

## **NIGEL HUNT'S (ASSOCIATE MEMBER OF WATTRAIN) COMMENTS ON SW USA - WATTRAIN CONFERENCE 2018 (Dec. 14, 2018)**

On arrival in Frisco we had an invitation to visit the Frisco Heritage Museum where Karl Ziebarth, former Executive VP and CFO, was entertaining an audience with his talk on the history of the Missouri – Kansas – Texas Railroad (locally known as 'KATY') from its formation in 1865 until amalgamation with Union Pacific in 1988. A background introduction to local and regional developments.

We had arrived in Texas to attend the 2018 triennial World Alliance of Tourist Trams and Trains (WATTRAIN) Conference. Dallas Fort Worth Airport is c. 9 hours from Heathrow, and our base in Frisco 30 miles further south. Transfer by taxi produced a quickfire introduction to American roads and associated transport. We were advised that Frisco is the fastest growing city in the state. It certainly has a vast array of new buildings and construction sites, knitted together with a network of intertwining roads. The city emanates from a settlement built around a water-stop on the railroad, and the logo of an animal skin is a legacy of the days when staff supplemented their income by selling racoon skins!

Unless involved in Committees 31<sup>st</sup> October was a free day. Unfortunately, it was also time to remain indoors – rain deluged all day. For those of us familiar with public transport Frisco is denuded of this provision - cars and taxis the modus operandi. Fortunately, the hotel hosted 'Kick-Back' sessions each evening – drinks and snacks and time to relax and meet colleagues and friends.

On behalf of our hosts, the Museum of American Railroad, Director Bob LaPrelle welcomed representatives from 8 countries world-wide to WATTRAIN Conference held on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> November at the Drury Inn and Suites in Frisco. Under the theme '*Addressing Tomorrow's Challenges with Today's Resources*' we were invited to listen to, and discuss, presentations verbal and pictorial; details will be available on the website - [www.wattrain.org](http://www.wattrain.org). The Partners' programme included retail therapy!

Annual General Meeting was held on the morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> November, with usual matters discussed and agreed. During the meeting, David Morgan retired after many years as President. Stefano Benazzo was confirmed as the next President and his first pronouncement was that David be appointed President Emeritus in recognition of past service.

Study tours consumed the remainder of our stay in Texas. After lunch on 2<sup>nd</sup> November, we headed for Dallas, first stop Union St station. The ground floor is still used by railroads, the remainder of the 1916 buildings normally off-limits to visitors. Elegant architecture is a reminder of past grandeur and importance of railroads in city development. The station is served by a frequent electric light-rail service (DART), Trinity Railway Express commuter diesel-hauled services and Amtrak. Next stop the 6<sup>th</sup> Floor Museum that focuses on history and mystery associated with assassination of President JF Kennedy. Our final visit was to McKinney Avenue Transport Authority, where a visit to the depot to view some of their vintage cars preceded a trip around the McKinney Avenue Loop (aboard Dallas car no.186, b.1913). The trip included the turntable at the end of a bi-directional link-line to Uptown Station (connection with the DART system). We split into groups for dinner, sampling a variety of offerings in local restaurants.

Museum of American Railroad was first visit on 3<sup>rd</sup> November. With foresight of having a connection built into the main freight network, most stock has been relocated from Dallas to Frisco by rail. Open-air storage will be a problem until the phased building programme comes to fruition, the project progressing as finances permit. Having seen plans for the area a site visit ensued, a chance to see and investigate rolling-stock, including 'Big-Boy' steam-loco no.4801 and diesel-loco no.6913, survivor of the large 'Centennial' locomotives. Covered accommodation will eventually help save hard-earned restoration and conservation of rolling-stock. Visit to the site ended with a viewing of the intriguing 'TrainTopia' – a massive display of model railways with various backdrops.

We then crossed the city to Grapevine, north-west of the main centre. The railway-line through town is chiefly used by freight services but is being upgraded for a regular Trinity Railway Express link to DFW Airport. At weekends, 'The Grapevine Vintage Railway' runs to Fort Worth. Following a very brief visit to the workshops to view overhaul of their steam-loco, we boarded a diesel-hauled train (headed by class GP7 loco no.2199), the 4 carriages fully-booked. Services run to Fort Worth Stockyards, an extremely popular, very commercialised, tourist-cum-heritage centre. With many road and rail crossings not the fastest of journeys, but we travelled in style and comfort in a vintage coach. The evening ended back in Frisco with a visit to Babe's Chicken Diner, a very popular venue next to the Heritage Museum. The museum has displays of local history and is temporary home for some of MoAR's small exhibits. Unfortunately, time constraints permitted only the briefest of visits.

