Transportation History at the Millennial Pinnacle

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In large part the intent of this Transportation Research Board (TRB) CD-ROM, to understand and document the state of the art in each committee's field of interest, parallels the focus of the work of the Task Force on Transportation History. Because the task force is new, and more important because transportation history is a new subject for TRB, it is appropriate that the task force focus in its early stages on stock-taking and inventorying of transportation history resources of every kind.

The pinnacle in time that seems to be created by the end of a century and the end of a millennium has value for historians perhaps because the public's historical consciousness has been raised. We are all somehow more interested in what the view is like from that pinnacle, although to be sure the hindsight and foresight are not particularly better on January 1, 2000, than on the day before or after—or the year or the decade before or after. But we must grasp these moments of self-awareness and make as much of them as we can.

Any assessment of the state of America in regard to transportation history must consider history making and historians, museums and their curators, archives and archivists, and perhaps other concerns.

ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT TRENDS

"Knowledge is of two sorts; one either knows a thing, or he knows where to find out a thing." Dr. Samuel Johnson's observation ought to be of comfort to people curious about transportation history. By many measures transportation history has achieved a high status of public interest and involvement. To a different degree the topic is also the subject of substantial professional interest. Of some concern, however, is the question of whether resources required for a high level of transportation history research are adequate or are jeopardized by the commonplace weeding-out of public records.

Within the last few years prize-winning authors and movie and TV producers have devoted substantial attention to such icons of transportation history as the Brooklyn Bridge, the Panama Canal, the journeys of Lewis and Clark, the Columbian voyages of discovery, the Mormon migration, and, naturally, the *Titanic*. Whereas the chief focus of books, plays, and movies featuring transportation history may lie elsewhere, such productions serve to integrate transportation history into other themes of public interest.

It is possible to gauge the public's interest in transportation history by reference to a host of representative examples, ranging from the most popular museum in America, the National Air and Space Museum, visited by some 9 million people each year, to the wholesale public adoption of U.S. Route 66, stretching from Chicago to the Pacific Ocean. The public's interest and the services, facilities, and programs to respond to that interest cover the gamut of transportation modes.

The countless places where the public has access to the physical past are essential elements of transportation history. The *Harvard Guide to American History* observes:

> In addition to the written sources of history, there exist a variety of nondocumentary sources of information and understanding in the form of three-dimensional survivals from the past—both man-made and natural. To view Ford's Theater or drive through the Donner Pass, to examine a flintlock musket or the *Spirit of St. Louis*, to observe the tools and processes related to spinning and weaving yields a wealth of facts and impressions, available in no other way, about the events, people, and ideas of the past.

Automobile Quarterly's publication, *North American Automobile Museums*, while noting that automobile museums come and go, identifies 238 museums in North America (220 in the United States and 18 in Canada). They are found within 45 states and 8 provinces and range in size from immense to tiny. In addition to automobiles themselves, many of these museums provide a rich source of the artifacts, relics, and objects of every kind that are associated with the automotive age. Patronage of these museums is unknown, but it is probably more limited by public awareness of their existence than by a lack of interest.

The *Guide to Tourist Railroads and Railroad Museums* lists more than 350 such railroads in 49 states and 7 provinces. They range in length from a few hundred feet to a 640-mi line between Vancouver and Calgary. Some of the museums, such as the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento, are of great sophistication. The guide notes that almost all tourist railroads and railroad museums have been created in the last 50 years; before then, if you wanted to ride on an old-fashioned train, you just got on one. Railroad history is blessed by a visible professionalism. There are groups such as the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, Inc., and comprehensive summaries such as the *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* and the American Heritage's *History of Railroads in America*.

In states known for their association with a mode of transportation, historical connections are highly visible to the public. A recent brochure states that "commensurate with Pennsylvania's proud railroading heritage," the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation will issue a distinctive automobile license plate featuring a steam locomotive. Of the $35 price for such plates, $15 will underwrite the education and exhibit program of the Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission. The brochure makes further reference to the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania and collections of the state archives.

According to the Council of American Maritime Museums, there are just over 300 maritime museums in 38 states and 42 more in 4 Canadian provinces. Whereas most are where one would expect them, they can be found even in such places as Nebraska and South Dakota. They all appear to share the objective of educating and enlightening the public. As in other modes, they vary in size, budget, and sophistication. Some, like the San Francisco National Historical Park, conceived 50 years ago, benefit from federal funding assistance and provide a substantive level of service.

