



# Mid-South News Bulletin

May 2009



A publication of the Mid-South Chapter of the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society

## May Program

### Central of Georgia Ry historian to bring May 2 program

Allen Tuten, a founding member and current president of the Central of Georgia Railway Historical Society, will be guest speaker at the next meeting of the Mid-South Chapter on Saturday, May 2.

Tuten will present an illustrated history of the Central of Georgia Railway, from its beginnings in 1833 to its final merger into the Southern Railway System in 1971. His presentation will include historic maps, photographs, and drawings illustrating the Central's development into a major regional carrier. A short video featuring vintage scenes of Central passenger and freight operations from the 1950's will close out what promises to be a most interesting program on one of the two major railroads that helped establish Leeds' industry.

A native of Savannah, Georgia, Tuten grew up near the Central of Georgia (former Savannah & Atlanta) tracks close by the entrance to the Savannah State Docks. He is a life-long fan of the Central of Georgia and helped establish the Central of Georgia Railway Historical Society, serving as secretary/treasurer and most recently as the society's president. A music typesetter by profession, Tuten edits and produces the society's quarterly magazine, *The Right Way*, and is working on a book on the Central.

*(Editor's Note: The date for the May meeting has moved to May 2. We will return to the regular "second Saturday" meeting schedule at our next bi-monthly meeting on Saturday, July 11).*

### Chapter pens agreement with Leeds Historical Society

The Mid-South Chapter and its host, the Leeds Historical Society, have set the course for the future development of the Historic Leeds Depot as a major regional attraction.

Representatives of the two groups recently signed a memorandum of understanding formalizing the relationship between the chapter and the historical society. Society President Frank Little and Chapter Chairman Marvin Clemons drafted the memorandum, which sets forth mutual responsibilities for the development and operation of the Leeds Depot.

"This agreement confirms our mutual desire to develop the depot as an authentic railroad exhibit," Clemons said. "We are greatly indebted to Frank and the board of the Leeds Historical Society for providing our chapter with a permanent home in such a historic railroad landmark."

*(continued on next page)*



The two groups are developing plans for establishing a permanent railroad exhibit at the depot, including restoration of the agent-operator's office with authentic telegraph and telephone communications and an area dedicated to the memory of railroad laborer John Henry, the "steel-driving man" of local legend. Long-range plans also call for restoration of a Southern Railway caboose located on the depot grounds.

## Exhibit project's first phase

### Restoration of operator's desk, telegraph-telephone system proposed for agent-operator's office

Back in the days when trains regularly stopped at Leeds for passengers, mail and express, the depot was a one-man show. The agent-operator was busier than the proverbial "one-armed paper hanger," selling tickets, copying train orders, weighing Railway Express packages, and sending Western Union telegrams. Nearly every task depended on a reliable communications system, first the telegraph, then the telephone connecting the depot to the railroad and the outside world.

As a standard small-town depot, Leeds would have had at least two sets of telegraph and telephone circuits for communication with the dispatcher and other railroad and Western Union offices. The telegraph system included an elaborate array of apparatus, including telegraph keys, sounders, relays, resonators, and switchboard. The telephone system included a unique swing-out, gate-arm telephone transmitters with separate speaker box and ring set.

All of the depot's original communications and signal equipment was removed after the agency closed, and the operator's desk was taken out during the restoration in 1984. For a quarter of a century, the agent-operator's office has lain silent. But thanks to the efforts of two local craftsmen, along with some hopeful funding (*potential donors and benefactors, please take note!*), the now-quiet agent's office will soon be abuzz with the nostalgic sounds of the click-clack of the telegraph and the ringing of the dispatcher's phone.

Joe Christian, a retired electrician and an expert in telegraph and telephone communications, has proposed the restoration of a working telegraph/telephone system for the agent-operator's office. As the first of several educational exhibits planned for the depot, the proposal calls for a remote telegraph station for the transmission of live real-time telegraph messages between the agent's office and a second location. Visitors to the agent's office would be able to send and receive simulated "Western Union" telegraph messages, as well as listen in on telephone conversations between the operator and the dispatcher describing train movements through Leeds.