The remainder of our American vacation was based around an add-on programme. Having left Dallas at an elevation of c.450ft we would be spending the remaining days at elevation 7-8,000ft! A flight from DFW to Durango (Colorado) preceded a day as guests of Al Harper and Rail Events and Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad – spiritual home to the ‘Polar Express’. A small town with delightful architecture; not difficult to imagine days of horse and cart. On 5<sup>th</sup> November, along with representatives of N. America’s Heritage Railway Alliance, we enjoyed a trip along the D+SNR, the line climbing into the San Juan National Forest, with dramatic scenery, to Cascade Canyon, roughly halfway to Silverton. Along with the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad this line is a survivor of the 3ft-gauge network built to transport ore mined in the region. The line opened in 1882 as part of the Denver & Rio Grande Railway. Our 1920’s locomotive (K36 class no. 482) took the train along the line as it runs, in places, on a narrow ledge in the Animas River valley. We saw the effects of forest fires, which had raged through the area last summer and the work in reinvigorating sections of line, which had either been washed away or badly damaged by subsequent floodwaters. A great day out – the sun shone all day adding a sheen to brilliant autumnal colours. The railway’s museum is a wonderful mix of artefacts associated with both railway and town development. Following the forest fires, the railway has decided to convert one of its steam locos from coal-fired to oil-burning. Two powerful diesel-locos have also been ordered. Both these projects are expected to be achieved during spring 2019.

Road trip to Santa Fe (New Mexico) took us across desolate country with some spectacular rock formations and sparse vegetation interspersed with settlements of various sizes. At one point, we crossed the continental divide which defines whether rivers flow to one coast or another. Most of the land is defined as Indian reservation and managed by several tribes.

The heart of Santa Fe has retained its historical aura, with traditional adobe architecture adding to the ambience. The area around The Plaza reflects seventeenth century Spanish settlement. The once numerous railroads are history, but the Stockyard area has been redeveloped to encourage tourism. The old railway-station survives as terminus of the remaining railroad, the ‘Rail Runner Express’ commuter service to Albuquerque – loco-hauled push-pull trains with double-deck carriages.

In Santa Fe our hosts represented Heritage Railway Alliance whose members had arrived for their Fall Conference. Pre-conference we travelled to Los Alamos, where the Bradbury Science Museum is dedicated to USA’s nuclear history (Manhattan Project, etc) and subsequent scientific applications and research. An excellent presentation made the subject easier to understand.

The Conference was held on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> November, with 4 rooms available for presentations. Many the topics, often presented twice in a day to get maximum exposure, were familiar – restoration conundrums, safety, insurance, social media, importance of Friends etc. One evening was set aside for members and visitors to show videos and to share their interests and activities.

Last day of Conference (10th November) included road transfer to Chama across mostly desert / scrub, but some livestock was noted in small areas of pasture - cattle, sheep, horses and even llamas. Locally famous artist Georgia O’Keefe incorporated scenes from the area in her paintings, including the magnificent geology of the country around the Jemez Mountains. Prior to boarding our Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad train at Chama, time to look around the station and view the last wooden coaling-tower, a prelude to a journey on the line opened in 1880. The special train was hauled by class K36 locos 487 and 488. Wonderful scenery as the line meanders and climbs over 2000ft to Cumbres Pass at 10015ft, which due to time constraints was the terminus of our train trip. Before departing we were treated to a special run into the station for the benefit of photographers, who braved ice, snow and a biting cold wind. Continuation to Antonito was by road, where staff and the Friends of C&TSRR ensured that we had opportunity to see progress made on restoration of 19<sup>th</sup> century loco 168 and 5 associated vintage carriages, as well as other projects. They have limited covered accommodation and due to the climate organise work-weeks during the operating season – winters are extremely cold around here.

We returned to Santa Fe by road, with some relics of the old Antonito to Santa Fe railway still visible nearby. This line nicknamed ‘The Chilli Line’ after some of the produce it carried closed in 1941. Dinner on this final evening included a celebration of numerous successes and presentations to winners of a variety of projects.

Our sojourn ended with a road transfer to Albuquerque Airport, and onwards to Heathrow via Dallas Fort Worth. Final connection with rails was a ride on DFW’s frequent ‘Skytrain’ loop-line connecting the 5 terminals.

In conclusion special thanks must go to Bob LaPrelle and Kellie Murphy for their coordination of our activities in Frisco, Tripp Salisbury and McRail for sponsorship and to Al Harper and Jeff Johnson for our brief but memorable stay in Durango. G Mark Ray and management team of HRA are thanked for making us welcome and the

opportunity to join in their activities. Finally thank you to John Bush for his great contribution to both Conference and C&TSRR. For 2 weeks we were entertained by a host of enthusiastic characters associated with rail and tram heritage - thank you. We look forward to renewing friendships at our next Conference in Italy in 2021.

*(Nigel Hunt – Associate member of WATTRAIN)*