

The way it was: Spencer 1896

Railroads have been pivotal throughout the history of the United States creating cities, job opportunities and economic growth. Spencer, North Carolina is no different. In the late 1800's Samuel Spencer gained control over the Southern Railway. At that time the railway's major line was from Atlanta, Georgia to Washington DC. The problem with the line was the lack of shops for maintenance. As a solution land was bought parallel to the main line of the Southern Railway just north of Salisbury (Galloway and Wrinn).

Walking around the property of the Spencer Shops today wouldn't feel anything like it was back in 1896. Most of the property has been renovated with the last being called the Back Shops. This building towers over the rest of the property and it was previously home to the heavy duty car and engine repair shop (Galloway *The History of the railroad and Spencer*). When this building was renovated it required a full overhaul. It would have been interesting to have come across a time capsule during the refurbishment. Inside this time capsule would have been multiple items acting as a portal to the way it was at Spencer.

First, an engineer's hat was an iconic symbol in the late 1800's and early 1900's. The men who wore these hats knew how to get trains moving under any conditions. These men were the backbone of the railway industry, for without them trains weren't moving and when trains don't move, neither do products or money. Spencer shops was a sort of gathering place for engineers. Since all trains passed through Spencer, it was a common place for crews to switch off. This would also contribute to the growth of Spencer with crews needing places to stay, eat and get some entertainment before returning to work. To today's common folk an engineer's hat is just a hat with a railway logo on it. However, back in the days of Spencer Shops it was an honor to be wearing such a hat.

Secondly, railroad lanterns were a pivotal introduction into the railway industry. Long before the time of radios crews had to communicate by motions of a lantern. This would have been common practice at Spencer. Since the Spencer Shops were home to a large yard, crews would have been communicating signals such as raising the lantern up and down to tell the engineer to proceed (*Po Railroad Lanterns*) or waving the lantern overhead to reduce speed (*Po Railroad Lanterns*). Lanterns didn't just allow for improved communication, but also safety during 24/7 operations. For safety, railway lanterns were placed on the back of trains to give a marker of when another train was approaching. The impact of 24/7 operations was also a key influence on the industry. Work could now be extended into the night with the increased visibility provided by the handheld lanterns.

Lastly, two items that are seemingly out of place are the wood brick and a piece of coal. A piece of coal seems odd at first until one realizes what it represents. The coal stands for the power and innovation that was a driving force for the locomotives of the railway. Coal powered beasts were what used to roam the rails in Spencer, so it is only right for a piece of their fuel to make its way into a time capsule. A wood brick doesn't seem like it would relate to railways at all but in Spencer they

played a big role. Wood bricks were placed all throughout the back shop in order to help combat spills. Wood soaks in oils and liquids making the work environment safer in the case of a spill. The wood bricks helped the workers as well. Instead of working on concrete, the wood makes them less prone to injuries in an already dangerous workplace.

We may never know if a time capsule is truly buried in Spencer Shops. However, in the fictional one I presented today we can see the passion of railroading. From the dedication to work 24/7 through all conditions, the power of coal, the safety measures provided by a wood brick to the pride that comes with wearing a simple hat. Each of these items help us revisit the past during 1896.



Work Consulted

Galloway, Duane, and Jim Wrinn. *Southern Railway's Spencer Shops: 1896-1996*. TLC Pub., 2004.

Galloway, Duane. "The History of the Railroad and Spencer." *History of Spencer*, 5 Feb. 2007, web.archive.org/web/20070205080337/www.gorowan.com/spencer.

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