

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RED RIVER VALLEY RAILROAD HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

Web Site: WWW.RRVVRS.ORG

On Facebook: [Shreveport Railroad Museum](https://www.facebook.com/ShreveportRailroadMuseum)

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SHREVEPORT, LA

Our 34th Year

What in the World is a Fish Car ?



Traveling coast to coast by train is no easy trip even today. But back in 1874, just 5 years after the first transcontinental rail linkup, the journey was really difficult - especially when tending 35,000 shad fry (baby fish). For Dr. Livingston Stone of the U.S. Fish Commission, the trip was a unique challenge. His job was to get the fish fry from the east coast to California safe and sound for planting in the Sacramento River and other Pacific coastal streams. The fish were carried in open milk cans, and Stone changed the water every 2 hours - if water was available. After days of such round-the-clock care, most of the shad fry arrived safely. As a result of the successful experiment, a new species was established on the West Coast for sports anglers and commercial fishermen.

With steadily increasing traffic of fish, the Fish Commission decided in 1881 to purchase a "fish car" - a train car specifically equipped for carrying fish. The Fish Commission purchased a total of ten "Fish Cars". The first fish car was a wooden baggage car converted to carrying live fish. Car No. 2 was fitted with special compartments to hold ice. It was reinforced so it could carry as much as 20,000 pounds of fish, water and equipment at passenger train speeds. Fish Car No. 3 not only carried fish but hatched fish eggs while in transit. Fish Car No. 4 had cedar tanks and an air pump to aerate the water. Each car produced became more advanced than its predecessor. Fish Car No. 7 was the first steel fish car and had twice the fish-carrying capacity of the older wooden cars.

With more efficient fish train cars being produced, more efficient equipment was developed. Milk cans were replaced by lightweight containers called "Fearnow" pails. These containers weighed less, could carry twice as many fish as the older milk cans, took up less space, and had a special compartment which held ice to keep the water cool. Electric and jet aerators using compressed air replaced manual aeration of water in containers.

Fish Car No. 10 was built in 1929. Its insulated compartments could hold up to 500,000 one-inch fish and it had its own generator to operate all the equipment, including the aerating devices. But the "Fish Car Era" was coming to a close. By 1932, truck transportation of fish was more economical and making an increasing impact. By 1940, only three fish cars were still operating. One of the cars was wrecked in 1944.

The fate of another is unknown. And the last fish car, Car No. 10, the pride of the fleet, was finally taken out of service in 1947 with its equipment scattered among various hatcheries.

The fish cars generally operated from April through November and usually contained a five-man crew consisting of a captain, messengers and a cook. They traveled, ate and slept on the fish cars as they crisscrossed the country. Fish delivery service was free of charge, the recipients need only to be at the station to pick up the fish. If no rail terminus was nearby, a messenger would unload the shipment and transport it to a more convenient location. Railroads generally charged 20 cents a mile to haul the cars and their crews, and sometimes levied no charge for up to fifty percent of the annual fish car mileage. Messengers detached from shipments rode for reduced rates or at no cost. Pails and empty cans used in hauling the fish were shipped back to the Commission for free. By the early 1920s, fish cars had distributed 72,281,380,861 fish by traveling 2,029,416 miles and their detached messengers traveled an additional 8,104,799 miles. Fish Cars had played a major role in enriching the nation's natural resources for 66 years when this unique way of life ended. (Source: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service)



Upcoming Events

April 17 – RRVRS Meeting – 7 p.m. - Shreveport Water Works Museum – 142 N. Common St. – call (318) 797-8008 for information.

May 1 - First Friday Railroad Photography Meeting – 7:30 p.m. at the Shreveport Water Works Museum – 142 N. Common St. – call (318) 797-8008 for information.

May 9 – Shreveport Model Train Show – River View Hall – 10 to 6

The President's Message

Russell has done well with his bypass surgery recovery, and is now undergoing chemo treatment on an out-patient basis at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Since there is not much time between treatments, he is staying at his sister Connie's house in Katy, Texas. He wants me to thank everyone for their calls, thoughts and prayers. Russell may be able to come home to Shreveport at the end of April.

Dave Bland
Editor

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Next Meeting
April 17