

## Travelogue about the Railroaders Memorial Museum at Altoona, Pennsylvania

In the fall of 2018, I was fortunate to be able to participate an excursion with a group from the Smithsonian Institute and visit the Railroaders Memorial Museum. During the visit I took pictures, some of which are inserted into my travelogue of the visit.



The museum is located at 1300 Ninth Avenue in Altoona, Pennsylvania on the site of the former Penn Central Railroad Shop and is dedicated to revealing, interpreting, commemorating and celebrating the significant contributions of Railroaders and their families to American life and industry. While there are many static displays of train cars and locomotives the emphasis of the museum is on the life of the railroaders not the railroad itself. Altoona, Pennsylvania's contribution to the railroad was significant as by the 1920's the railroad works employed 15, 000 workers and by 1945 the Pennsylvania Rail Road's facilities here were the largest in the world.

In 1965 Altoona lost the bid for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Railroad Museum, but the residents of Altoona didn't give up the idea of a Railroad Museum in Altoona. In 1966 an ad was placed in the Altoona Mirror, a local newspaper, searching for parties that would be interested in establishing a Railroad Museum in the City. The Altoona Railway Museum Club was formed and adopted Altoona Railway Museum Association as it's' name. In 1968 the National Railway Historical Society granted a charter to the association and Chapter members began to collect railroad memorabilia and displaying historical objects at various civic events around the city. This lead to the incorporation of the museum as the Railroaders Memorial Museum in 1972. In 1975 the Museum acquired a private rail car, The Loretto, from Charles M. Schwab. Around the same time the Altoona Redevelopment Authority sold the former Penn Central Railroad shop complex to the Center Associations with an agreement that they make a 5 acre site available for the Railroad Museum.



On May 12, 1979 ground was broken on the Railroad Museum and the Museum celebrated a grand opening on September 21, 1980. The Museum then acquired a Pennsylvania Rail Road K4 locomotive and moved it from the Horseshoe Curve to its building in Altoona for restoration. After two years the excursions using the restored K4 locomotive returned to the rails as the "Pride of Altoona" and hauled thousands of passengers.

In 1993 the Museum acquired the former Pennsylvania Railroad master mechanics building and an adjoining parcel of land and began renovations to the building in 1995. In 1997 exhibit fabrication and installation work of the exhibits took place leading up to the grand opening of the "New" Museum on April 25, 1998.

There is plenty to see at the Museum, the three story former master mechanics building has static displays and interactive



exhibits arranged such that you can easily follow the life of the railroaders and citizens of the city. The **first floor** has three areas that encompass:



“Working on the Railroad” where the sounds of steam engines welcome you back to the days when rail was king. In the lobby, a life-size replica of K-4 #1361 stands tribute to the 6,000 steam locomotives built in Altoona, and to the workers who built them.

“Why in the World Altoona” where you can find out why quiet little Altoona, at the foot of the Allegheny Front, became the bustling heart of construction for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Here you can look back on the rail city’s days of prosper, a central Pennsylvania city that was home to rail barons living in luxury as well as immigrants working long hours on the railroad.

And the “Norfolk Southern Theatre” where you can watch a movie entitled “Altoona at Work: An Era of Steam” which will immerse you in the time when life in Altoona revolved around the railroad, and the Pennsylvania Railroad revolved around Altoona. You can also go back to 1854 to the “Birth of the Curve” to see why the Horseshoe Curve was necessary and how this engineering marvel was constructed. And finally you can view “Working the Mountain: Workers of the Horseshoe Curve” a movie that tells the day-to-day story of the Horseshoe Curve through interviews with track workers, locomotive engineers and others who worked there over the years it has existed.

The **second floor** has eight exhibits that allow you to see how some of the areas of the city appeared such as:

“City Built by and for Railroaders” where you can wander from Dutch Hill to Little Italy, among the ethnic neighborhoods that Altoona’s railroaders called home.

“In the Community” where you can track down the diverse interests that occupied railroaders outside the shop, from churches to secret societies to picnics at local amusement parks.

