



Mid-South News Bulletin

September 2009



A publication of the Mid-South Chapter of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc

September highlight

Chapter to host first open house at Leeds Depot

The Mid-South Chapter, R&LHS will make its community debut when the chapter hosts its first open house at the Leeds Depot during the annual Leeds Folk Festival and John Henry Celebration on September 19-20.

On Saturday from 9 am to 4 pm and again on Sunday from 1 to 4 pm, the depot will be open for tours and chapter fund-raising activities. Member volunteers will escort visitors through of the 125-year-old depot, including the former agent-operator's office, passenger waiting room, and baggage and express room. During the tour, guests will learn about the chapter's plans for restoring the depot's telegraph and telephone system and developing a permanent exhibit devoted to the area's railroad history featuring a display dedicated to John Henry, the local folk hero of "steel-drivin" fame.

The chapter will also have tables displaying various historical railroad artifacts. A variety of donated railroad collectibles will be available for purchase with proceeds going to restoration of the depot's telegraph and telephone system.

In addition, the chapter is co-sponsoring a lecture by folklorist Dr. John Garth on the life and legend of John Henry. Based on Dr. Garth's research, the State of Alabama has recognized the Leeds area as the likely locale for the famed contest between John Henry and the steam drill used to bore Oak and Coosa Mountain tunnels on the former Central of Georgia Railway. Dr. Garth will present his latest research on John Henry on Saturday, September 19 at 1 p.m. in the depot's Meeting Room.

An Operation LifeSaver display, hosted by Bryan Schaffer of BNSF, is also planned as part of the open house. Other railroad-themed festival highlights include a presentation of the play "Listen to that Cold Steel Ring," written by Leeds historian Marie Cromer. The play depicts the life of the railroad steel driver and the contest he waged against a steam drill at Oak Mountain Tunnel near Leeds in September 1887. The play will be presented on the depot grounds on Saturday at 10 am and 3 pm and again on Sunday at 3 pm.

For more details on the folk festival, visit www.leedsfolkfestival.com/index.php.

Important notice!

Change in September program

In preparation for the open house, the chapter's board has designated the September 12th meeting date as "Depot Cleanup" day. More details inside!

Call for volunteers!

Your chapter needs members to welcome and escort visitors during our open house on September 19 & 20. We offer flexible hours and excellent working conditions! Please sign up by calling Marvin Clemons at 205-836-3457 or use this link to email

Important meeting notice!

“Sweeping change” in September meeting plans

Recognizing the importance of making a good first impression, the Mid-South Chapter board of directors has designated the next regular meeting date of September 12 as “Clean Sweep Day” in preparation for the chapter’s first open house in conjunction with the Leeds Folk Festival on September 19 & 20



Instead of meeting at our usual time of 2pm, members (and guests, if you dare!) are invited to “join the party” at 9:30 am and spend the morning giving the depot a proper cleaning. Lunch will be provided along with other party favors (read “cleaning supplies”), and everyone’s invited to hang around for some fellowship (read “train-spotting”) afterwards.

Getting the depot ready for the folk festival has become a priority among local civic groups. In addition to the chapter’s cleanup, the Leeds Historical Society has is making some needed repairs to the building, and the festival committee is making plans to spruce up the grounds with additional landscaping.

So come on down to the depot on September 12 and lend a hand or two. And please pass the word that we’re on for 9:30am. At least that should make some afternoon football fans happy!

Editor’s note: Our thanks to Bryan Schaffer, special agent in charge with BNSF, for agreeing to reschedule his planned September program to our next regular meeting on November 14.

Restoration update

New operator’s desk installed in agent-operator’s office

A major step towards restoration of the depot’s original telegraph and telephone system was taken in July with the installation of a new operator’s desk in the agent’s office.

The new desk will support the depot’s telegraph and telephone equipment, to be installed as part of the ongoing restoration of the agent’s office as funds become available. The original desk was removed during the 1984 building redesign and replaced by a standard writing desk.

The six-foot long desk top with storage cabinets was installed in the bay window where the depot’s operator was stationed. From there, the operator could view the tracks in both directions and communicate with the dispatcher and others regarding train movements through Leeds.

