

EXHIBITS

America on the Move

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Washington, DC. Project Director: Steven Lubar; curators: Janet Davidson, Laura Hansen, Michael R. Harrison, Paula Johnson, Peter Liebhold, Bonnie Lilienfeld, Susan Tolbert, Roger White, and Bill Withuhn

Permanent exhibit

America on the Move is the result of a 3-year, \$22 million redesign of the National Museum of American History's surface transportation exhibit. From the museum's opening in 1964 through the 1990s, the Smithsonian's carriages, bicycles, and automobiles were displayed in series, suggesting a simple march of progress. The new exhibit places the vehicles in context, emphasizing their place in the American landscape and in the lives of the people who used them.

The exhibit displays the changes in surface transportation since the 1870s using 15 settings, each representing a specific place, time, and mode of transportation. For example, instead of placing a 1955 Ford station wagon in a line of family automobiles and a 1953 Schwinn child's bicycle in a procession of bicycles, the curators have put the two together in front of a wall-sized enlargement of an ad for homes in Park Forest, Illinois. Mannequins pose next to the vehicles, and in a typically witty touch, a replica 1950s television plays clips from *Leave it to Beaver*, completing the sketch of transportation's role in a postwar suburb. In each setting, centerpiece vehicles are surrounded by a wealth of smaller artifacts, photographs, models, video screens, and interactive displays, such as mock packing crates that open to reveal the variety of goods once shipped by train. Music, recorded conversations, and the chance to sit on a train station's waiting room bench or in a Chicago "L" car complete the immersion experience.

America on the Move's main theme is that transportation is bound up in broader decisions about the built environment. Artifacts tell much of the story: An explanation of the relationship between streetcar expansion and suburbanization is fleshed out with a lawn mower, while a 1939 Plymouth coupe appears next to a Maryland tourist cabin. The second theme is that changes in transportation were the products of choices by regular people. Particularly good is the section on the development of containerized shipping, in which goods are packed into standardized metal containers that can be shipped by sea, rail, or road, rather than requiring the difficult and dangerous work of loading individual bales and barrels by hand. The section explains the benefits to both shipping companies and longshoremen while acknowledging the longshoremen's sense of loss and the frustrations that led to the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union 130-day strike in 1971. Like the exhibit as a whole, this section combines video, models, text, and artifacts to tell a story far more effectively than any one medium.

The exhibit is not shy about transportation's darker side. The display of a 1927 North Carolina railroad station emphasizes the rigidity of Jim Crow, using the words of teacher and activist Charlotte



Visitors to *America on the Move* can experience riding the Chicago Transit Authority "L" train, complete with sound and moving images. (Courtesy of National Museum of American History)

Hawkins Brown. A 1939 Indiana school bus is joined by a display documenting the disappearance of the one-room schoolhouse, and the five vehicles displayed on a short stretch of interstate highway call to mind the ubiquitous traffic jam. On the other hand, the trope of progress is still visually dominant. With the exception of a 1929 Oakland sedan illustrating the Okie migration to California, the vehicles have been restored to showroom luster. The dangers of the automobile are represented in photographs and a copy of *Unsafe at Any Speed*, but none of the cars themselves are displayed as wrecks, and the carnage of streetcar and railroad accidents is ignored.

Even more obscure is the role of public policy. Admittedly, the process of passing a highway bill is not visually stimulating. However, more emphasis in the display texts and computer kiosks would have helped explain the decline of the railroads, or the reason why the 1977 Honda Civic on display got better mileage than almost any car on the market today. When the exhibit does address public policy, as in a display about the freeway revolt of the 1960s and 1970s, the treatments are balanced and visually appealing.

The most ironic silence is the lack of technical detail. Determined to avoid the rivet-counting, internalist approach of earlier exhibits, the curators have provided almost no explanation of what the vehicles were made of, how they worked, or how they performed. We get a display of early accessories—such as a 1915 car alarm—and a video gushing that computers are embedded throughout the transportation system. But the curators have not tried to explain the workings or social construction of key technologies such as transition curves, catalytic converters, air traffic control, or even minor doodads like the spotlight on that 1955 Ford.

Although the exhibit cannot tell every story, it tells its main story remarkably well. Whether visitors focus only on the largest artifacts or devote their time to the text or the interactive displays, all will

absorb the basic thesis that transportation is about place. And all will sense that transportation is not the exclusive province of planners and engineers, but a part of our shared history and culture.

Whether they get home on foot, by subway, taxi, car, or airplane, they will depart *America on the Move* with a greater understanding.

Zachary M. Schrag
George Mason University

1. The exhibit is accompanied by a book, Janet F. Davidson and Michael S. Sweeney, *On the Move: Transportation and the American Story* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2003); a DVD, *America on the Move* (New York, NY: A&E Television Networks, distributed by New Video, 2004); and a website, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/>.

Archaeology and the Native Peoples of Tennessee

McClung Museum, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN; Exhibit design and fabrication: Design Craftsmen, Inc.; Architecture: Barber and McMurray, Inc.

Permanent exhibit

Utilizing multimedia and anchored by the Frank H. McClung Museum's collection of prehistoric and historic Native American artifacts, *Archaeology and the Native Peoples of Tennessee* is an effective presentation of the state's indigenous past. This exhibit builds upon the strength of the museum's collections in anthropology, archeology, and local history, while touching upon its other core collections in decorative arts and natural history. As the title indicates, the exhibit focuses on the native peoples of the region, including the pre-Columbian cultures in what later became Tennessee and the Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Shawnee, and Yuchi tribes that had emerged by the 18th century.

A Smithsonian Institution affiliate, the McClung Museum is an integral part of the University of

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