“At Home” which provides a glimpse on how railroaders’ wives ran their home “shops” from their kitchen tables, struggling to bring order to a city of grime.

“The Bar” the local meeting hole where you can take the railroader trivia test, and listen to workers “hash” the day’s events and argue local politics.

“Country Girl/City Girl” an exhibit that will help you find out the difference as you cross the bridge high above the rail yard.

“Motive Power Division” an exhibit that allows you to explore the shops where the locomotives that moved the Pennsy’s trains were designed and built to exacting standards – from casting 80-inch drive wheels to choosing the color of trim paint.

“Maintenance Division” the exhibit that provides you information about the gangs, gandy dancers and others who built and maintained the Pennsylv’s 26,000 miles of track, tunnels and stations, and the wreck crews who dealt with disaster.

“Transportation Division” where you can test your skills at fast-paced track switching for just a few of the 5,000 trains the Pennsy ran each day, and find out why the brakeman had the most dangerous job on the railroad.

The **third floor** has exhibits which include:

“Railroaders as American Heroes” where you can search the Museum’s extensive database to see if your family members worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR), which counted 279,000 active employees at its height.

“How to Run a Railroad” where model trains chug down the track as you learn how railroaders moved trains and communicated in the days before high-tech satellites.

“Travel” where you can experience train travel of days gone by, from elegant stations and luxurious dining cars to the secret signs of hobos. See how Pennsy passenger cars brought travelers to America’s natural wonders and big cities.

“Report to the Shareholders” an exhibit where you can learn about the difference between the PRR’s public image and the private reality of its thousands of railroad workers, including union battles, pensions and on-the-job injuries.

“The Standard Railroad of the World” participate as a Pennsy master mechanic and conduct some of the tests that helped the Pennsylvania Railroad set the pace for precision around the globe. From squeezing oranges to inspecting safety glasses to putting locomotives through their paces, the testing labs made railroading a science.

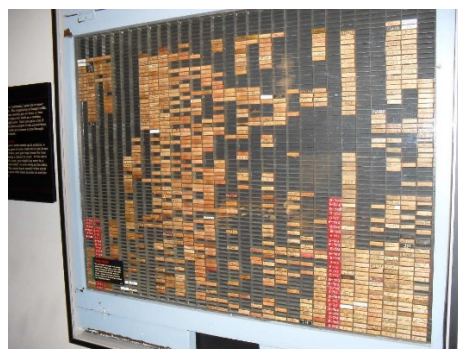
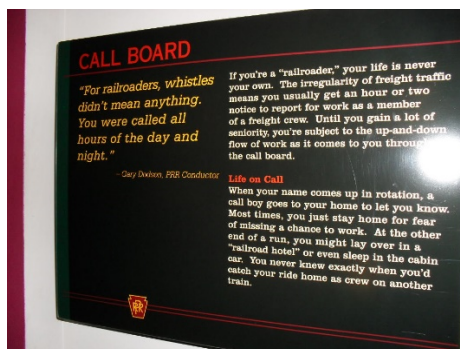
“The End of an Era” where you can learn what roles victory walking sticks, security passes and Rosie the Riveter played for railroaders during World War II, before airplanes and interstate highways began nudging aside trains as America’s transportation of choice.

“Special Events Room” a special place where you can have attend a special event.

More information about the Railroaders Memorial Museum at Altoona can be found on the internet using the link:

<https://www.railroadcity.com/visit/museum/>

Here are some pictures of the Museum facility that I took on the day of my visit:



The Call Board that told you when you were to work.



Here is the Pennsy K4 steam locomotive #1361 that is in the restoration process. It was at the Steamtown site for a couple of years and now is back at the Museum awaiting more funding to continue the process. It is currently in the round house at the Museum.



Here is picture that shows some of the roundhouse from the turntable side. There are several rail cars stored inside the roundhouse that you can view.



A picture taken from the AMTRAK station on the other side of the main line from the Museum. Some of the cars awaiting restoration are shown on a siding there.