The desk was designed by Joe Christian, an expert in railroad telegraph and telephone communications, and was fabricated by Henry Johnson, a master craftsman who has done numerous woodworking projects for the Leeds Historical Society. The desk was donated to the chapter by member Marvin Clemons in honor of his long-time friend Jack Gillespie, a former Southern Railway operator who worked at Leeds in the 1960’s.



Sitting at the newly installed operator’s desk is MSC member Marvin Clemons, with designer Joe Christian.

Board of Directors

New board organizes, plans for chapter development

The newly appointed MSC board of directors is organizing and making plans for the chapter's continued development.

At the Executive Committee meeting on August 23, Chairman Marv Clemons welcomed new directors Eddie Cook, Dan Ferris, Lee Singletary, and Tim Smith. They join Executive Committee members Clemons, Vice-Chair Ron Mele and Secretary/Treasurer Stan Burnett on the new board.

The board's first order of business was to organize itself around specific functions aimed at developing a strong and sustainable chapter. The board will meet again in November to finalize a strategic plan to be presented at the January meeting of the general membership.

We congratulate the new board members and thank them for their contribution to the chapter.

STRANGE BUT TRUE!

The Unique and Unusual Truth about Railroads

The US standard railroad gauge (distance between the rails) is 4 feet 8.5 inches. That's an exceedingly odd number. Why was that gauge used? Because that's the way they built them in England, and English expatriates built the US railroads.

Why did the English build them like that? Because the first rail lines were built by the same people who built the pre-railroad tramways, and that's the gauge they used.

Why did 'they' use that gauge then? Because the people who built the tramways used the same jigs and tools that they used for building wagons, which used that wheel spacing. So why did the wagons have that particular odd wheel spacing? Well, if they tried to use any other spacing, the wagon wheels would break on some of the old, long distance roads in England, because that's the spacing of the wheel ruts.

So who built those old rutted roads? The first long distance roads in Europe (and England) were built by Imperial Rome for their legions. The roads have been used ever since. And the ruts? Roman war chariots first made the initial ruts, which everyone else had to match for fear of destroying their wagon wheels and wagons. Since the chariots were made for, or by Imperial Rome, they were all alike in the matter of wheel spacing.

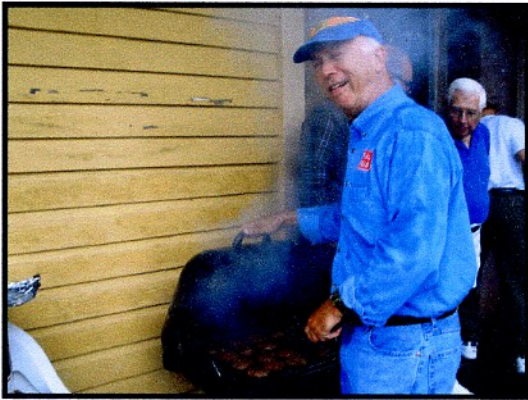
Thus, we have the answer to the original question. The United States standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8.5 inches derives from the original specification for an Imperial Roman war chariot, which was made just wide enough to accommodate the rear-ends of two war-horses. And you thought you knew a lot about railroads!



Thanks and a tip of the oil can to MSC Member Greg Allison for this "Strange But True!"

July Chapter Cookout

A stormy summer's day didn't dampen the spirits of the thirty or so MSC members and guests who attended the chapter's first (annual?) July cookout social on Saturday, July 11. With the exception of grill master "So Rare" Clemons, we discovered we have some swell chefs in the house. Our thanks to everyone for coming and sharing the food and fellowship. We look forward to seeing everyone again next summer!



Where there's smoke, there's burned burgers!



Mike Floyd and guest Joe Christian chow down

Convicted felons on work release? Naw, just some of the gang taking in the wet weather. From left to right, guest Doc Clements with board members Stan Burnett, Tim Smith, and Ron Mele. Keeping his distance from brother Tim is member Ken Smith, seen at far right.



Our devoted patron Marie Cromer (center), holds forth with guests Henry and Helen Johnson from Moody.



