

‘Rails and Tales’ peer back into the history of train history – April 14, 2024

Today is the grand opening of the Taneytown Heritage and Museum Association’s 2024 exhibit entitled “All Aboard - Rails and Tales” in its museum at 340 East Baltimore Street, Taneytown. Visitors are welcome from 1-4 p.m., after a short opening ceremony.

Each year this all-volunteer group features a different subject for its exhibit, and the 2024 topic is the role three railroads have played in Taneytown’s history. The exhibit has something for everyone, from an operating O-gauge train layout with a variety of the well-known Plasticville buildings to an amazing number of artifacts and old photographs. Train enthusiasts of all ages will enjoy a visit, especially those who appreciate the “tales” which Nancy Eyler uncovered to accompany the historic photos she found.

Over twenty individuals or organizations contributed the items on display — a huge train whistle, the lanterns which swung from the arms of men working at night along the tracks, the logo of the Western Maryland Railway, china from the dining cars of the B&O. Volunteers at the Western Maryland Railway Historical Society Museum in Union Bridge shared their knowledge as the exhibit came together over recent months.

While no railroad reached Taneytown until 1872, train stories go back much further. Maryland’s Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, formed in 1827, is the granddaddy of America’s railroads and, for a short period, made Baltimore the second-largest city in the country. The B&O helped trigger the first railroad economic boom from the 1830s to the 1860s by connecting the Eastern Seaboard to America’s early heartland, just as the Erie Canal had done a few years earlier.

The Switzer family of Union Bridge left home in 1857 and boarded the B&O in Baltimore. Traveling on a variety of railroad lines across Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, they eventually reached their destination - Iowa. If they had waited, the Western Maryland Railway was operating a station in Union Bridge by 1862 and the family could have started the journey practically from its front door.

Once Americans realized the economic impact railroads could make they popped up everywhere. They often were single-purpose short lines which might carry coal from western Maryland mines or barrels of flour from mills along Big and Little Pipe Creek, etc. They were “feeder lines” which eventually joined larger lines like the B&O, the Pennsylvania, the New York Central. If you have played Monopoly, you’ll remember a railroad called the “Reading.” Its purpose, when it began in the 1830s, was to transport anthracite coal from eastern Pennsylvania mines to Philadelphia. That coal probably ended up heating homes from Maine to Georgia. Maybe coal from Maryland traveled there as well on ships leaving the port of Baltimore.

By 1872, when Taneytown could offer its citizens and their products train transportation, it was estimated that 80% of people living east of the Mississippi lived within five miles of a railroad track. Taneytown was never served by one of the major railroads but by several “feeder lines” with complex names that seemed to change frequently as the companies changed ownership.

The Rails and Tales exhibit, with a large map prepared by Doug Heck, illustrates how a mid-Maryland town like Taneytown could send its agricultural products just about anywhere by 1900, and import what it needed as well.

Once upon a time, Taneytown boasted a very attractive Victorian-style train station. Mrs. Eyler hunted high and low to find a picture of it as well as photos of the station at Keymar and ones in Frederick and Union Bridge too. When trains began disappearing, so did the stations which often served as centers of their communities — where a hotel was located and the telegraph office; where businesses were centered; where you met relatives coming for a visit or said goodbye to loved ones.

Volunteer Carroll Hahn traced what happened to the locomotive turntable that existed once upon a time in Keymar. Who would believe there had been one so long ago? It is hard to imagine how much rail traffic crisscrossed Carroll County for over 100 years? Sometimes we still see it — rarely in Taneytown, but often in Westminster when traffic stops on Main Street as Maryland Midland Railway cars loaded with cement from the plant in Union Bridge rumble through on their way to Baltimore. Residents of Sykesville enjoy the whistles of coal-carrying trains on the tracks which once belonged to the B&O but are now part of the CSX system.

The Maryland Midland Railway, what remains of the Western Maryland, now has about 80 miles of track and intersects the CSX at Emory Grove in western Baltimore County and at Highfield in Washington County. It hauls only freight, but its orange locomotives brighten the central Maryland landscape wherever you encounter them. Photographer Warren Jenkins recently captured a Maryland Midland train crossing the trestle over Little Pipe Creek and Keymar Road. About 42% of America's freight still travels by rail in the 21<sup>st</sup> century even though we scarcely seem to notice.

The exhibit in Taneytown offers a glimpse into the past and the glory days of railroading. It will be open each weekend — Fridays from 10 until 1 plus Saturdays and Sundays from 1 until 4 — until November 17. You have plenty of time to plan a leisurely visit with children or grandchildren. Admission is free and there is even a scavenger hunt with prizes.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County*

Image 1 – Credit: Warren Jenkins      Caption: Two locomotives and a freight car from the Maryland Midland Railway cross a trestle over Little Pipe Creek. Keymar Road runs underneath. The Maryland Midland (now a subsidiary of the Genesee and Wyoming) uses track originally laid by the Western Maryland Railway across the middle of Carroll County.

Image 2 – Credit: Taneytown Heritage and Museum Association      Caption: Announcing the 2024 exhibit of the Taneytown History and Museum Association — “All Aboard – Rails and Tales.”

*Image 3 – Credit: Submitted photo      Caption: Volunteers Carroll Hahn and Nancy Eyler  
prepare the 2024 exhibit of the Taneytown Heritage and Museum Association. The museum is  
located at 340 East Baltimore Street, Taneytown.*