

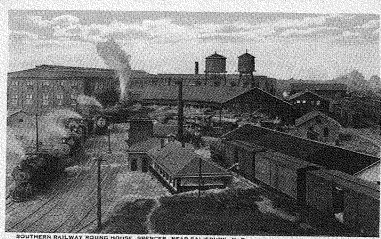
SUMMER/FALL  
2012

N O R T H C A R O L I N A  
CONVERSATIONS



A PUBLICATION OF THE NORTH CAROLINA HUMANITIES COUNCIL





SOUTHERN RAILWAY ROUND HOUSE, SPENCER, NEAR SALISBURY, N. C.

The Southern Railway Round House in Spencer was once home to the Spencer Shops, a repair house for the many steam locomotives that carried the state's freight and passengers. The shop was active from 1896 through the late 1970s. It is currently active as the North Carolina Transportation Museum. The Humanities Council's 2012 Teachers Institute Summer Seminar participants spent the day here as part of the Humanities Council's *Laying Down Tracks — A Study of Railroads as Myth, Reality, and Symbol*. Find out more about the seminar on p. 32. In addition, Museum on Main Street's *Journey Stories* exhibition will be housed at the museum from January 5 — February 17, 2013.

"Southern Railway Round House, Spencer, near Salisbury, N.C." in Durwood Barbour Collection of North Carolina Postcards (P077), North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

## NORTH CAROLINA CONVERSATIONS

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## FROM THE CORNER OF ELM AND FRIENDL

Shelley Crisp, Executive Director

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,  
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,  
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,  
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,  
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand  
singing on the steamboat deck,  
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,  
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or  
at noon intermission or at sundown,  
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of  
the girl sewing or washing,  
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else...

Walt Whitman's catalogue of working Americans celebrates industry, commerce, craftsmanship, travel, trade, home, journeys — the spirit of individuals in a country where the whole is greater than its parts. First published in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the same year the Fresnel lens lit the Cape Lookout, North Carolina, light-house, casting light 19 miles out into the Graveyard of the Atlantic, Whitman's anthem is an emblem of shared enterprise, of democracy, of America's story: *E pluribus unum*, diversity and democracy, the essence of the "American Experiment."

In the 1970s, the North Carolina Humanities Council funded a series of scholar-led forums that addressed a "Reassessment of the American Experiment." The Council's resources have been put to use chronicling, celebrating, addressing, and assessing ever since, including topics as far-ranging as the Constitution's Bicentennial, the decline of agricultural society, the haunted past and threatened future of Appalachian culture, and the fight for equality in the public schools. Why? The 1965 legislation creating the National Endowment for the Humanities and the State Humanities Councils states:

Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support... the arts and the humanities [which] reflect the high place accorded by the American people to the nation's rich cultural heritage and to the fostering of mutual respect for the diverse beliefs and values of all persons and groups.... [to] support, then, an orderly continuation of free society, and provide models of excellence to the American people.... (The National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965)

Affording "wisdom and vision" continues to be the work of the North Carolina Humanities Council as does "the fostering of mutual respect for the diverse beliefs and values of all persons and groups." In this issue of *North Carolina Conversations* are varied voices, like those in Whitman's song, clear evidence that, as Richard Brodhead's Caldwell lecture argues, "the humanities are not a specialized taste but the root of the most basic human and civic competencies." The words of *Crossroads* authors, the detailed accounting in "The Annual Report to the People," the work of teachers and project directors, the wisdom of scholars and story-tellers — all contribute their gifts to the cause of excellence and shared endeavor.

# Laying Down Tracks: A Social Studies Teacher's Notebook

*Timothy McDonough*

**Laying Down Tracks ~ A Study of Railroads as Myth, Reality, and Symbol** was the theme for the 2012 Teachers Institute Summer Seminar held at The Friday Center for Continuing Education in Chapel Hill, June 17-23. Through literature, art, music, and history, participants explored various viewpoints of railroads, considering how trains and railroads have functioned as symbols of power, change, and inevitability.

Christmas in springtime! Weeks before the Teachers Institute 2012 Summer Seminar would begin, select educators across the state received a present — a box of books and other reading material. Later, a seminar participant would comment how all these texts enhance his professional library — one of the goals, I discovered, of the Teachers Institute.

Good books and good learning experiences are full of information — and questions. Why are Black women, ill-dressed for the winter weather, cleaning up a railroad right-of-way? Why does the Illinois Central's magazine feature a recurring racist cartoon? The most exalted position the "best and "brightest" of slave descendants can aspire to is "porter"? We read and we wrote.

