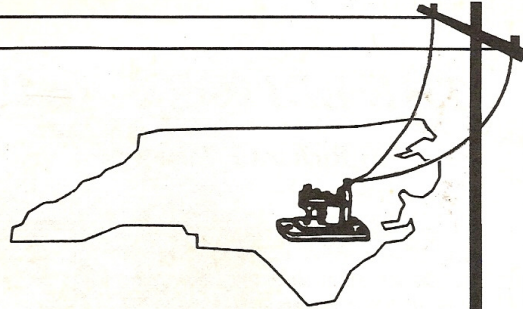


# The Tarheel Telegrapher

The Newsletter of the East Carolina Chapter of the  
National Railway Historical Society



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Forty-two ton,  
ice-cooled Swift  
Refrigerator car  
arrives at Bonsal  
Yard on a  
Yarborough  
Transit Company  
lowboy trailer.  
The trucks  
arrived later on  
a separate trailer.  
- photo by R.T.  
Lasater

## Swift Refrigerator Car Joins Museum Collection

by Richard T. Lasater

In late May, a representative of the John Morrell Co. telephoned to ask if the Chapter was interested in the donation of a steel Swift ice-cooled refrigerator car. The car was located in Wilson, NC at the former Dinner Bell Foods meatpacking plant and had been used for storage since the 1960's. The John Morrell Co., a large midwestern firm, had recently bought the plant and was in the process of remodeling it. Plans called for removal of the refrigerator car. The engineer in charge of the renovation felt that the car was in too good shape to scrap. He contacted Carl Jensen of the Norfolk Southern Steam Excursion Program concerning railroad museums in North Carolina. Carl suggested calling the Spencer Shops Historical Site or the East Carolina Chapter. Spencer Shops declined the donation as they already have an ice refrigerator car. President Robert Middour said that we were interested in the donation, but that we would have to inspect the car and to evaluate the logistics of moving it to Bonsal before proceeding. The company wanted the car removed by June 5.

We inspected the car the following Sunday in torrential rain. It was located next to the main loading dock. This (continued on page 3)

### Inside this Issue

Editor's Roundhouse .....	2
"Huntington '91" - NRHS Convention .....	4
Board of Directors' Meeting Minutes .....	6
Treasurer's Report .....	8
Work Sessions at Bonsal .....	10
Bonsal Folks .....	11
Heisler News .....	12
Carolina Railroading .....	13
Local Rail History .....	14
Rail News .....	16



## Refrigerator Car Joins Museum Collection continued from page 1

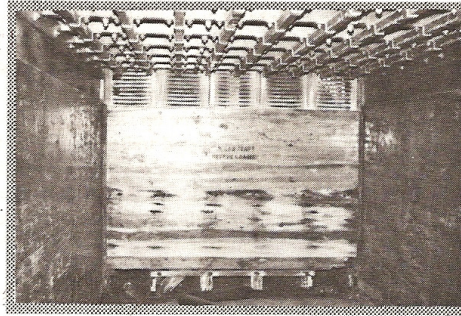
sheltered one side of the car and preserved the silver paint and large red Swift's Premium emblem on the side next to the building. The cartop walkway was still intact. The four roof ice bunker hatches were wood covered with a thin sheet of steel. The metal sheet had rusted and cracked, letting in rainwater that rotted the hatches. All the hinges and other hardware on the hatches were still in place, simplifying replacement. The latches on both car doors worked. As the car had been used as a storeroom, the wooden interior was in great shape, even the floor. Except for faded paint, the only notable damage was corrosion damage to the two water drain pipes under the car. The last journal repacking was done in December 1972 at Charlotte, NC by SCL.

Meat reefers (refrigerator cars) were used to transport animal carcasses from Midwest slaughterhouses to regional plants for final dressing. The Dinner Bell plant was originally one of 40 Swift Co. plants where beef sides were cut for delivery to local stores, and less choice cuts were processed into hot dogs, etc.

SRLX No. 15917 was built in November 1956. The letters RSM indicate that the car had ice bunkers on both ends, air circulating fans, and overhead beef rails for hanging sides of dressed beef on hooks. Beef cars with brine tanks were lettered RAM. The car is painted silver and lettered for the Swift Refrigerator Line in black letters. Overall length is less than 40 feet.

The Dinner Bell Foods plant is located next to the CSXT ex-ACL main line just south of the big Ralston-Purina feed mill on US Highway 264 Bypass. I called the CSXT trainmaster to determine if the car could be moved by rail. He thought the Dinner Bell spur was still active, though no traffic had used it in the last ten years. He said that car inspectors at Rocky Mount Yard must first inspect the car and declare it roadworthy. He would then contact the Roadmaster to check the siding.

The car knockers repacked the reefer's axle journals with fresh waste pads and oil

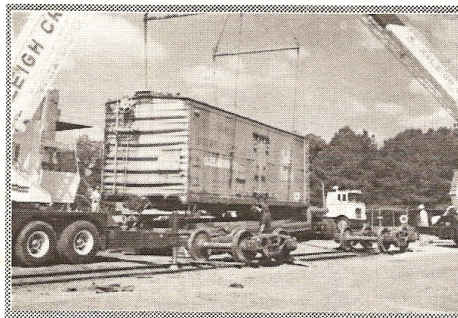


Refrigerator car interior showing ceiling meat racks and car-end cooling fans. - photo by R.T. Lasater

and replaced the air hoses. They were hesitant to allow the car to be moved in normal train service without the journal brasses being replaced, fearing a hotbox. Although I have replaced brasses on freight cars and felt that the Chapter could have done this easily, time was running out. The trainmaster was also reluctant to send a switch engine into the plant. Therefore we decided to move the car directly to Bonsal by truck.