According to Christian, before work can begin on the telegraph/telephone system, the operator's desk must be restored to the bay window. The original desk was removed during the 1984 building redesign and replaced by a standard writing desk. Besides providing work space, the operator's desk



Reviewing plans for the installation of a new operator's desk in the depot agent's office are master carpenter Henry Johnson (left), and communications electrician Joe Christian.

(continued on next page)



supports the telegraph and telephone equipment used by the operator. The desk is of a specific design, and would have to be built from scratch by an experienced carpenter.

Fortunately, Marie Cromer with the Leeds Historical Society recommended her good friend Henry Johnson for the job. Johnson is a retired furniture craftsman and has numerous historic projects to his credit, including a replica stagecoach and the well site located on the depot grounds. Johnson and Christian met recently to review plans for the desk and work is expected to begin in May.

Our thanks to Joe and Henry for the contribution of their time and talent towards making the agent-operator's exhibit a reality. Now all we need are the necessary funds to complete this first phase of our depot exhibit project. The total estimated cost is \$2,500. If you or anyone you know would like to donate to this important project, please contact Marvin Clemons at 335-3457 or [mclemons@bham.rr.com](mailto:mclemons@bham.rr.com).

## The Roundhouse

### Local Internet newsgroup keeps rail fans in the loop

(Editor's Note: This is the first installment in a new column we've entitled "The Roundhouse" featuring rail-related groups and activities that help to educate and inform regarding current and historic railroad operations in the Mid-South area. Our thanks to ALRails moderator Dale Burns for the following).

Rail fans have been around for many, many years. We are a diverse group, some with particular interests. Most just like to watch trains in action, not really caring where they're going or coming from or anything out of the ordinary about the train. But many others concentrate on more specific aspects of the hobby. What types of horns are on the engine, what is in each car, what types of trucks (wheels) are on the engine, special moves, or any other number of more specific, concentrated interests. The list could go on.

What's always been missing, though, has been a good, efficient way to spread knowledge in a very timely manner. That's where the Internet comes in. With the huge access to online services now, most everyone can send and receive information about anything very quickly, making it very easy for people to learn more about their interests. That's why I started an on-line discussion group covering railroading in our State, to have one central location for people to send and receive information.



The group we have now, ALRails ([www.alrails.com](http://www.alrails.com)) has grown from one person (myself) to, as of this writing, 373 members. The group started out sometime in 1997 or 1998. It was hosted by a now defunct Internet service. It was good, but somewhat limited on what could be posted. As I remember, no photos, no files, etc. could be sent out, just messages. When that host decided to shut the doors, it was suggested that I move the list over to what was then a relatively new service at Yahoo! called Yahoo Groups. The move was made in 2001, invitations were sent out to the very few folks from the old group to move memberships over, and on July 11, 2001, at 12:08 PM, David Kudrav sent out the very first message on the ALRails Yahoo! Group. It read:

*(continued on next page)*



*"NS work train #911 is working from Bessemer, AL to Moundville, AL today, and possibly tomorrow as well. Train might tie down in or near Tuscaloosa, AL tonight. The train is picking up tie plates in varying sections of track that have had a rail replaced. (Two weeks ago and last week, NS had a rail gang changing outer rails on selected curves between Bessemer and Meridian, MS)." Later, David*

Thus started the beginnings of what is now a very busy information source that speeds messages and media to people wanting to learn more about local railroads. That first month, July 2001, there were a sparse 42 messages sent out to the world. At this writing, 9:00 AM, March 25, 2009 there are 1160 messages already sent out this month alone! Not every message is of interest to every member, of course, but there is something here for everyone at any given time. Anyone looking for information about anything concerning railroads, past or present, in the State of Alabama can surely find it right here on AL-rails.com. Nothing is off-limits, as long as it concerns the railroad industry.