The San Francisco park provides 35 acres of waterfront with nine buildings and 50,000 ft^2 of exhibit space. Its $3 million budget underwrites about 100 full- or part-time consultants, a collection of 5,000 archeological pieces, 120,000 ship plans, 250,000

photographs, and 20,000 general historical artifacts. It is blessed with 800 members and 40 volunteers. Its nine historical ships are somewhat scattered, but it enjoys three associated libraries, one of which houses 12,000 volumes and 300 oral interviews.

Whereas the San Francisco facility conjures up a picture of one kind of transportation history resource, the list of maritime museums shows experiential opportunities as well, including 300 days a year of sea training. The number and variety of maritime museums surprised even the North American Maritime Museum, which more than doubled the expected size of its guide to such facilities.

In its own review of historical resources, the National Trust for Historic Preservation lists 50 libraries with maritime collections, 65 organizations with maritime research facilities or archives, and 79 maritime historical societies and associations.

A parallel condition exists with regard to aviation. The *North American Aircraft and Aerospace Museum Guide* lists more than 200 museums in 46 states and the District of Columbia. Another 18 museums can be found in six Canadian provinces. Whereas the focus of these museums is on aircraft, several museums without aircraft but dedicated to individuals and groups important to aviation history are included. In addition to museums, the guide now includes a half dozen “terminal queens”—airports that display vintage aircraft.

Like museums in all modes, aviation museums rely on a backdrop of volunteers and historical societies. The American Aviation Historical Society, founded in 1956, has well over 4,000 members organized in 15 regional groups. Its journal has been published continuously since the organization’s inception. There is also a parallel International Society of Aviation Historians, begun in Great Britain shortly after World War II.

The role of volunteers in transportation history activities would be hard to overstate. At the National Air and Space Museum on Washington’s Mall, the ratio of volunteers to paid staff is roughly two to one. Its 138 docents alone almost match the approximately 150 permanent employees. Within its archives there are about 30 volunteers and 15 permanent employees.

In a sense, museums are the tip of an iceberg of publicly accessible sites commemorating transportation history. Though museums often by their nature concentrate on the rolling stock of transportation history, there are many examples of ways in which larger-scale aspects of transportation history can be brought to the public’s attention.

Roadside rests are often located with an eye to transportation history. One Wyoming rest area provides overlooks and historical interpretations of the nearby visible remnants of the Oregon Trail. Not far away is another roadside rest adjacent to pioneer-inscribed Independence Rock, a landmark of several western migration routes. Indeed, for many years the state’s highway maps have shown the routes of both famous cattle-drive trails and migration paths. Independence Rock cannot fit into a museum, but it fits within a public agency’s imaginative and sensitive commitment to help the public to experience milestones of transportation history. In a similar vein a number of states preserve historic bridges at rest areas and use state highway maps to point out covered bridges.

Perhaps the largest retention of historical transportation right-of-way is the recent resurgence of both public and private actions to preserve the atmosphere and some of the facilities of old U.S. Route 66 between Illinois and California. Comparable preservation and rehabilitation of historical rights-of-way are evidenced in many if not most tourist railroads and even in such unusual sites as Maryland’s College Park Airport. In this case an entire

airport, the first in the country, has been rehabilitated and preserved as a historic site by the local planning agency. The C&O National Historical Park encompasses a 185-mi strip from Washington, D.C., to Cumberland, Maryland, under the National Park Service and a cooperating private organization and includes interpretive sites.

The museums and other sites noted above represent facilities where transportation is the only or the prime focus. However, rich transportation history resources can also be found in places where they are incidental to the primary focus. Writing on maritime history research, one historian noted, “The traveler will also come upon interesting collections in such unexpected places as public libraries, art galleries, and great universities.” He observed further that these dispersed collections often provided local flavor missing from the great collections.

Whereas much of the meat of transportation history resides in the physical traces of past events, a great deal is to be found only in the record of public and private deliberations and decisions. To a great degree these are paper records, some now at risk.