Shouldn't a railroad course be about Casey Jones and John Henry, robber barons and a lonesome train whistle, hopping freights before interstate highways existed? The seminar notebook and texts included all of the above and more: the golden spike joining East and West, the romance of the rails, plans for "high speed" rails — and the exploitation and corruption so evident in the building of

the railroads. How do trains affect our lives today? Do they?

The seminar hadn't even started yet.

A diverse group of 40 educators came together in Chapel Hill on the afternoon of June 17 to begin a week of learning. Among us were college instructors, librarians, school counselors, teachers of all grade levels and subject areas and of all kinds of students. Our ages and outlooks, accents and skin tones were as varied. We were geographically diverse as well. An icebreaker required that we creatively merge to create our own North Carolina rail companies and routes. Piedmont people were most eager to find counterparts from Waynesville and Beaufort.

Thus, we began.

The core of these summer seminars is found in small group seminars designed as intense graduate-level experiences.

Dr. David Zonderman (History, NC State University) began with a discussion about the irony of a group of states seceding from their union with other states over the issue of state's rights — and immediately forming a new

"Confederate States," banding together to fight a war. Almost incidentally, they needed some sort of coordinated railroad policy. In this new "nation," who decided anything? The resulting Southern RR mess was inevitable.

Dr. Rachel Willis (American Studies and Economics, UNC Chapel Hill) brought a laser-like focus to determine who controls the rail corridor. She made clear that whether the plans are for interstate rail or intra-urban, serving the people and places is the most important task. Teachers should find such ways to make our lessons so clear to students.

Dr. Anne Baker (English, NC State University) delighted participants with a fresh literary perspective using poetry, short stories, and essays. A discussion of a Langston Hughes poem written in dialect sparked questions: If it's uncomfortable, why? Does it put us back into Jim Crow times? Does it sound demeaning? Are these questions personal, political, aesthetic, racial? This historical and philosophical discussion — from a poem!



Teachers are dwarfed inside the Back Shop at the North Carolina Transportation Museum. Built in 1905, this building served as the major overhaul facility for steam locomotives. Photo by Lou Nachman.



Teachers take a ride on the turn-table at the Bob Julian Roundhouse. The 37-bay roundhouse, built in 1924, is one of the largest remaining such structures in the country. The first 16 bays hold steam and diesel locomotives, cabooses, freight cars, and passenger cars. The roundhouse was dedicated as a Historical Mechanical and Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers in 2011. Photo by Lou Nachman

In the larger group, other quality academic aspects of the seminars were evident: visitors, guest lecturers, documentary film, art, music, related literature, class discussion, performance. From personnel at UNC's School of Education and at Wilson Library we learned of a multitude of primary sources and additional resources available to us. We rode a train to spend the day at the North Carolina Museum of Transportation in Spencer and benefitted from "behind the scenes" experiences. All of this affords us with resources that we can use with our own students.

The seminar encouraged us toward a broad view of educational tools: they can be anything! Beyond those already mentioned come others such as signage, architecture, and design; competition, games, and prizes; customer relations, and scheduling of Amtrak; background strategy, politics, museum management, and government relations; a view from a train. The list of educational "supplies" is as limitless as human imagination, and the Teachers Institute experience made this quite apparent.

During the week we learned that standard gauge for railroad tracks is 56½ inches. Also called "Stephenson gauge" after a British railroad pioneer, it describes most of the track in the world. The various other spans in use are called "narrow gauge" and "broad gauge." Brazil, for example, has both broad and narrow gauge, thousands of miles of each.

When I was growing up in Cooperstown, NY in the 1950s and 60s, a Delaware and Hudson freight train came about a hundred yards from my front door. Passenger service had been discontinued long before. A friend lived with his family in the former passenger terminal, and we used to play in their giant "baggage

room." The last scheduled passenger train departed from that ornate stone station 78 years ago.

The specifics about Brazil and my childhood do not come from our summer seminar syllabus.

But the spark to learn does.

I look into track width and the D&H because I want to know. This is not likely subject matter for my students. But teaching them to follow up on ideas that interest them — to investigate further and learn more — is certainly something all of us can learn from "Laying Down Tracks."

And that lesson most definitely will roll into my lessons.

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Timothy McDonough is a social studies teacher, grades 6-12, at the Lakeview at Red Mill Road school in Durham, NC. A Teachers Institute alumnus, he completed the 2009 spring semester course, "The South in Black and White," a collaboration between the North Carolina Humanities Council and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. He also attended the fall 2009 Teachers Institute weekend seminar in Wilmington, NC, "The Segregated South Through Autobiography." In this article, McDonough reflects on his experience at the week-long 2012 Teachers Institute Summer Seminar.