

In Spite of Lean Times, Excursion-Railroad Ridership Remains Healthy (Including Ours!)

Though a straitened economy has presumably pinched the money American families

spend on recreational activities, tourist railroads across the country are reporting that

their ridership has held steady over the last year.

That was almost precisely

the experience of the Austin & Texas Central, with a total 2011 ridership of 25,384--only about 400 fewer than the previous year.

The continuing strong showing of the A&TC is partly attributable to good, reliable service on the part of the railroad's volunteers and staff, and partly to strong and flexible marketing efforts across multiple media, but also to increasing efforts to make Cedar Park, the railroad's home terminal, a popular tourist destination.

According to Katie Krampitz, Cedar Park's tourism services manager, bed-tax revenues from the city's six hotels sagged in 2011 but are already "starting to swing back up."

"Generally," she said, "things are picking up pretty well after a slowdown due to the economy."

Krampitz said the city is promoting the railroad as Cedar Park's "top attraction," but is also trying to maximize the popularity of the 8,000-seat Cedar Park Center, which offers not only a home arena for Texas Stars hockey and Austin Toros basketball, but also a venue for many other events including circus performances and musical acts.

City tourism officials, she said, are also strongly pushing the concept of Cedar Park as a jumping-off place for family tours of the lakes, wineries

(Continued on back page.)

Trackside Monument Honors One of Burnet County's Favorite Sons

Just west of the A&TC's restored depot in Bertram, there now stands a life-size statue of an alert young Marine from World War I, on a granite base inscribed with the monogram of Texas A&M University.

The bronze figure is that of James V. "Pinky" Wilson, who lived on a ranch north of Bertram until his death in 1980, but who years earlier attained lasting fame among his fellow Aggies as the composer of A&M's famous "Aggie War Hymn," (the fight song that commences, "Hullabaloo, caneck, caneck....")

Placing the statue at the Bertram depot was the idea of Burnet funeral director Bill Wilcox (Bertram was "where they bought their groceries," he said), who also sponsored the installation of an identical statue outside the Corps of Cadets building on the A&M campus, a cenotaph honoring Wilson in the Texas State Cemetery, and a new grave marker in Burnet's Post Mountain Cemetery, where Wilson and his wife are interred.

Wilcox said "Pinky's" likeness was cast by the Matthews Bronze Co. of Pittsburgh, following a photograph taken of Wilson in Germany on Armistice Day, 1918.

The privately funded effort to commemorate Wilson has been spearheaded not only by Wilcox but also by Gene Taylor, Macyl Orman and Ray Cagle of Burnet, helped by noted Aggies such as rancher/gubernatorial candidate Clayton Williams and Texas Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson.

Wilson, who was born in Florence in Williamson County, was a junior at A&M when he joined the Marines in 1917. While his unit was engaged in the massive and bloody Battle of the Argonne Forest which broke German resistance at the end of the war, "Pinky," pinned down in a muddy trench, is said to have scrib-



bled the words to the Aggie War Hymn on the envelope of a letter from home.

He returned to graduate from A&M and lived a quiet ranching life in Burnet County after the war, and for many years, in spite of numerous inquiries, would not reveal the meaning of "Hullabaloo, caneck, caneck."

Wilcox, however, said that toward the end of his life, "Pinky" explained that in the midst of the Argonne battlefield, "hullabaloo" referred to the "hell of a fix" in which the Marines found themselves, and that "caneck caneck" mimicked the sound of German artillery pieces being reloaded across the lines.

Thanks to Our Generous Friends!

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Volunteer's Investigations Shed Light on Early Days in ASTA's Home Town

In 1881, as the locating surveyors of the Austin & Northwestern Railroad came out of the valley of Brushy Creek and pointed their transits northwestward toward what is now Cedar Park, they encountered the ranch of one of the most notably enterprising families of 19th-Century Central Texas.

When the close of the Civil War brought a nationwide demand for Texas beef, George Cluck loaded up his wife Harriet and three children and took a herd up the famous Chisholm Trail. When the advent of barbed wire brought a sudden demand for fence posts, he returned to his ranch and made a thriving business cutting its abundant cedar. And when the narrow-gauge railroad built up and around the curve out of Brushy Creek, his son Emmett decided to make the ranch the location of a new town.

