

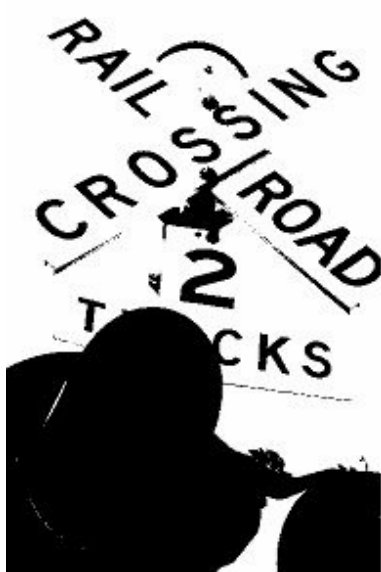


The Shadow-Train

*The human brain is like a railroad freight car – guaranteed to have
a certain capacity but often running empty.
But what happens when there are no more freight cars?*

My locality has a railway line that has been replaced by a walking/biking trail. Extending from Weaver in central Calhoun County to a current point just beyond Piedmont, the Ladiga Trail is precisely laid over the track known by such legendary lines as Georgia Southern. Though no one could argue the recreational and ascetic value of the trail, the transformation of *rails-to-trails* is one local indication of a continuing migration from this once-primary mode of transportation to other, more-practical modes; but the transformation also serves as starting point for this story of my soul.

Trains have long been a fascination for boys and boys-at-heart: the nostalgia or association of trains to an expanding nation invokes a certain romanticism and intrigue played out in movies and documentaries, books and magazines, scaled models, and miniatures. From toy train sets to half-scale operating engines, hobbyists and enthusiasts can couple much time and expense for the simple pleasure of operating or observing a train travel around a track and dream of being a conductor or engineer; but nothing can be quite as exciting and suspenseful as an actual train – especially through the eyes of a child sitting in a car while waiting at a railroad crossing.



The clang of a bell, the shrill of a whistle, the screeching of metal-on-metal, the rhythmic clicking of the wheels to track, and the quake of much tonnage are the sensations that coincide with a passing train. In the twilight, the setting sun cast a fleeting silhouette aside the track of the faint semblance of a shadow train – an image marked not so much by the childhood memory and the setting sun, but by the asphalt that has since replaced much of what once was a train. The shadow train is the asphalt, and the asphalt is remnant of the railroad line that is now a trail, and the trail is called Ladiga. The shadow train is the story of my soul.



Chief Ladiga was from the Creek tribe – one of several tribes indigenous to North Alabama and beyond. During the early 1800’s, he established a treaty with the United States that effectively passed ownership of all but an area in Benton County (now

Calhoun County) for he and his family. Referring to the map below, a point is shown on the Northern tip of Alabama bearing the same name; although it appears to be on the edge of Calhoun County in



what is now the city of Piedmont. Within a few decades of the treaty, the railroad emerged as the forerunner of industry such as iron and textiles; and townships such as Drayton (or Jacksonville), Blue Mountain, and still others. First bearing the name of Selma Rome and Dalton Railroad (SR&D), the rail line would *switch* ownership over its life to: East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railroad in 1881; Georgia Southern Railroad; Louisville and Nashville (L&N); and CSX.

Remnants of the line can still be found along the shadow train as well as the last vestige of active rail line. The depot pictured below is one of several depot-type buildings that straddle the line; some of these buildings have been renovated or maintained to commemorate the railroad – its central role to the given township.



One doesn't have to look closely to realize the distinct style of the depot whether clapped with wood or clad in brick. One of these depots has been maintained to the degree that the L&N marking is boldly visible on at least one of the facets. The shadow train is the asphalt trail, but these buildings are the remaining evidence of a once central mode of transportation – both freight and passenger...and maybe more.



This particular building pictured on the right was erected just prior to the Civil War; initially, it served as a warehouse for the Confederates. Several years ago, while on a bike ride, I stopped at the old depot and rummaged through the remains of the burned-out interior. In these remains was a dispatch or schedule dating back



to the 1970's – perhaps just a few years before the line shutdown. Beyond the shards of paper was the large wooden framing – some burned and other intact. In this moment of silence, I imagined what this building (and others like it) might tell me if it were able to speak – beyond the small relic I held in my hand.

From its beginning, the building could tell of the war and what it may have learned about the local training center in Blue Mountain, the hospital in Jacksonville, and events telegraphed or otherwise communicated from the frontlines or other stops to the north and east. The building might describe Reconstruction and the farmers, the industrialists, and others of this place; and tell of major events and time periods that helped or hindered the community. With the experience of the Civil War behind it, the building could describe the reoccurrence of war – this time overseas: of how recruits traveled to training, not in Blue Mountain, but to further stops; of how soldiers traveled back on their furlough or their funeral; and how arms and materials from local sources passed by with destinations to far away places. Beyond war and such dramatic events,



the building could share anecdotes of *this or that* – of some memories that stand out or made for an atypical day in the operation of a depot or railroad.

At the end of its intended purpose, the building would describe what must have been a time of sorrow – for the days of operation, typical or otherwise, would be no more. The rail line would begin to falter and eventually be removed for scrap, the sensations of a passing train would be a memory; and now only the shadow train remains at its side and as a story of my soul.



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