

Train of Dreams



Robert Menzies and family share – and celebrate – the glory of a Gilded Age train

BY GAYVIN POWERS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN GESSNER



“It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end.”

— Ernest Hemingway

It’s the time of year when holiday enchantment fills the air, building excitement of what is to come and inducing fond memories of times past. Apple cider simmers on the stove, mistletoe invites stolen kisses and children dream of ponies, play toys and sugar plums. In the distance, a train barrels down the tracks; these are not electric trains pattering around a Christmas tree; these are coal-fueled trains traveling 80 miles per hour past snow covered pine trees outside in the crisp winter air.

Robert Menzies, owner of the Aberdeen Carolina & Western Railway, wouldn’t have it any other way. In Menzies’ youth, electric trains were on lists to Santa, but he dreamed of riding the rails. His mother has been known to say that he was chasing trains from the time he walked. Menzies’ fascination with trains and travel only increased as he got older. By college, Menzies and his friends would hop the freight trains and feed their wanderlust. Throughout his life, trains provided him freedom, family and memories that he couldn’t experience any other way.

Menzies attributes his love of trains and childhood wanderlust to having dyslexia. “Dyslexia taught me perseverance,” he says. “Because I couldn’t read well or live vicariously through books, I experienced life through trains and travel. What would have been considered a handicap was a gift.”

This gift led Menzies to eventually own and operate a railroad business, located in Candor, North Carolina, specializing in freight shipping and passenger trains. With freight trains running from Charlotte towards Raleigh and extending south toward Pinehurst, it makes the company the “largest privately held shortline or regional freight railroad in North Carolina,” according to the company website. For Menzies, the pièce de résistance is his historical, cranberry-colored passenger cars used to promote economic development that were recently on display, parked alongside the U.S. Open last June in Pinehurst.



Robert Menzies, owner of the
Aberdeen Carolina & Western Railway



It was a long haul getting to Pinehurst. A lifetime to be exact. In 1987, Menzies bought a freight railroad with one locomotive and had three customers. He says that back in those days, “the ties were rotten and like butter. We had so many derailments that the *Pilot* stopped taking pictures as they were no longer newsworthy.” Fortunately, the derailments are in the past.

“People told me I was crazy for buying the business. After six months, I agreed with them,” Menzies says. “It took me 17 years to be profitable.” He laughs, “My ignorance got me into my businesses, but it’s my Scottish perseverance that got me through them.”

Along this journey, Menzies took his childhood passion and turned it into something greater by combining a love of traveling the rails and a career that he now shares with his family: His wife Rita and children from their previous marriages Andy Harrell, Anthony Menzies and Jennifer Harrell.

Robert and Rita Menzies took their family on several trips throughout the United States in search of trains. They were looking for the right addition to their family – to make it complete. A favorite story is when they were in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Late at night, the children were telling ghost stories, and ended with one about a man hit by a train who haunts the tracks. Robert Menzies, ever aware of train schedules, pulled their camper into a space to sleep for the night. At midnight, the entire family woke to bright lights, the camper shaking and train horns barreling down the tracks toward the camper. Robert Menzies had parked near two train tracks, knowing the trains would be whizzing by shortly. “It was payback to the children for listening to ghost stories all night,” Menzies says, chuckling.



It wasn't until June 2012 that the Menzies family found what they were looking for in an 189,100-pound, passenger car named, “Roamer.” Made by American Car and Foundry, this child was unlike Robert and Rita's other children. Born in 1917, the Roamer is remarkable due to the intricate, period details, including solid oak interiors; hand cut Italian tile bathrooms and

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gilded hardware. To the Menzies, it's much more than a passenger car. They unanimously agree that *she* is a member of the family, a sister — she is simply too beautiful to be a brother.

"I was the favorite child until the Roamer came along," says Jennifer, the family's youngest.

While walking down the century-old, quarter sawn oak corridor of the Roamer, it's easy to see how a guest could become a child again, lost in the enchantment of the Gilded Age when robber barons ruled the rails and their personal passenger cars were social, artistic and financial statements. A porter's room allowed a chef and porter to prep behind the scenes during the day and a small space to sleep at night. Meanwhile, guests enjoyed tea and scones, turned-down beds and Irish linen tablecloths topped with hothouse roses in crystal vases.