After several telephone calls, I located a crane company that could provide both cranes and trucks and had an equipment yard in Wilson. This minimized the distance that we would be charged for equipment travel to the loading site.

The Acquisitions Committee presented the proposal at a called meeting of the Board of Directors on Saturday, June 11. The Board accepted the donation and authorized the move. The cost of the move was bid by Raleigh Crane at \$3100. A donation of \$1000 was made by the Old North State Chapter, NHRS towards the move. Two Board members made no interest loans to the Chapter for the remaining \$2100. The move was planned for Wednesday, June 5.



Two cranes lift reefer body onto lowboy at Dinner Bell Foods plant in Wilson. - photo by R. Lasater



## Refrigerator Car Joins Museum Collection

continued from page 3

body and it was used like a truss to pull up the trailer belly. Although this allowed the lowboy to travel along the highway, a new routing to Bonsal had to be arranged by NC DMV to minimize railroad grade crossings and other potential snags.



The lowboy with the carbody, a second lowboy carrying the wheel trucks, two cranes, assorted Raleigh Crane attendant vehicles and most of the ECC members' started for Bonsal. The new route went toward Fayetteville crossing the NS near Selma. The lowboy carrying the carbody bottomed out on the crossing, but did not get stuck. They approached Bonsal from the south, coming up new US Hwy 1 from Sanford. As the convoy passed through Merry Oaks on Old US 1, one of the crane

trucks blew two tires and had to stop.

Just before the convoy arrived at Bonsal, a truck hauling trash for our neighbor at Fish City came up Daisy Street pulling a very dilapidated trailer heaped high with trash. Apparently the load was causing the frame to scrape on the trailer's wheels and the driver pulled over into our parking area adjacent to the Bonsal house track. We now

Move complete, the Swift Refrigerator Car rests on the Bonsal track. - photo by R. Lasater

had an immovable and alarmingly leaning trailer (an old parade float) right where the trucks and cranes needed to unload. The owner of Fish City came up with a small air compressor and readjusted the trailer's air shocks. They careened off towards Chatham County just as the lowboys arrived.

Repairs to the crane took over an hour, but the unloading and rewheeling of the refrigerator car proceeded smoothly. The

Raleigh Crane people finished at 8 PM.

According to John White, author of *The Great Yellow Fleet - a history of American Railroad refrigerator cars*, the ice-cooled refrigerator car was replaced by mechanically cooled cars because it could not handle the frozen foods that became such a large part of food sales after World War II. It was uneconomical to maintain all the icing facilities and maintenance facilities for limited use cars. Most ice-cooled cars were replaced by the early 1970's.

My uncle ran Colonial Ice Co. in Durham, and I remember watching his crew ice a wooden refrigerator car about 1970. The car was loaded with butter and was to go to the State Mental Hospital at Butner. It had arrived on Saturday on the Southern Rwy. and was to wait until Tuesday to go up the Keysville Branch. They reiced the car by hand, one man on the truck tossing 50 lb blocks of ice to another on the car. The top man caught the ice with his tongs and dropped it in. I don't think that they added salt. He commented that this was the second car that he had serviced in ten or more years.

The refrigerator car is a significant addition to our collection as it represents an example of one of the many thousands of ice-cooled refrigerator cars that passed through Bonsal on the Seaboard carrying Florida produce. ♦

# THE EDITOR'S PAGE

by Richard T. Lasater

In researching the refrigerator car article, I was surprised to find that Swift & Co. has not existed since 1972. According to an article on meat cars in the August 1991 issue of *Railroad Model Craftsman*, Swift was reorganized as Esmark Corp. Swift Independent Packing Co. was created to run the meat packing portion of Esmark, which had shrunk from operating 40 packing plants in the US, Canada, and Europe in 1977 to four plants. Swift Independent was acquired by ConAgra in 1987.

I can remember seeing Swift refrigerator cars spotted at their distribution warehouse across Blackwell Street from the American Tobacco Co. in Durham. These cars and others like them carrying produce were part of the local railroad scene while I was growing up. One day, like the steam engines, they were gone. The warehouse closed in the late 1960's and the Swift cars vanished. Now I know why.

Like cabooses, ice cooled refrigerator cars outlived their original reason for being. Trucks now carry most of the dressed beef hauled from the Midwest and a very large part of the fresh vegetables and fruit shipped nationwide. Any railfan who grew up in the 1950's as I did enjoys seeing old familiar faces like a real refrigerator car. This is a part of our local rail heritage that I am glad that we can preserve for future generations.

To accurately represent Triangle Area railroading as it existed in the 1950's, the North Carolina Railroad Museum needs to acquire a few more basic freight cars of types no longer used on today's railroads. To complete our collection, the wish list includes: a small tank car (to also serve as canteen for the Heisler), gondola and hopper cars (useful in track maintenance operations), and a pulpwood rack car. If you have information on the availability of any of these 50's-vintage cars, please contact the NCRM Acquisitions Committee at Bonsal (919-362-5416). ♦