

**MID-SOUTH DIVISION and the DECATUR UNION DEPOT**

By Jim Norris, Mid-South Division 02

The historic Decatur, Alabama, Union Depot was built by the Southern Railway in 1905 and is a symbol of the city's rich railroad heritage. It was the eastern terminus of the Tusculumbia, Courtland and Decatur Railroad, the first American railroad west of the Allegheny Mountains (built 1832-34). This railroad later became part of the Memphis & Charleston which became the



Southern and now the Norfolk Southern Railroad. Other railroads which ran north and south through the city became the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, now the CSX. These two great railroad systems of the South made Decatur strategically and industrially important as a transportation and communications hub before, during and after the Civil War (leading to the near total destruction of the city during the war) and that importance continues today.

Both the Tennessee River and the railroads in Decatur were used in the Cherokee Trail of Tears to provide transportation for the Native Americans and the original depot (now destroyed) was a major "in transit" point.

By 1889, the L&N had established its repair shops in Decatur which, at their peak, employed over 2,500 persons. Railroads were the major reason the city doubled in size from 1900 to 1920 and they have continued to fuel industrial and population growth ever since.

Restoration of the Union Depot has preserved most of the original architectural elements of the building, including high ceilings, original doors, windows, wainscoting and door and window facings, and original brick and plaster walls.



Featuring a unique "adaptive reuse" design with one-half of the interior and exterior space housing the city's transportation museum while the other half is occupied by the Patrol Division of the Decatur Police Department, the restored depot links the historic downtown to the city's oldest neighborhood. The depot has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1980. It was the third structure in Morgan County to receive this designation (preceded only by the Old State Bank, Alabama's oldest bank and the Somerville Courthouse, Alabama's oldest courthouse).

Although often referred to as the "River City" because of its proximity to the Tennessee River and the importance of the river to its history and its industrial prowess today, Decatur is—and always has been—tied as much to the railroad as to the river.

Today, the Norfolk Southern and the CSX continue to serve as the catalyst for both the population and industrial/commercial growth of the city as evidenced by the large and busy yard which divides the city with its multiple tracks. The city boasts more than 15 Fortune 500 companies with commercial and industrial operations, virtually all of which are heavy users of railroad services.

It is estimated that more than 60 trains on the average day cross the Tennessee River lift bridge shared by the Norfolk Southern and the CSX representing thousands of freight cars. This level of activity proved to be the drawing point for members of the Mid-South Division of the SER to approach the city in 2013 about in-



cluding a model railroad in the museum. The Division formed a committee which designed a proto-typical layout depicting the operations of the Norfolk Southern and CSX in Decatur.

After two years of monthly meetings with the city historian, the architect and contractors, the layout was started in August, 2016. The Mid-South Division holds monthly work sessions the first Saturday of each month although some members can be found at the depot working on the layout almost any day of the week. We have just completed one year's effort and the layout will be fully operational very shortly.



Local publicity has brought new members to the Division and attracted help and assistance from modelers in other disciplines. Jim Pruett who won Best in Show with his model of the depot at the SER Convention is one of those new members. Jim has committed to doing models of the Princess Theater, the Old State Bank building and prominent water towers in town. Others have completed models of a senior center, a prominent park setting and the Farmer's Market. Andy Smith, secretary for the Mid-South, is working on a model of the Cook's Natural Science Museum. A professional airplane modeler is helping with weathering our fleet of rolling stock and a professional ship builder has almost completed a tow boat with barges for display in the Tennessee



River scene.

Visitors will view the layout through the three ticket windows and from the exterior viewing deck adjacent to the tracks. They will see the bridges across the river, the transfer yard adjacent to the



depot, the CSX and NS yards and companies served by the railroads: Daikin, Nucor, Bunge and agriculture industries with staging on the lower level. The layout was designed to support operating sessions which we plan to hold in conjunction with Mid-South meetings and during city events that attract visitors to the area around the depot.



As one enters the lobby of the depot, to the right is the secured substation of the Decatur Police Department to which public access is generally not available. The lobby display depicts a number of scenes and artifacts from Decatur businesses of the early 1900s which surrounded the depot.

There is also a continuous power point presentation on the restoration of the Depot.



From the lobby and also from the main museum artifact room one can look into the original ticket office in which the model train layout depicting Decatur is located along with artifacts and actual railroad signage.

The large main artifact room contains two benches which were in the depot in 1905, the original depot superintendent's desk from 1905 and a unique depot desk from the 1920s from the Tusculum, AL, depot. Murals detailing the railroad history of Decatur line the walls. Also found are many other unusual artifacts from the



area's illustrious railroad history. Two monitors show CSX and Norfolk Southern trains on the mainline and working the transfer yard adjacent to the Depot. Railroad employees can be heard conversing with dispatchers by means of special audio feeds.



Next to the main artifact room is the museum theater which contains artifacts as well as interesting audio/video presentations on railroads. This room is also available as a small meeting space.

Behind the depot is the renovated original loading dock area, one



of the finest places in the nation for the rail fan to enjoy watching trains. Trains pass at a reduced speed because of the speed restrictions on the nearby Tennessee River lift bridge.

Mid-South is continuing to work closely with the city to support the goals of the museum and to provide a vehicle through which we promote interest in our hobby.

