



THIS YEAR COOPERATIVE LIVING IS TAKING A ROAD TRIP ALONG THE LENGTH OF ROUTE 11 AS IT CROSSES VIRGINIA FROM NORTH TO SOUTH. EACH ISSUE, CORRESPONDENT DEBORAH HUSO WILL RELATE HER EXPERIENCES ALONG THE WAY.

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# Riding the Rails

*Step back in time in the city the railroad built — historic Roanoke.*

When I consider some of the more memorable moments of my life, my first and only time driving a diesel locomotive on the Norfolk Southern Railroad practice track near Atlanta, Ga., always comes to mind. A new employee in the department of labor relations at age 25, my training included learning what life was like “in the field.”

Having had, like my father, a lifelong fascination with trains that evolved in my early adolescent years into the creation of an expansive model railroad in my parents’ basement, it was rather invigorating to occupy the engineer’s chair, pull the lever that moved this great iron horse forward on wheels as tall as I was, and take it up to a brisk speed as I pulled the whistle to warn an upcoming crossing of the locomotive’s approach: *long, long, short, long.*

Though my days as a Norfolk Southern employee are well in the past, my continued romantic fascination with railroads is not, so tooling into Roanoke on Route 11, which passes directly through historic downtown via Campbell Avenue, is a bit like entering a history lesson on how the railroad turned Big Lick, a stop on the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad, into the city of Roanoke (the name it assumed in 1884).



This historic 1218 steam locomotive resides in the Virginia Museum of Transportation.

Directly adjacent to the city’s downtown and running along Campbell Avenue are the Norfolk Southern rail yard, and then along Shenandoah Avenue are the famous Roanoke Shops, which produced 447 steam locomotives for the Norfolk & Western Railway from 1884 to 1953. Today the shops’ employees overhaul and repair GE diesel locomotives.

## LINKING UP WITH THE AGE OF STEAM

My first stop when I enter town, however, is the O. Winston Link Museum, a favorite spot of mine, as it houses the photographer’s famous collection of black-and-white photos of the final days of steam on the N&W Railway in the 1950s. Museum volunteer Bill Arnold, who was born 50 feet from the N&W track in Radford, Va., and grew up in a company house, was a friend of Link until his death in 2001. He first met the famous photographer at a National Railway Historical Society convention in Roanoke in 1987, where Link was the keynote speaker. Arnold remembers how seriously the photographer took his work, which required remarkable lighting techniques to capture the often romantic and poignant images you’ll find at the museum.

"Once when the Virginia Association of Museums asked him to give the keynote address at the Hotel Roanoke and asked for slides, he replied, 'I didn't make slides! I made photographs!'" Arnold says before Link's death, he often spoke of wanting the museum that would showcase his work to be located in Roanoke, and he always loved the N & W Railway station there — which is where the museum is indeed housed today.

"Link wanted an N&W 1218 on a trackside turntable as part of the museum," Arnold recalls, "but Norfolk Southern [to which N&W was a predecessor] wasn't willing to give up track to show a locomotive." Arnold says he spoke to Link the day before he passed away, and "he was still talking about it."

NS did, however, eventually donate the 1218 (built at the Roanoke Shops) to the Virginia Museum of Transportation, where it is part of a vast collection of steam and diesel locomotives directly adjacent to active NS track. It is the only N&W 1218 saved from the scrap yard and would have once pulled 150 cars filled with coal at average speeds of 70 miles per hour.

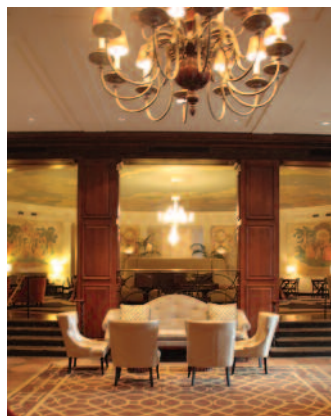
Link never asked N&W for any money for his railroad photography. He merely asked the company president for full access to the railroad to show life along the line. Over the course of five years, he made over 2,400 black-and-white photographs along the N&W and also made recordings of the trains themselves. It has all become a critical historical record. N&W was the last steam railroad in the United States.

"He preserved a way of life," says Arnold, noting how Link preferred to do his shots at night and designed his own lights to create his photos. "Sometimes he would have as many as three cameras and 60 light bulbs to craft one shot," Arnold remarks. "He said, 'I can't control the sun or where the tracks are.'" Thus, night photography gave him better command over conditions.

The O. Winston Link museum (right) houses Link's collection of black-and-white photos of the final days of N&W Railway steam locomotives



in the 1950s. Museum volunteer Bill Arnold (right) with a self-portrait of Link. Arnold was a friend of Link until Link's death in 2001. Below is Roanoke's Norfolk Southern rail yard.



Gary Walton (left) has been manager of the Hotel Roanoke (below and far left) since 1994. Originally owned by the railroad, the hotel and an adjacent conference center have evolved into a nexus for business and tourism travelers over the past 25 years.





