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Orlando Sentinel

Cozy depot reveals immense role of railroads in Florida and beyond

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Florida Flashback

2:39 PM EST, November 17, 2013

Perhaps there's something special about years that end in 3 or 13, because we've had a bumper crop of anniversaries this year, in advertisement
2013. And this week, a friendly Winter Garden building with a formidable history marks its centennial when the Central Florida Railway Historical Society celebrates the 1913 depot that houses the Central Florida Railroad Museum.

Like the Tavares & Gulf Railroad that built the depot, the museum makes mightier contributions to history than its size would indicate. Operated by the society and the Winter Garden Heritage Foundation, it opens doors to the history of railroading in Central Florida and beyond.

Winter Garden is blessed with two historic train depots. The former Atlantic Coastline station at Plant and Main streets — home to the Winter Garden Heritage Museum — sits on the spot where farmers built the city's first depot in 1893 so they could ship citrus and produce on the Orange Belt Railway.

A couple of blocks away, the T&G line added another wooden depot in 1899. The birthday depot, built of Florida sand brick for \$1,765, replaced it in 1913.

Tavares founder Alexander St. Clair-Abrams also founded the T&G Railroad in the 1880s. Dreaming that his city might become Florida's capital, he planned to take the tracks to St. Petersburg — hence the "Gulf" in the railroad's title — but instead reached Winter Garden, Ocoee and Clermont for a total of 38 miles of track that led to a legendary reputation.

Although known for excellent customer service, the T&G was also plagued by frequent derailments. According to local lore, a T&G train once took a week to go from Tavares to Ocoee and back. Such episodes earned memorable nicknames, including the Turtle and Gopher, the Try and Go, and the popular favorite, the Tug and Grunt.

When citrus was king

But the T&G was no joke; it and other railroads had an enormous impact on the growth of Winter Garden, Orange County and the citrus industry that was once king here.

Before the railroads arrived, folks could grow oranges and other citrus, but the fruit would rot before it reached Northern markets. Central Florida farmers and citrus growers had to haul crops by wagon to steamboats that traveled the St. Johns for passage north.

Railroads opened up the interior of the state to development in a way that had previously been unimaginable. Train cars cooled with big blocks of ice hauled millions of oranges from tracks that ran through Winter Garden. In 1949, the tiny T&G generated more perishable freight per mile of track than any Class 1 railroad in the United States.

Now, the museum in the 1913 T&G depot is open every afternoon at 101 S. Boyd St. in Winter Garden. On Nov. 23, though, it will be open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. with special displays and an anniversary ceremony at 2 p.m. For details, call 407-656-0559 or visit cfrhs.org.

Nov. 22, 1963

After 50 years, most of us who are old enough recall vividly when and how we learned that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. Fellow Boone High alum Kay Harwell Fernandez wrote recently with the memory of being in a yearbook class at Boone, where she was co-editor of the yearbook. "A life-altering time," she wrote.

That day, I was a college freshman, riding a bus to visit a friend for the weekend in Alabama. As the bus passed through cold, gray streets in Birmingham, we passengers looked from the windows to see a solemn newsboy holding up a newspaper. I can't remember if the boxcar headline read "President shot" or "President dead." I know I had never before seen type that big. Many of us on the bus, sealed off from information, feared that our country had been invaded. Soon we learned the truth. Then, two days later, on Sunday, Nov. 24, I watched with millions as Jack Ruby fatally shot Lee Harvey Oswald on live TV. A life-altering time, indeed.

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