Board member Eddie Cook (right) shares his table (but not his lunch) with reporter Meredith McCay. *Write him up, Meredith!*

July Chapter Cookout



Looking on attentively, Sam and (board member) Dan Ferris appear slightly skeptical as Stan Burnett describes how he put away his fourth hamburger at lunch. *Well, guys, seeing is believing!*



Enjoying some father-son rail fanning, Bryan Schaffer with son James (left) join Greg Owings and son Hayden out on the platform for a glimpse of the morning *Crescent*.



A perfect ending to a perfect day!

Thanks to Kayron Clemons for the great photos!

From the Observation Platform by Marvin Clemons, Chairman

Another autumn is coming to Alabama, bringing with it some of the best rail-fanning weather of the year. Sunny cool days are ideal for getting out onto the main line with a camera or just sitting out on the viewing platform at the depot and taking in the action.

This fall is very special in another way, as it marks the first anniversary of our chapter's founding in November 2008. It's been a remarkable year and we have lots to show for it: A healthy membership, a new board of directors with great ideas, some enjoyable programs, and many new friends. Not least of all, we have the historic Leeds depot as our home, and what nicer abode could there be for a group dedicated to preserving our local railroad heritage!

We are all indebted to "the kindness of strangers" for many of our blessings. As a group, we are especially thankful for our gracious hosts, the City of Leeds and the Leeds Historical Society, for welcoming us into their midst. Two people in particular, Frank Little, the Society's past president and current chairman of the board, and Marie Cromer, a founding member and creator of the John Henry Celebration, have been unswerving in their support to our chapter. As we celebrate our first open house in the depot, let's remember to thank Marie, Frank, and all the fine folks in Leeds for making it all possible!

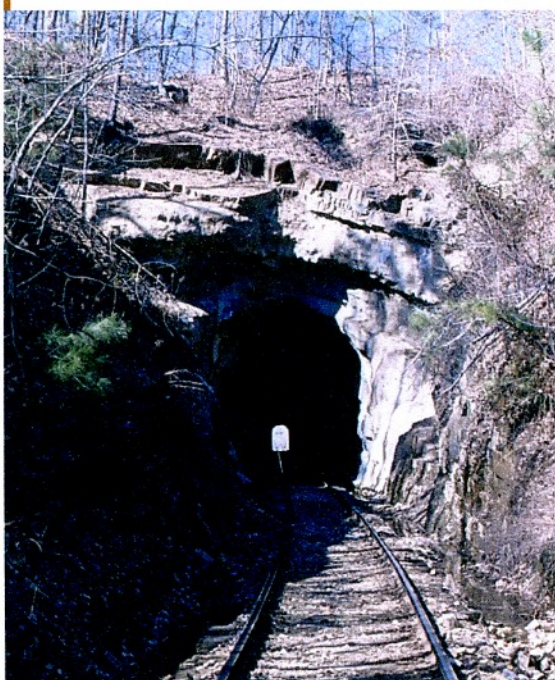


Photo courtesy of Alan Dismukes

Where Are We?

"A railroad tunnel," you ask? Very good for starters! Look at the entrance. No fancy portal, just a rough bore into the rock. Perhaps a secondary main line or branch line? "Hmm, wait a minute....Isn't that welded rail?" Could be!

Here's a clue: This tunnel saw daily passenger service into the early 1950's and 150-car freight trains with six-motor power lashups well into the 1980's, but successive mergers and shifting traffic patterns eventually made the line redundant. After a brief reprise under private ownership, the line was sold for scrap. It might have become Alabama's premier rail trail, but instead the right of way has been "extinguished." (hint-hint!) So, where are we?

LAST LOCATION; Many of our Central of Georgia fans recognized the shot of CofG Local #2 at Opelika, AL. Pretty good guesswork, considering some 60 years have passed since the photo was taken!



What? "Depot Cleanup Day" (in lieu of regular 2pm meeting)

When? Saturday, September 12, 9:30 am till noon.

Where? The Historic Leeds Depot, Leeds, Alabama

Who? You and anyone you'd like to bring along. Lunch will be provided, along with all the trains you can watch!