



The museum that moves you!

“N.C. Lining Bar Gangs,” the newest permanent exhibit at the N.C. Transportation Museum, opens Feb 24th

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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African-American Railroad workers, their toils and their music will be featured in the newest exhibit at the N.C. Transportation Museum

SPENCER – A little known facet of the history of African American workers on North Carolina Railroads will take center stage when the N.C. Transportation Museum’s newest exhibit opens Feb. 24. The North Carolina Lining Bar Gangs exhibit recalls the labors of African-American railroad workers and their music. At 10 a.m., the ribbon cutting will take place in the Elmer Lam Gallery in the museum’s Bob Julian Roundhouse. This exhibit is a part of the museum’s Black History Month programming, but will remain as a permanent addition to the museum.

Between the mid-1800’s and mid-1900’s rail lines were laid manually across North Carolina and the United States. The workers who performed this hard labor were generally African-American and created their own work-based culture. Music was incorporated into the job both to pass the time, and to aid in completing the work.

Lining bar gangs consisted of several men who laid railroad track onto rail ties. They were known as “gandy dancers,” referring to a “gandy” or lining bar, used to align the tracks. The crews were generally made up of 10-30 laborers and a foreman. Laborers picked up the rail, using rail tongs, placed it on tie plates, and spiked it down to the ties. To maintain a fluid motion, crews sang blues and rag, along with African spirituals dating back to slavery.

The work was back-breaking and took place in the heat of summer. The songs helped keep the workers synchronized and expressed feelings about the hard job they were doing. One traditional song featured the line, “July de red bug, July de fly / Ef Augus' ain' a hot month, lawdy, I pray to die.” The songs also featured humor. One traditional line reads, “I got a gal who's long and tall / Sleeps in the kitchen with her feet in the hall.” Faith and Biblical figures also found their way into these traditional songs, like, “Moses stood on the Red Sea Shore / He was battin’ at the waves with a two by four.” Each line was followed by a refrain. During that refrain, each man would push the rail with his lining bar on certain musical beats.

It was in the 1950’s that mechanization began making lining tracks a faster job. It also heralded the end of the traditional lining bar gang and the music created by those workers. Today, groups like the Buckingham Lining Bar Gang of Buckingham, Va. continue to bring the lining bar gang tradition to railroad festivals and events. The N.C. Transportation Museum is proud to present this important piece of railroading history.

The N.C. Transportation Museum, located in historic Spencer Shops, the former Southern Railway repair facility, is part of the Division of State Historic Sites, Department of Cultural Resources. The museum

is located just five minutes off I-85 at Exit 79 in Spencer, N.C., and about an hour from Charlotte, Greensboro or Winston-Salem. Visit www.nctrans.org for more information. The N.C. Department of Cultural Resources is celebrating the 2009 theme of “Treasure N.C. Culture.” For information on the Department of Cultural Resources, call (919) 807-7385 or visit www.ncculture.com.

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