It's a bit of an American Downton Abbey on the rails. One wonders if the Roamer's walls could talk, what secrets would she reveal about her heydays in the 1920s? Did Florenz Ziegfeld, creator of the Ziegfeld Follies, and John Studebaker, car manufacturer, get royal flushes or stain the walls with cigar smoke while playing poker? When Edward VIII, the Prince of Wales and future King of England, went to sleep watching the passing landscape from his bed, could he imagine that in less than ten years he'd meet an American divorcee, Wallis Simpson, fall in love and abdicate his throne? Or in 1964, did former President Dwight Eisenhower revise his speech dedicating the National Railroad Museum in Green Bay, Wisconsin, on the Roamer's ornate, built-in desk?

These secrets remain within the walls of the Roamer, but Menzies made it his mission to revive the rich structural history buried under years of decay by



hiring a team of highly skilled crafts persons. Dale Parks, vice president and chief mechanical officer at Aberdeen Carolina & Western Railway, oversaw the restoration of the Roamer, managing up to 25 workers on the train at a time. During The Great Depression and World War II, in order to save money, paint was added over existing layers. It led to over 30 layers of paint peeling off the car. Todd Jorgensen, a Smithsonian-trained conservator, painstakingly revived

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ing the U.S. Open — it was the first time she'd run in 40 years.

The Roamer wasn't the only passenger car that received a makeover. The "Pinehurst," a Pullman car that is a tribute to the village of Pinehurst itself, features memorabilia, old prints and décor from the early days of Pinehurst. A highlight in this car is exquisite murals created by Dave Marino, a well-known artist from Florida. The Pinehurst holds a 24-seat dining room, kitchen and room dedicated to comfortable, period chairs begging guests to read the latest novel by Edith Warton or F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Included in the train restoration is "The Patio," an open-air passenger car that originally started out as a freight car. Menzies reinvented the car by taking off the roof and sides of the car and installing beer on tap where guests can help themselves, allowing visitors to enjoy a mobile beer garden with scenic views of the countryside.

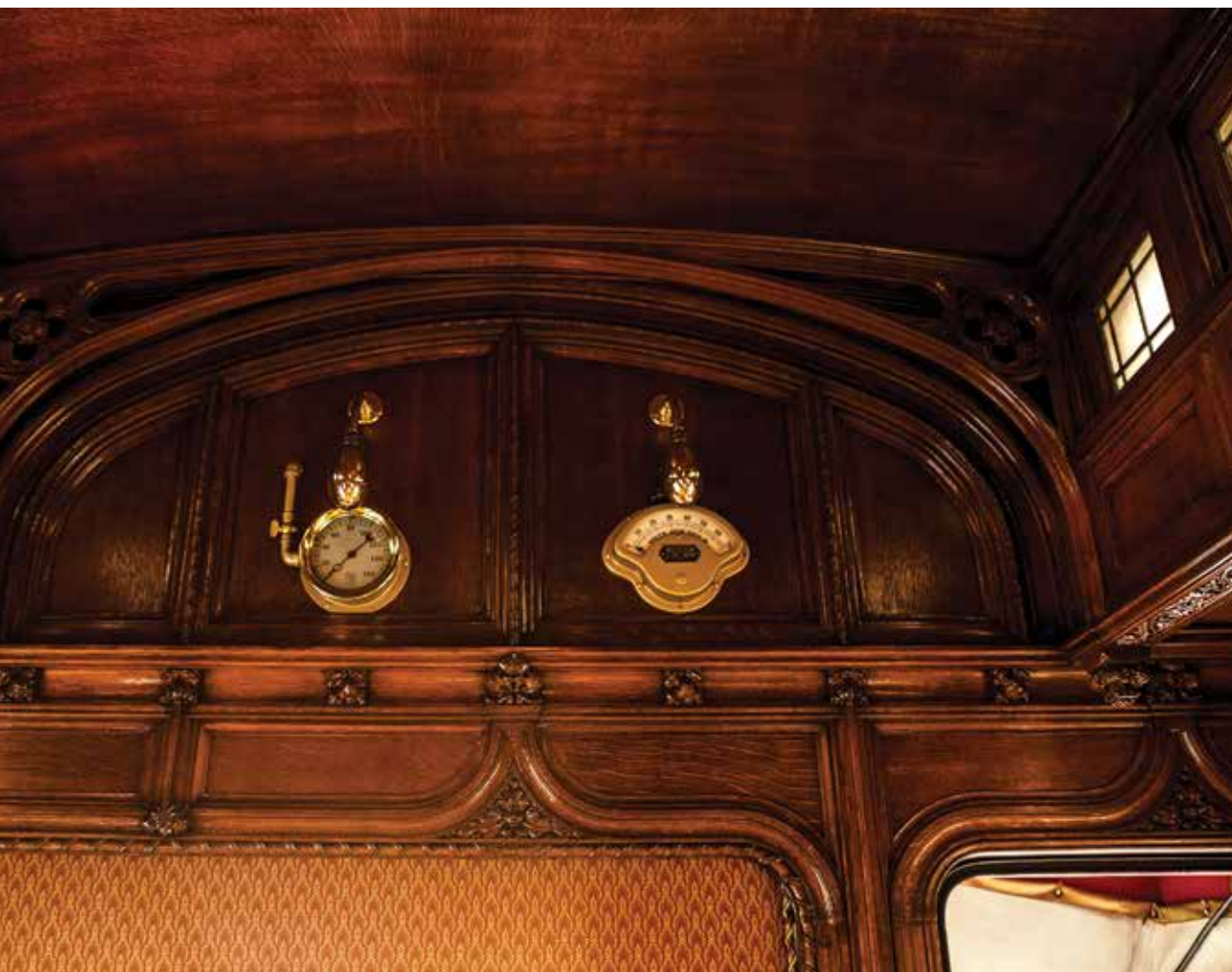
"Robert has such a love for these historic cars," says Rita. "I'm so happy that he has that. He's put so much imagination and foresight into them."

