

College offers minor in railway heritage tourism

Center for studies is based at Davis & Elkins

By Rich Roberts

By what arguably are the most important measures, the nation's only accredited college program devoted to teaching future generations how to preserve and promote rail heritage is a success: It has earned the enthusiastic endorsement of America's premier venues and placed its first graduates in the type of careers that would make most enthusiasts jealous – notably working day in and day out with live steam locomotives.

The program is sponsored by the Center for Railway Tourism at Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, W. Va., a private, four-year liberal-arts institution established in 1904 and named for Henry Gassaway Davis, founder of Potomac & Piedmont Coal & Railway Co., and his business partner and son-in-law, Stephen Benton Elkins. The wealth generated by their rail, oil, coal, and timber businesses from the late 1800s to early 1900s enabled them to contribute land for the school.

Justin Guy, whose grandfather worked as a car inspector for the Penn Central Railroad, was the first Davis & Elkins student to enroll in the program. He also was the first to complete the 18 credits required to graduate with a minor in railway heritage tourism management and the first to be placed in a related job. He signed up as soon as he learned about the program: "I thought, that's right up my alley because I like trains and want to do something with railroading."

After graduating in December 2016, he accepted a position with Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Railroad, a short line that operates passenger excursion and freight trains in West Virginia's mountains. He now works as a steam locomotive fireman on the celebrated Cass Scenic Railroad. John W. Smith, Durbin & Greenbrier Valley president, said Guy's education helped land the job: "Justin came to us with a background of what tourist companies must do to survive. He has a good understanding of the business aspect of tour-

ist railroading and is a willing worker."

Smith, one of the early supporters of the Davis & Elkins program, was particularly impressed by the experience Guy gained during his three-month internship at Nevada Northern Railway Museum in Ely, Nevada. Working under President Mark S. Bassett and his staff, Guy learned how to operate diesel and steam locomotives, perform the roles of a fireman and brakeman, and handle maintenance duties in the shop.

The Center for Railway Tourism is the brainchild of James D. Porterfield, its director, who proposed the concept to Davis & Elkins in 2012 and received approval to launch the Center in 2013 as part of the college's Division of Business & Entrepreneurship.

The Center evolved from work Porterfield was doing for a short-lived travel blog undertaken by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and discussions with railroad historian John P. Hankey, Heritage Rail Alliance executive G. Mark Ray,



Standing in front of Buffalo Creek & Gauley Railroad G-7s-class 2-8-0 locomotive No. 13 (Alco-Brooks 1920), Daniel Condo conducts a tour at the Age of Steam Roundhouse Museum in August 2019 during an internship organized in conjunction with his studies at the Center for Railway Tourism.

Bob LaPrelle of the Museum of the American Railroad, and Robert Holzweiss of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society. Although Porterfield was then serving as an adjunct marketing professor at Penn State University's main campus in State College, Pa., he decided Davis & Elkins College was the ideal location for the Center, not only for its modest size and rail heritage origins but also because Elkins is home to Durbin & Greenbrier Valley, West Virginia Railroad Museum, and the 24.2-mile Allegheny Highlands Trail, which follows the original 1884 route of the West Virginia Central & Pittsburg Railway, also built by Henry Gassaway Davis.

(The public knows Porterfield best for his book *Dining by Rail, the History and the Recipes from America's Golden Age of Railroad Cuisine*, first published in 1992 and reprinted several times since. The railfan community knows him for

—Continued on next page

—Continued from previous page

the hundreds of columns and features he has written for *Railfan & Railroad* magazine. Colleagues know him for his marketing column in *Railroad Museum Quarterly*.)

The Center's threefold purpose is to 1) "Educate future generations of railway heritage preservation and tourism leadership, 2) Support railway heritage preservation and tourism growth with information, materials, and tools and 3) Expand awareness of the contributions railroads made to North America's history and culture."

Interested students commit to completing an 18-credit undergraduate minor during their junior and senior years that consists of five required courses, five electives, externships (also known as practicums), an internship, field projects, potential study abroad, and model railroading. Cross-enrollment is offered in other Davis & Elkins majors, including managing a nonprofit, fundraising for nonprofits, history, and tourism management.

Daniel Condo enrolled at Davis & Elkins in 2017 specifically to participate in the Center for Railway Tourism program after graduating with a bachelor's degree in fine arts at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. "I was hoping that I could find a career," he said. "Ever since I was a kid, I've always loved trains and railroading, particularly the history and heritage." With credits applied from Bowling Green, he completed his Davis & Elkins degree this spring – after just three years – and earned the college's Outstanding Achievement Designation and one of the highest GPAs in his class.

Like Guy, Condo participated in a summer internship at the Nevada Northern and left a positive impression on the staff. "He wanted to learn all aspects of the railroad,"



James D. Porterfield, director of the Center for Railway Tourism, awaits the departure of the Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Railroad's Mountain Explorer Dinner Train from the Elkins, W.Va., station.