The sunsetting of the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) brings the issue into focus. At the time of ICC’s demise, its library became available for relocation. From some viewpoints the library constituted a significant historical resource. As it happened, the cost of relocation was greater than the benefits to be derived for many who considered taking it over. An inspection showed that it substantially duplicated material available elsewhere in Washington. The collection, or parts of it, have since found a home, but the underlying question remains: What transportation records are essential, how essential, and to whom?

There are a few other questions that characterize the state of the art of transportation history. Although it is possible to count museums and libraries, it is more difficult to judge how well they serve their interpretive role and whether necessary professional skills are in the pipeline. Whereas education has now supplanted entertainment in most American museums, their ability to do that job well is still uncertain.

The state of the art is uncertain in one other important respect: the power and potential of the Internet to serve the needs of a diverse and dispersed corps of professionals and others anxious to use and enjoy the benefits of transportation history. The Internet may provide the best way to tap the broad spectrum of research resources characterizing transportation history today.

ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE

At the millennium we have a strange situation in which transportation museums are numerous and many are flourishing, interest in them in the form of visitations is great, and yet at the same time it appears that there is not a lot of interest in transportation. The museum visits represent a great interest in transportation objects—cars, locomotives, planes, and transportation “stuff”—rather than in transportation itself. Aircraft rather than aviation, cars rather than highway transportation, and so forth appear to attract interest. We may all accept, and even share, the public’s interest in the objects of transportation. However, we must also seek to expand that interest, or perhaps leverage it, to generate some exposure to the subject matter of transportation and its role in society itself.

It is probably an overstatement to say that there are few museums that focus on the story of transportation, but it is safe to say that their numbers are limited. We as a profession have to be concerned about what appears to be the failure of museums to instill in the public a greater understanding and appreciation of transportation in our society. That

may be asking too much of our museums or historians. The work of historians in recent years has certainly captured the public imagination and has provided testimony to the power of travel and transportation.

If we are convinced that we need to talk about the role of transportation in our society, we must ask what story should be told. At each point in our considerations we must constantly ask what the content of transportation history ought to be—we might call this the history lesson of the *Enola Gay*.

As we project ourselves forward in time and ask about the field's ability to do its work in the future, the most serious concern must be the fear of the loss of the documents, the archives, that are so essential to understanding the past. These concerns have at least two aspects: the things we choose to save and the media we use to save them. We can be relatively secure about the objects of travel. There appears to be enough clear value in many of these transportation artifacts to ensure that they will be with us for a long time to come. (Of course, resources will always be a problem, but the economic power of tourism will be a strong positive factor.) Sheer bulk is an issue with respect to aircraft, ships, and so forth; preserving a 747 or a supertanker is a challenge.

The public appears hungry for serious treatment of transportation history, yet it is not clear that our storytelling abilities and institutions are up to the task. In an increasingly video-driven world, the sophistication of the materials may not be keeping pace with the sophistication of the public. We must find better ways and more responsive institutions to tell the story in interesting and concise ways without dumbing down and resorting to excessive reliance on flashy sound bites.

It is in the archiving area that there must be the greatest diligence and the greatest concern. There is no guidance as to what to save or in what media. There has been congressional recognition of these needs, and the profession is better served today than in the recent past. Transportation historical agencies have been directly funded by the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), and many historical activities are now eligible for funding under the TEA-21 program. More significantly, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics has been given a mandate to establish a National Transportation Library that will embrace and serve to focus many archival functions. This has spawned the development of a new archival task force within TRB, which is to be welcomed as a valuable step.

Although archivists will have a strong sense of what needs to be addressed, it is each profession's responsibility to ensure that the important materials are retained. So many new forms of storage and preservation, all apparently so permanent, lead us perhaps to a false sense of security about our ability to preserve the key documents of the past. We need both institutions and technology to deal with the aging written source material of transportation history. Archival technology to find and preserve what needs to be saved is important, as are stable institutions to maintain the memory, particularly as digital media become obsolete with technological change.

But the greater threat to our ability to have access to key documents of the past will be the disinterest of organizations and the professionals in them. The profession must focus in that area, demonstrating the importance of the work to be done by showing the value of the historical work of the past. Imbuing the transportation professionals of today and tomorrow with a sense of the past will make them better preservationists and better professionals in the future.