All of this thought and effort culminated at the U.S. Open last June during a nighttime celebration where guests traveled on the train from Pinehurst to Candor and back again. With each step, guests fell more in love with the train, and it was easy to imagine how John Philip Sousa, Lillian Gish or Percy Rockefeller traveled throughout the country. The freedom, luxury and adventure of train travel, as guests discovered on the run from Pinehurst to Candor, is exhilarating, especially when experienced through Menzies' vision.

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the oak and gold leaf in the car and found an aged whiskey bottle behind one of the panels — courtesy from one of the original contractors. Modern upgrades were also added, such as air conditioning, updated electrical and more that were cleverly concealed to hide the modernism. Jorgensen predicted it would take two years to restore the car, but a team of devoted contractors worked around the clock for six months ensuring the Roamer would have her Inaugural Run dur-



“We want people to appreciate them,” says Menzies. It’s hard not to enjoy and indulge in the history when walking through his passenger cars, taking visitors back to a bygone era when traveling by train was the main mode of transportation and height of travel luxury. Menzies has enjoyed preserving the history of these cars so much that he’s currently restoring another Pullman car named, “Mission Santa Ynez,” expected to be finished in Spring of 2015.

Currently, there is a historic revival going on in the United States regarding trains. People are beginning to explore the United States again through train travel with the last ten out of eleven years seeing increases in ridership. Train travelers are able to have a comfortable trip while exploring the states the way previous generations from the 1800s would have seen it. Rita Menzies adds that, “Now people can even attach their personal passenger cars on the back of Amtrak cars and travel that way.”

Robert Menzies shares why trains are important to the future of transportation in the United States, “We can’t keep building roads. We have to relieve congestion. The railroad can help alleviate the roads and traffic in big cities. Passenger trains in Europe and Asia can travel over 200 miles per hour. If we had high-speed rail, it would take one hour and 20 minutes to go from New York to Washington D.C.”

“Every industrialized country in the world has good passenger railroad systems except the United States. We have the best freight railway system in the world, but we’re way behind the rest of the world in passenger rail. The United States needs to get caught up,” he says, already knowing the benefits of passenger rail travel for families.

During the holidays when families are drinking eggnog around the fireplace, Robert Menzies sits on the open platform on the last car of the train where Eisenhower gave his speech so many years ago. His wife and their adult children are next to him, watching the sun spill across the ever-changing scenery.



He happily looks across the tracks thinking on what he’s created. Life is good between his family, his passenger cars and his successful business. The cost for years of personally fixing derailments and issues with the railroad was paid in blood. The cost for purchasing and renovating the passenger cars was paid in sweat. The cost for ensuring his family persevered was paid in tears. The adventure continues for Menzies, a man who started his life hoping for boxcars for Christmas, while the family, freedom and memories that trains have provided him are priceless. [PS](#)

Gayvin Powers is a frequent contributor to PineStraw magazine.

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