
The Trains of Our Memory: A History of the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, by Peter Osborne. Foreword by William W. Farkas, Introduction by Kurt Bell. Yardley Press, 2016. 604 pp. \$29.99 paperbound, \$39.99 hardbound

The complete tale of a museum

An institutional history might seem like dull reading, but author Peter Osborne has written an easy-to-digest account of the first 50 years of the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania.

One of just three state-owned and -operated railroad museums in the United States, RMPa is situated in southeastern Pennsylvania, directly adjacent to the steam-powered Strasburg Rail Road Co. (The others are in California and North Carolina.) Registering more than 100,000 visitors a year, it's the most heavily visited site in the state system of museums.

Its collection is considered to be world-class, comprising more than 100 locomotives and cars, as well as wide-ranging holdings of official records; photographs; books; paintings; hardware such as lanterns, station signs, and a complete 19th-century bridge; and ephemera, such as timetables and advertisements. It maintains an education center for children and school groups, operates a restoration shop for in-house work, and enjoys the support of an active auxiliary group, the Friends of the Railroad Museum.

Perhaps the best way to convey the scope of the book is to put it in terms of page counts: 16 pages of front matter, nearly 400 pages of history, 82 pages of essays by principals in the story, 39 pages of endnotes, 18

pages of index listings, and 16 pages of bibliography.

The book opens with the beginnings of an idea in the 1950s and proceeds chronologically to 2015. In a welcome touch, the author introduces each chapter with a page of quotations that are pertinent to that chapter.

Osborne was not and is not directly associated with the museum, freeing him to tell all sides of a story. This was important because the museum found itself at the center of controversy even before it started, when it opened, and several times since then, as state budget battles have erased large chunks of funding for the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the state agency that owns and operates RMPa.

The author tells the all-important story of how the museum came to be placed in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a tourist area that is known for its Amish population and farming industry rather than as a railroading center. He traces the tempestuous contest among partisans of sites at Strasburg, Altoona, and Mount Union.

Strasburg's draw was that it had an operating steam railroad and was located in a tourist mecca. This proposal originated with the SRC, which both promised to donate land and envisioned that the carrier actually build the museum. In addition, SRC connected

Conrail GP30 No. 2233 gathers a crowd at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, from *The Trains of Our Memory*.



with the Pennsylvania Railroad main line, a fact that PRR itself considered important at the time.

Altoona's claim was that it was once the greatest railroad city in the world, with the PRR employing 15,000 workers in its shops there to build, test, repair, or refurbish everything from rubber gloves to steam locomotives. The area had no operating steam tourist railroad, but the famous Horseshoe Curve tourist destination lay just five miles west of town.

Mount Union was the onetime junction of the narrow-gauge East Broad Top Railroad with the PRR main line. When the former coal hauler reopened as a tourist railroad in 1960, EBT began running five miles north from its headquarters of Rockhill Furnace to a picnic grove, on the way to Mount Union but still several miles short. EBT pledged to donate the land needed from its now-disused Mount Union yard, and to reopen its main line to that point if the state placed the museum there.

At stake was a group of some 15 vintage locomotives and 12 cars that the Pennsy had gathered, beginning in the 1930s, known as the PRR Historical Collection. The community that got the museum would get the PRR collection.

Osborne combed records of the PHMC, which was charged with making the decision, tracing the ups and downs of the contest, which lasted from 1963 to 1965. In the end, Strasburg was selected as the most advantageously located with respect to an operating steam railroad and equally important, an existing and growing tourism base.

The others, lying in the relatively isolated central part of the state – some 200 miles west of Philadelphia – were passed over. The outcome was remembered differently by different people, but the most common tally reported was Strasburg, four votes, Mount Union, three votes, and Altoona, one vote.

Outraged Altoonans went so far as to get resolutions passed in both the state House and Senate condemning the vote and demanding a reversal. The PHMC panel did take a second look, but reaffirmed its decision for Strasburg.

Multi-year funding issues, bureaucratic delays, and staffing issues prolonged construction on the 14-acre site. Ten years after

the historic vote, the building and display yard were about ready in early 1975, but still no opening date was set. When taxpayers and newspapers began to complain, Gov. Milton J. Shapp issued an order to open it on 48 hours' notice, and that occurred without ceremony. A grand opening, with Shapp presiding, took place five months later.

Since then, the museum has gone through a succession of directors, has witnessed the founding of the Friends group in 1982, has added dozens of pieces of rolling stock, and has seen a doubling of the size of its Rolling Stock Hall, which afforded more indoor protection to the most vulnerable pieces.

