assorted food and drink options. The children constantly seem extremely aware of their environment and often experience the train through the sense of touch. Smiles, curious stares, outright laughter and sleepy eyes paint their faces but rarely do I see a child cry.

The enthusiasts are either keep-to-themselvesish or find an at-large crew member to claim as theirs for conversation during the majority of the ride. They are always pleasant, however, and highly-motivated to pay attention to the train, cars, sights and sounds.

I find through my documentation there is no such person who doesn't belong on this train nor is there a personality type not allowed to enjoy the experience ASTA offers. Trying to find a theme that connects the people on the train is the error. The train itself brings these people together. Long ago, the Austin Steam Train Association discovers what I learn through my short inquiry: The train *is* the link and it offers no explanation nor does it attempt to make any apologies for stealing the hearts and minds of anyone willing to listen.