## THE GOLDEN AGE OF RAILROAD HOTELS

Just across Shenandoah Avenue from the Link Museum is the historic Hotel Roanoke, which the N&W built when the railroad was headquartered here.

"When the N&W merged with Southern Railway in the late 1980s, corporate headquarters transferred to Norfolk," says hotel general manager Gary Walton. The railroad operated the hotel until 1989 and then gifted it to Virginia Tech. By that time, Walton remarks, the hotel had deteriorated quite a bit, but "it was an icon here in the community, and Norfolk Southern didn't know what to do with it."

They gave Tech five years to raise the \$27 million to renovate the hotel. Walton, who came to the Hotel Roanoke as manager in 1994, says only the lobby and dining room are original. "Everything else was gutted."

The City of Roanoke got in on the action, too, because it wanted a convention center, so it built the facility adjacent to the hotel, turning the whole complex into the Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center, now managed by Doubletree.

As for me, I've never stayed anywhere else

when in Roanoke than this 1882 Queen Anne-style hotel with its turrets and gables adjacent to the Norfolk Southern track. Many times it was a temporary home base for me when on business for the railroad in Roanoke, and it has served as my headquarters for pleasure trips to the Roanoke Valley as well. I'm not alone in loving the hotel's nostalgic feel.

"People love the railroad history of this place," Walton says. "We have guests who love to stay on the rail side of the hotel so they can hear the trains go by. Being here is like stepping back in time. We're in the vintage era of grand hotels."

And while one can dine in the Hotel Roanoke's elegant Regency dining room or the more casual Pine Room pub, I elect to hit a relatively new spot in town after my afternoon in Mr. Walton's company — appropriately named The River and Rail Restaurant, a short drive from downtown on Crystal Spring Avenue.

Opened just two years ago, this casual bistro has a menu that changes with the local seasonal offerings from area producers. Chef Aaron Deal, who prompts my taste buds to

explode with his unusual flavor combinations like veal sweetbread with pumpkin sauce and coconut jalapeño sorbet for dessert, tells me his inspiration for mixing so many food metaphors comes from a childhood as what he laughingly calls "the ultimate fat kid." This trim chef is anything but today, though he credits childhood attempts "to figure out how many ways to put marshmallows, peanut butter, and chocolate together" as the real inspiration for his River and Rail menu, which he calls "classic comfort food with a twist." ■

Chef Aaron Deal strives for "classic comfort food with a twist" at The River and Rail Restaurant.



## ● IF YOU GO ...

Your first stop in Roanoke should be the **Roanoke Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau** (101 Shenandoah Ave. NE, 540-342-6025, [www.visitroanokeva.com](http://www.visitroanokeva.com)), which is located in the old Norfolk and Western Railway train station. The station is also home to the **O. Winston Link Museum** (540-982-5465, [www.linkmuseum.org](http://www.linkmuseum.org)), which has a stunning collection of the railroad photographer's artwork.

You can explore Roanoke's railroad history further at the **Virginia Museum of Transportation** (303 Norfolk Ave. SW, 540-342-5670, [www.vmt.org](http://www.vmt.org)) and along the **David R. and Susan S. Goode Railwalk**, which runs from Market Street to Warehouse Row, paralleling the Norfolk Southern tracks that pass through downtown. Storyboards, plaques, whistles, and even a radio scanner tell the railroad history of the city. The Railwalk was named in honor of former Norfolk Southern president and CEO David R. Goode, who was responsible for getting the 1218 locomotive to the Virginia Museum of Transportation.

While you're exploring the rail story of the city, be sure to spend the night at **The Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center** (110 Shenandoah Ave., 540-985-5900, [www.hotelroanoke.com](http://www.hotelroanoke.com)), which was formerly owned by Norfolk Southern. From the hotel, you can easily walk to restaurants and attractions in downtown Roanoke via a glass-enclosed pedestrian bridge over the railroad tracks that will put you in the midst of **Market Square**. This thriving area of downtown is home to **Center in the Square** (1 Market Square SE, 540-342-5700, [www.centerinthesquare.org](http://www.centerinthesquare.org)), which houses a number of museums and music venues, including the **Harrison Museum of African American Culture, History Museum of Western Virginia, Science Museum of Western Virginia, Mill Mountain Theatre, and Roanoke Symphony Orchestra**.

Adjacent to Center in the Square is the **Historic Roanoke City Market** (213 Market Street, 540-342-2028, [www.downtownroanoke.org/city-market](http://www.downtownroanoke.org/city-market)), the oldest continuously operating open-

air farmers market in Virginia, where you can purchase locally grown fruits, vegetables, and flowers seven days a week except major holidays.

While there are a host of restaurants in Market Square, if you want to try something a bit more innovative, check out **The River and Rail** (2201 Crystal Spring Ave., 540-400-6830, [www.riverandrailrestaurant.com](http://www.riverandrailrestaurant.com)), a short drive from downtown. Located in the renovated former Lipes Pharmacy building, the restaurant features weekly changing menus made from fresh and local ingredients prepared by Chef Aaron Deal. ■



Roanoke's thriving downtown Market Square is home to Center in the Square, which houses a number of museums and music venues.