Which brings me to some of the folks we have on here on the group. You'd think that a group like ALrails would only have members from Alabama. Not true. Unbelievably, we have members from all over the United States, Canada, South America, Australia, the UK, and even Afghanistan and Iraq. There are probably more countries represented, but I'm not aware of them. Of course, our core group, the ones that normally post most of the information, reside in or around Alabama. We are all 'friends' here, even though a majority of us have never physically met each other. We know each other by given names, or by our on-line identities. Thankfully, we have most areas of the state covered. There are members that cover the northwest area of the state around Decatur, Florence and Tuscumbia. We have several helping us out in Birmingham, the state's rail hub. A few individuals cover Montgomery. A long time member covers Dothan very well. And then there are the far-flung members that are spaced out around the State keeping us abreast on what's



actually happening out there on the main lines. We even have members posting from surrounding states letting us know what's happening that might affect Alabama, such as special trains or unusual loads, new yards, or any other events. We are a very busy group. With our collective knowledge, there are very few subjects that cannot be addressed concerning railroading in our area.. From the very earliest history of railroads, to what's happening right now, we can address it. Normally with way more information than you'd ever thought you'd ever need!

Not only will you find written messages, but also other forms of information on ALrails. There is a area to post photos you've taken of your favorite railroad subject., and an area to post files such as train orders, maps, mileage charts and the like. There's a links page, where members can post the address of some of their favorite web sites. Also, there is a database page where information can be shared such as phone numbers, addresses, or other information so that others can get in touch with you faster. And finally, there is a page where members can create a poll to gather other members preferences about anything from dates to meeting up to your favorite engine.

In closing, let me say that this group, the ALrails Yahoo! Group, has grown remarkably over the last several years, far more than I ever envisioned. New members are jumping on every few days. The number of posts is growing, spreading even more information. More longtime members are now posting as opposed to just receiving messages. More photos are being posted. It's a great resource for those wanting to know more about Alabama's very dynamic and constantly changing railroad industry. To see what we do here, and hopefully become a full-fledged active member of the group, go to [www.alrails.com](http://www.alrails.com) and request a membership. Sit back and watch, and be amazed at the useful information you can glean from the many knowledgeable members just itching to spread the word!



## From the Observation Platform by Marvin Clemons, Mid-South Chapter Chairman

I'd like to use this regular column to share a few brief observations about our chapter, its members and activities, and to encourage discussion and feedback on what I consider important topics related to our future growth and development.

First, my thanks to all for your membership. To use an analogy from nature, we're barely out of the nest, and because we're still fledgling, we need the active support of every single member if we're going to fly. Some of us need a little push, so in the days ahead, we'll be asking for your ideas for the chapter and involvement in our activities. Our chapter belongs to us all, and every one should take some responsibility for its success and its failures. Let's not allow a few to carry the load while the rest sit back and enjoy the show.

In that spirit, I am asking for eight volunteers to assist your Executive Committee in planning and directing the chapter's affairs. You will serve as voting members of the committee's advisory board with functional responsibilities for the chapter's programs and activities, and will commit to meet at least once every other month to conduct the chapter's business. If you'd like to contribute to your chapter in a direct and meaningful way, please talk with me about serving on the advisory board.

I'm very pleased with the progress we're making towards our ambitious plan for developing the depot exhibit areas. As you've read elsewhere in this newsletter, we've taken our first major step towards the proposed restoration of the telegraph and telephone services in the agent-operator's office. Our next big challenge will be to identify funding for the estimated \$2,500 cost for labor and materials, which is a remarkably low figure for an authentic restoration with genuine historical artifacts. One very generous benefactor or a dozen generous donors will get us there.



Copyright photo courtesy of J. Parker Lamb

### Where are we?

Since our May program features the Central of Georgia Railway, we thought we'd throw in this vintage photo of CofG #1, the local mail and express, taken somewhere along the "P-line" (to the uninitiated, also known as the Birmingham District of the Columbus Division).

It's sometime in 1953 as E7 #806 in its original paint scheme trundles out of \_\_\_\_\_ with the usual consist of a baggage car, RPO and two heavyweight coaches en route to the Smokey City.

OK, all you Central fans, *where are we?*



**What?** May Meeting of the Mid-South Chapter, R&LHS Program? A History of the Central of Georgia Railway  
**When?** Saturday, May 2, at 2 p.m.  
**Where?** The Historic Leeds Depot, Leeds, Alabama  
**Who?** You and your guests. Please join us and enjoy an afternoon at the depot!