Osborne tracks each director's tenure at the museum, and he writes straightforwardly about the founding director, the eccentric George Hart, and his remarkable ability to negotiate and horse-trade for pieces of equipment. Hart also was a successful bidder in obtaining a large percentage of the items auctioned in 1972 when the bankrupt Penn Central, successor to PRR, liquidated hundreds of historic items from its collection. In all, the state spent more than \$27,000 to win 248 lots.

In addition, Hart was director when eleventh-hour passage of legislation in 1979 saved the PRR collection – loaned to the museum since the late 1960s – from being split up by Penn Central and sold to the highest bidder. The special legislation accepted the collection in lieu of back taxes that PC owed the state. Osborne also frankly addresses PHMC's decision in 1983 to terminate Hart. Later, the Rolling Stock Hall was named for him.

The author also discusses the relationship between SRC and the museum. SRC provides the only rail access to the museum, which is vital when new pieces of rolling stock are acquired or existing pieces are loaned out. The most recent acquisition was electric locomotive No. 915, which became surplus when Amtrak retired its entire AEM-7 fleet in mid-2016. Its arrival underscores the museum's continuing commitment to interpreting present-day railroading as well as the industry's past. Besides Amtrak, Conrail and later, Norfolk Southern, have contributed equipment or financial support.

Another explosive episode was the 1983 "raid" of archives files by employees from

PHMC headquarters in Harrisburg. Especially under Hart's administration, the files had been collected but never organized. Some of them were stored outdoors in a boxcar, others were stuffed in closets and alcoves, and almost none were available to researchers. Making 14 trips back and forth, PHMC relocated 1,000 cubic feet of paperwork and other archives to Harrisburg. PHMC Archives staff filed and reorganized the collection, ultimately returning it to Strasburg.

A budget cut in 2009 eliminated 40 percent of PHMC's funding, resulting in scores of layoffs and ambushing an ambitious 10-year project that RMPa and the Friends group had under way. That was obtaining American Association of Museums accreditation, which signified high levels of professionalism and adoption of best museum practices. RMPa would have become the first railroad museum in America to achieve that standing, but the draconian budget thwarted RMPa's application before it could be submitted.

Osborne meticulously records the various historic dates in RMPa and FRM history, giving ample credit to employees and volunteers who spearheaded various projects, be they reversing deterioration of rolling stock, preparing exhibits, or handling files in the library.

The book closes with contributions written by, or on behalf of, all of the directors of the museum except one. Similar pieces were written by FRM officials and volunteers, RMPa employees and consultants, and a member of the state House of Representatives. This is both the strongest and weakest part of the book: Strong because it adds to Osborne's own text, giving first-person views and opinions, but weak because of the repetition it introduces. Many of the writers mentioned specific people and their accomplishments who had already played an important part in Osborne's narrative.

I found very little to criticize about this book. One item was typography and proof-reading errors. For some reason, these seem to be more prevalent in the first 300 pages than in the second half. Also, the author's drive to be comprehensive needed to be reined in at times. I'm not sure, for example, that readers really need to know that refreshments and cake were served at this event or that celebration.

From a factual standpoint, the only omission I noted was the absence of a complete story on PRR GG1 streamlined electric locomotive No. 4800, which is a cautionary tale for museums and historical groups everywhere. It was the first of 139 of its class, which became renowned as the most successful and longest-lived electric locomotive fleet in American history. Its riveted skin, as opposed to a smoother welded look, distinguished it from all other GG1s. In 1980, the Lancaster Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society acquired and restored No. 4800 to its 1934 appearance, after which RMPa displayed it in the Rolling Stock Hall. But when an FRM member donated another ex-PRR GG1, Amtrak No. 4935, to RMPa, hard feelings ensued, because RMPa placed the 4935 indoors and kicked the 4800 out into the open-air display yard.

This action was taken on the grounds that the chapter still owned the 4800, while the museum's duty was first to protect its own equipment from the weather rather than non-owned pieces. The scuffle represented hard-nosed attitudes on both sides. Fueled in part by a personality conflict, the chapter kept putting off actually donating the 4800 to RMPa. The result was that, outdoors, the beautifully and lovingly restored 4800 eventually became weather-beaten and faded, detracting from rather than enhancing the appearance of the overall collection.

In time, the NRHS chapter did turn over ownership of the unique piece, but needless damage to a working relationship had already been done. In its current round of projects, RMPa does plan to restore the locomotive's exterior appearance.

In addition to writing the text, the author gathered black-and-white photos, drawings, and maps that document various stages of growth and construction. The book is printed on uncoated stock, but fine-art photo reproduction is not the goal here — these images help immeasurably to bring the story to life.

This book is a magnum opus. All museums, especially railroad museums, should be so fortunate as to have such an encyclopedic and exhaustive record of their mission and work.

—*Dan Cupper is deputy editor of Railroad History and has used the museum's archives and library many times in researching books and articles.*