

From *The Decatur Daily*

by Catherine Godbey

As the blare of a whistle and rumble of train cars filled the century-old depot, the gray-haired men peered out the window in anticipation.

“Rail fans call this space a hot spot. Actually, it is a double hot spot, because two major rail lines converge and diverge here. Not only that, we have a large number of trains that come through here very slowly every day,” said David Breland, Decatur’s history resources director. “This place is something very special. This is almost perfection.”

The Decatur Union Depot Museum, the final phase of an eight-year, \$2.25 million renovation of the L&N Railroad Depot, which included the creation of a 4,000-square-foot office for the police department, will open to the public June 23 at 10 a.m.

Expect to see treasures from Decatur’s past — the controls of the Keller Memorial Bridge, the red superintendent’s desk original to the 1905 depot, telegraph machines and photographs of the men who built the railroad.

“At one time, 80 percent of the city’s workforce worked for the railroad in some capacity. The railroad was the center of Decatur. It shaped the city Decatur became and its people,” Breland said. “Only two towns west of us have a deeper rail history. They are Tuscumbia and Courtland, and that is only because the Tuscumbia-Courtland-Decatur railroad was built west to east.”

To honor the railroad’s history, the city designated 2,000 square feet of the renovated depot to the museum. Since word of the depot’s restoration spread, Breland has fielded train-watching visitors from Seattle, the Netherlands, Germany and England.

The museum features a display of the city’s historic places, railroad and transportation artifacts, a mural of Decatur’s rail history, a model railroad, a 10-minute movie and an audio component that allows visitors to listen to engineers in the yard.

“Our forte will be creating the inside and outside experience. We are going to celebrate our history, but also focus on the modern railroads,” Breland said.

A platform connected to the depot serves as the prime train-watching spot. The exterior also will include tables and chairs and signs that describe what the view from the depot looked

like in 1913. Breland, Joel McWhorter and John Alison spearheaded the design and development of the depot.

Can't-miss items:

Two benches original to the 1905 depot. “The depot changed the benches in 1948 and went for more of a church pew look. The old benches were discarded. A local family took them and passed them down with the instructions that if the depot was ever restored that the benches should go back to the depot,” Breland said.

1905 Buchheit Bottling Co.’s Coca-Cola ice box. Built in 1887, Buchheit Bottling Co. stood where the parking lot of the new Cook Museum of Natural Science will be.

Round crossbuck mounted in the theater room. Breland found the crossbuck, a traffic sign used to alert motorists to a railroad crossing, under 3 feet of kudzu in the Decatur City Cemetery. The crossbuck is estimated to be 100 years old.

Oakworth sign. The 1887 rail yard sign, complete with a bullet hole, hangs in the model train room. “The guy who donated it apologized for the condition. I said, ‘You mean the bullet hole?’ For that time, it wouldn’t be authentic if it didn’t have a bullet hole,” Breland said with a laugh.

Baggage cart original to the 1905 depot. Caleb Frye restored the baggage cart as part of his Eagle Scout project. Another Scout, Matt Brown, built boxes for children to stand on to see into the model train room.

Model of the depot. Peer through the miniature windows and scenes from the depot will unfold. The interior includes vintage soft drink and candy machines, benches and bookcases. Decatur’s Jim Pruett spent 400 hours constructing the model, which features 1,691 hand-built parts. To complete the project, Pruett invented special tools to create the parts.

“It was a labor of love. I’ve been in and out of this depot since I was 7. My grandfather was a conductor, so my mother and I could ride for free. For one of my birthday parties, we took a train ride to Athens. I remember watching the steam engines come in, and I was here when Elvis Presley came through,” said Pruett, who won a merit award at the National Model Railroad Show for the miniature depot.

The miniature replica will sit along the model railroad, currently in development. Since August, 12 members of the local model railroad club gathered at the depot twice a month to work on the project. When complete, the track will feature replicas of the depot, farmers market, Turner-Surles, Dancy Polk house, Old State Bank, Tennessee River bridge, the Princess Theatre with a working marquee and the water towers.

“Decatur decided what this was going to look like. If someone looks at the model, they will see Decatur. We will be able to operate the model exactly like they do in the yard,” said Jim Norris, who designed the model. “It was a challenge, but it has been a lot of fun working it out.”