

The KC Rail Experience

By Tony J. Bowen



Kansas City's Union Station

During a family visit to my parent's home in Overland Park we made a stop at Kansas City's Union Station. Union Station is a beautifully restored building that is home to several restaurants; some are even in the original area of where the Harvey House once was. Union Station also houses Science City, a 3-D movie theater and an IMAX / Planetarium, along with having a large exhibit area for artifacts that are currently touring the United States.

The newest exhibit to open at Union Station is the KC Rail Experience Museum, which was the main reason for my family's visit. However, we also took in Science City, and a 3-D movie while we were there as the price was cheaper to buy what they call a Round Trip Ticket.

A Round Trip Ticket will allow a visitor to get into each of the exhibits except for the touring exhibit, which is separate. Tickets can also be purchased for just one exhibit, which they call a One-Way Ticket. If you are planning a trip to Union Station and you think there is a possibility of seeing more than one exhibit then I would recommend the Round Trip Ticket, as it is a better buy.

Once we had our tickets in hand the family and I made our way to the escalator to take us up to the main concourse. On the way up the escalators you can't help but to admire the huge painting on the wall depicting the twelve different railroads that came into Kansas City's Union Station.



The mural representing the twelve different railroads that served Kansas City's Union Station.

As my family approached the main concourse it was a breathtaking sight with the marble floors and a ceiling that seemed to go on forever with beautifully painted details and handcrafted woodwork.



Looking down the main concourse of Kansas City's Union Station.

Towards the end of the concourse where people use to board trains on Track #16 is where I spotted two large banners coming down from the ceiling for the KC Rail Experience Tour. I knew we were in the right place.

As we entered the doorway to Track #16 there were these pale-gray mannequins and as you approached them they would tell of their story of how the railroad impacted them. My girl's were a little spooked by them at first but once they realized that it was a retelling of a story of someone's past they did not find them as disturbing. The self-guided tour calls these mannequins "ghosts." However, my wife and I did not bring that up to our girls for fear that it would bring on nightmares.



Some of the railroad memorabilia that covers the walls as you walk down to the track level to the KC Rail Experience.

At the track level there was a movie about Kansas City's Union Station playing on a continuous loop, which gave a lot of good historical information about the station and a brief description of the railroads that severed it.

We were also greeted by the front of a BNSF locomotive sitting there. The locomotive itself is a simulator for adults and kids to explore. This was one of the better simulators I have ever been in, as you can take a train from a stopped idle position to a moving position at different speeds. My daughters thought this was great as you could view the simulator as it was projected onto a screen in front of the locomotive.



I am standing behind my daughter Isabelle in the engineer's seat, as my other daughter Claire is trying to figure out what all the knobs and levels do on the control stand.

Around the locomotive there are many displays of different rolling stock, such as the recreation of a Katy Flyer passenger car and a caboose. There are also some hands on activities such as an old dispatcher's panel where the switches can be thrown and different lights will show up on the panel indicating that the switch was thrown. There is also an area that has four big Plasma TV's set up with live feeds as to what the current train traffic is coming in and out of the Kansas City area.



The signal display allows a person to demonstrate all of the different colors that would be seen on the railroad and what there meanings indicates to train crews.

While in the KC Rail Experience you can exit to the outside and see the three pieces of railroad equipment the museum currently owns or has on a long-term loan. The day we were there the Kansas City Southern F-7A and the Milwaukee Dinner were out on an excursion. However, the Great Northern Observation Car named "Going to Sun Mountain" that was built in 1950 for the Chicago to Seattle Empire Builder was there for the public to view.

The observation car has been restored to its 1950's appearance with maps on the walls of each state that the car would travel through when it was on the Empire Builder. The small kitchen galley and two small sleeping compartments have also been restored to their original appearance.

When the Milwaukee Dinner and the Kansas City Southern F-7A are at Union Station they can also be toured. One item that was on display that is not always at Union Station is the #745 Southern Pacific 2-8-2 that is on loan for the summer. The engine and four cars are normally part of the Louisiana State Railroad Museum but have been part of the KC Rail Experience and will travel back to Louisiana sometime this fall.



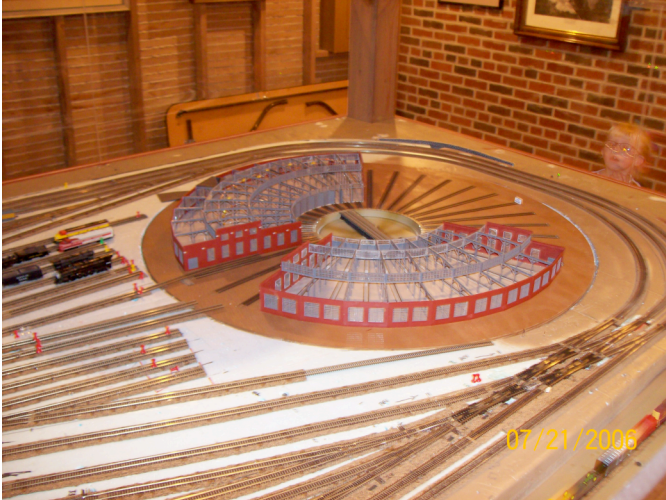
Outside of the exhibit area is the Great Northern Observation Car. Normally the Milwaukee Dinner and the Kansas City Southern F-7A are parked ahead of the Great Northern Observation Car.



Southern Pacific #745 2-8-2 Note the one ditch light under the walkway steps to the left of the picture. The flag hides the other ditch light to the right.

The KC Rail Experience would not be complete without model trains. One section is set aside called "Grandpa's Attic." Inside Grandpa's Attic is a large N Scale layout that is currently under construction by the Weekend "N"ginneers and the KC Rail Experience Staff. The N-Scale layout has three continuous loops that

operate daily. Each loop covers just a little less than 1,000 feet of track.



A large N Scale roundhouse will represent the one that was close to Union Station.



Still under construction the brown N Scale mock-up building in the background represents Union Station.

After spending about three hours in the KC Rail Experience area of Union Station we moved onto the other items that Union Station houses. Even though we left the area that is dedicated towards the railroads of Union Station, there were still other spots of interest that were railroad related and are worth looking at if you ever find yourself to be in the Kansas City area.



A bird's eye view looking down on the HO Club that rents space on the track level floor of Union Station. The HO Club welcomes the public during the weekends when most of the club members come to work on their modules. A Lionel Club and O Scale Club also share space with the HO Club, which are also open most weekends.



The Weekend "N"gineers N Scale layout can be viewed daily. Regular operating times for the club are mostly weekends and some Tuesday evenings.



In the basement of Science City is a fun interactive Lionel display for kids and adults to enjoy like my daughter Claire in the foreground.

One area of Science City is dedicated as the Train Spotter's Roost. Over 150 trains pass this area daily. In this view from the Train Spotter's Roost you can see the Southern Pacific 2-8-2 and train while a BNSF train comes into view.



A great HO display in Science City shows the 12 different railroads that came into Union Station. Many of the HO engines in the display case are custom painted with many additional details.