Justin Guy shovels coal into the firebox of Cass Scenic Railroad PC-13-class Shay No. 2 as it shoves a passenger excursion train through Pocahontas County, West Virginia. Guy was hired by Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Railroad, a short line that operates passenger excursion and freight trains including Cass, in 2016 after graduating from the Center for Railway Tourism.

Bassett said. "So, he got signed off as a brakeman, worked in the gift shop, took reservations, helped get the train over the hill, and did some sketches of Dirt the Cat," the railroad's feline mascot. The museum currently is producing a storybook based on those sketches.

Condo also interned at the Age of Steam Roundhouse Museum in Sugarcreek, Ohio. Noel B. Poirier, who serves the museum as executive director and manager of its primary funding source, the Jerry and Laura Jacobson Foundation, said Condo proposed the internship, which has become the template for future students. "He did excellent work for us," Poirier said. "He gave tours, helped our education coordinator develop programs, pitched in on merchandising, and contributed to our development efforts."

Although the Nevada Northern would, as Bassett put it, "have offered him a job on the spot," Condo chose to stay closer to his roots and pursued a full-time job at the Age of Steam Roundhouse Museum, which is 45 minutes from his Massillon, Ohio, home. Since graduation, he has been working in the locomotive shop "polishing bells and number plates and whatever else he is asked to do," said Poirier, and will conduct tours three days a week once the Age of Steam reopens to the public.

Smith, Bassett, and Poirier all agree that the industry

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College offers railway heritage program, cont'd.

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needs an educational program like this to develop a new generation of professional managers who can assume responsibility for operations like theirs. “There’s a leg up there if you are a railroad-interested person and then you’ve been educated in what it really takes to make a tourist railroad go,” Smith said.

Poirier said the Davis & Elkins program helps students develop “the kind of understanding that is considerably more helpful than just the generic museum studies program or generic business background,” adding: “They bring in that knowledge of all those unique aspects of railroading that someone like me, with 30-plus years of museum experience, doesn’t have.”

Bassett said academic training in economics, marketing and promotion, hospitality, and fundraising is critical to ensuring that the upcoming generation of rail heritage managers succeeds in business. “In England, heritage railroads are run by preservationists and businesspeople,” he said. “Running a heritage railroad is running a business. It does not matter if it is for profit or nonprofit; income needs to exceed expenses.”

The potential reward for students who pursue a rail heritage education is high, Bassett said. Unlike college students who pursue general humanities studies, students who successfully complete the Davis & Elkins railway heritage preservation tourism management program should have no trouble finding a job, he said. “Graduates from this program would be hired immediately into the industry because of demand.”

Despite its success to date and unqualified industry support, the Center for Railway Tourism faces significant headwinds, the greatest being the need to attract more students and the second being funding. Those challenges are compounded by the fact that Porterfield has no staff and the college does not fund the Center. In addition, he is responsible for creating and updating the syllabus and teaching the students.

“A national admissions recruiting effort for such a specialized program is like seeking the proverbial needle in a haystack,” he said. The challenge is to seek out high schoolers who are considering college and who have an interest in railroad heritage. “Their decision-making process lasts only about 18 months,” which is a relatively short time to find, recruit, and enroll these relatively rare potential candidates. (The Center offers a free e-book, “Careers in Railway Heritage Preservation and Tourism Management,” at www.dewv.edu/center-railway-tourism/ebook-careers.)

A hopeful moment cropped up two years ago when the Samuel Freeman Charitable Trust awarded the Center \$75,000 to establish a national recruiting campaign and underwrite an AmeriCorps VISTA member to help administer that search, among other responsibilities. So far, Porterfield has been using those funds to conduct a direct-marketing campaign targeting high-school guidance counselors as well as social-studies, history, and civics teachers. He also is attempting to tell the Center’s story by advertising in rail-enthusiast

publications and publicizing its programs through social media “influencers,” bloggers, and the news media.

Porterfield is planning several money-making ventures to fund the Center, notably a web-based national map for railroad tourists that would feature rail and historical attractions for consumers planning vacations. He would sell annual memberships to those attractions as well as nearby restaurants and hotels in return for hyperlinking them on the map. In addition, Porterfield hopes that the same railroad heritage preservation organizations that supported the Center’s establishment will step up to help underwrite its budget.

Those interested in learning more can contact Porterfield at porterfieldj@dewv.edu or by calling 304-637-1307.

—Rich Roberts is book review editor for **Railroad History**, the semiannual journal of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, North America’s oldest railroad historical organization (organized 1921).



—Photo by Rich Roberts

Nevada Northern Railway 2-8-0 engine No. 93 (Alco-Pittsburg 1909) eases into the East Ely enginehouse after a long day of photography during the Winter Steam Spectacular on February 6, 2009. NN has participated in the Davis & Elkins railway heritage tourism program.