The railroad management had located a stop on the Cluck ranch they called Brueggerhoff after one of

the line's directors, but no one in the area liked the name—too hard to pronounce, much less spell. Emmett Cluck had a better idea; he proposed the name "Cedar Park," and busily set about creating a little settlement worthy of the name.

The name indeed stuck after it was approved by the U.S. postal authorities, and Cluck built near the tracks a house for his family and a store which also housed the post office. (His mother was postmistress for eight years.)

The railroad built a depot, a section house for maintenance-of-way men and a residence for their foreman, and between his own house and the station Cluck laid out a "strolling park" for visitors with benches, trees, shrubs and raised flower beds.

Flash forward more than a century, when veteran ASTA Volunteer Jimmie Burleyson became curious about the area where the depot, the Cluck buildings and the "strolling park" had once stood.



A 1917 photo of the Cedar Park depot, primarily a shelter for passengers and local freight, as at the time it was not a train-order office.

The site, measuring three or four acres and on the market for several years, had recently been cleared of some of its heavier brush. The old foreman's house near the tracks still stands, and material from the nearby demolished Whitestone School occupies part of the tract, but the depot, store and Cluck homestead are long gone.

Taking a weed-trimmer to the thick grass, Burleyson soon uncovered a substantial stone sidewalk that had once led from the Cluck house through the park grounds to

the depot, as well as the foundation of the house itself.

Hidden in the weeds were a crop of iron artifacts, including several narrow-gauge track spikes.

Burleyson, a retired Texas Department of Public Safety officer, and his wife Kathy have been very active ASTA volunteers since 1999. Kathy has worked in many capacities including managing the railroad's concession operations, and Jimmie has likewise performed many jobs, including conductor and member of the board of directors.



Clearing off the site revealed the substantially built walkway that led from the Clucks' home to the depot. The present-day main track is visible through the trees. (Jimmie Burleyson photo.)



Lurking in the weeds around the old Cluck property and Cedar park depot were these diminutive narrow-gauge spikes and at least one old-fashioned cut nail. Modern standard-gauge spike on the right is shown for comparison.

Ridership.....(continued from front page.)

and other attractions of the Hill Country.

Coöperative marketing efforts by the Austin & Texas Central, city tourism authorities and the city's hotels have paid off in keeping the railroad's ridership strong, even in lean economic times.

A&TC ridership peaked in 2008 at just over 29,000 and has since dropped and leveled off slightly, but revenues have remained strong as the railroad improved the availability and quality of higher-end accommodations on the trains.

Nationally, according to Aaron Isaacs of the Tourist Railroad Association Inc. and Association of Railroad Museums, consistent ridership figures have been hard to gather, but a recent survey of tourist-railroad operators showed that their ridership "stayed about the same" in 2011 (43 per cent), while

25.5 per cent reported it had "increased somewhat." (A smaller proportion—20 per cent—reported ridership had "decreased somewhat.")

At least, Isaacs reported, "more railroads and museums showed ridership increases than decreases."



Chuck Hamsa, aka Old St. Nick, entertaining some of the more than 3,400 passengers who flocked to 2011's 15 North Pole Flyers. Tickets are already on sale for 2012's holiday trains!

Annual Reports Are Now Available Online

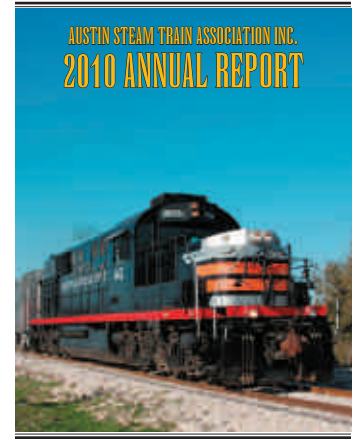
ASTA's annual report to its members is now easily accessible on our website, www.austinsteamtrain.org.

The annual report has not only the association's balance sheet and a summary of the year's financial activities, but also a full picture of ASTA including information on our

ridership, equipment, board and staff.

The latest report now online is for 2010, and a report for 2011 will be posted this spring.

On the site, go from "About ASTA" on the home page to "The Organization," and you'll find links both to annual reports and to back issues of the *Call Board* for the last two years.



Your Winter Call Board!

Austin Steam Train Association Inc.
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