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Nostalgic Selling: the Louisville & Nashville Railroad and its General Public Relations

Cover Page Footnote

The author acknowledges the effective, courteous assistance of the staff of the University Archives and Records Center at the University of Louisville Archives and Special Collections, Louisville, Kentucky, USA, and retired Louisville & Nashville Railroad public relations executive Charles Castner for his ongoing efforts to preserve the railroad's corporate records and in providing the author with his insights and materials from his personal collection.

Nostalgic Selling: the Louisville & Nashville Railroad and its *General* Public Relations

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Abstract - This paper represents a case study of how to use historic events/artifacts in public relations and sales. It recounts how the Louisville & Nashville Railroad participated in the United States Civil War centennial celebrations by restoring a locomotive, the *General*, that was made famous in a daring raid conducted in that war. Using primary and secondary documents mainly from corporate archives including notes, operations manuals, public relations logs, measurements, corporate publications and oral history, the paper outlines the *General*'s iconic history, the purposes for its 1960s restoration to operation for the Civil War centennial, and the overarching marketing strategy behind the project.

Keywords - Public relations, historical artifacts, U. S. Civil War, U.S. Civil War Centennial, "The Great Locomotive Chase," locomotive *General* Louisville & Nashville Railroad, marketing, event planning, history.

Relevance to Marketing Educations, Researchers, and/or Practitioners – Business use of artifacts and/or engagement in historical events require that a primary goal be in marketing, including development measures of conversions of such activities into direct sales.

Introduction

From the late 19th century to well through the 20th, a singular steam locomotive, the *General*, held an iconic place in U. S. Civil War history following what came to be known as The Great Locomotive Chase of April 12, 1862. For decades, Union advocates thrilled to the cool nerves of William J. Andrews and his "Andrews Raiders," a group of 19 soldier/spies who took the locomotive and its train on a wild 87-mile run across the Georgia countryside of the Western & Atlantic Railroad. They were at-

tempting to cut Confederate transportation and communication links between Atlanta and Chattanooga, Tennessee. Southerners delighted in the feats of train conductor William Fuller, who, left behind in the town of Big Shanty, chased his stolen train literally on foot, until, commandeering rail vehicles along the way, he caught up with the *General* near Ringgold, Georgia. Later, it was ironically the *General* that pulled a train from Chattanooga to Atlanta carrying the Raiders to imprisonment following their capture. Ultimately eight including Andrews were hanged, three were released in a prisoner exchange, and nine escaped. President Abraham Lincoln awarded six of the Raiders with the Medal of Honor, a federal commendation which only recently had been instituted (Bonds, 2007).

After the Chase

Following the Great Locomotive Chase, the *General* resumed its role as just another of the thousands of so-called “American” type locomotives popular in the mid-19th century (Morgan, 1962). Many steam locomotive types were named based on their wheel arrangements; American-type engines were 4-4-0 vehicles, meaning four small wheels in the front, four large driving wheels and no small trailing wheels. After the 1864 siege of Atlanta, the *General* suffered heavy damage in a munitions train explosion. It was repaired and continued in operation in the 1870s and ‘80s. On December 27, 1890, the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway leased the Western & Atlantic from the State of Georgia. The *General* was included in the lease, valued at \$1,500 and listed as “condemned.” But the NC&StL had one more task for the old locomotive, a forerunner to its eventual role as a public relations tool. Wanting to promote its new W&A line, on May 30, 1891, the NC&StL towed the *General* to Chattanooga, steamed it up and blew its whistle at a reunion which included surviving Raiders and their former foe, William Fuller. The engine then went into storage on a siding in Vining, Georgia, apparently slated for scrapping. However, in 1892, professional photographer E. Warren Clark of Tennessee came across it, photographed it, and successfully appealed to NC&StL management to have the engine displayed at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. As a result, the railroad’s Nashville shops refurbished it and before going to Chicago it appeared for a reunion of the Army of the Cumberland in September, 1892. The *General*’s Chicago appearance, promoted by Clark, also engaged in promotion of Tennessee by featuring a boxcar with a display of natural products of the state (The Great Locomotive Chase web site, circa 2001).

A Civil War Symbol

As participants in the Great Locomotive Chase increasingly published stories of the event, (Bonds, 2007), the *General*’s iconic status increased. It appeared at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta (where William Fuller was a

frequent visitor) and at the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition. Finally, the *General* was put on permanent display in Chattanooga Union Station in 1901, taken out from time to time for other exhibitions including the 100th anniversary celebration of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad at Halethorpe, Maryland, in 1927; the Chicago World's Fair in 1933; the New York World's Fair 1939-40, and the railroad fair at Chicago in 1948 (The Great Locomotive Chase web site, circa 2001).

The locomotive almost appeared in several motion pictures. In 1914 a movie producer wanted to re-enact the chase of the *General* and the *Texas*, an engine Fuller had commandeered to overcome the Raiders. *General* was restored to operating condition, but the plan was scuttled because producers wanted to move the production to California. In 1926 Buster Keaton made a comedy about the locomotive chase. He desired to use the *General* for the show, but public reaction intervened and Keaton had to use a substitute engine. Civil War historian and artist Wilbur Kurtz, acting as a consultant for the 1939 production "Gone with the Wind," hoped the *General* could appear in that epic, but transportation costs of taking the engine to Hollywood were too high, so producers instead used wood mockups. Finally, Walt Disney studios wanted to use the *General* in its 1955 production of "The Great Locomotive Chase," but costs of restoring it to operating condition were also prohibitive, so, like Keaton, Disney instead used a substitute engine (Morgan, 1962).

Except for its occasional display outings, the *General* slept for more than half a century at Chattanooga Union Station. In 1957, The Louisville & Nashville Railroad absorbed the NC&StL and ownership of the *General* (Morgan, 1962). As a public relations gesture, the NC&StL had been distributing colored lithographs of the engine. The L&N continued the practice and by 1958 the railroad got one or two requests each day for the picture (Thomas, 1958). While the Disney movie ensured the engine's ongoing fame, few apparently knew of its location. That changed somewhat, when photographer O. Winston Link published a 1957 photo series on it in *Trains Magazine* and the resulting increased interest in the *General* required erection of a protective fence (Morgan, 1962).

Civil War Centennial: Restore the General?

With L&N ownership of the *General*, a new focus developed toward the famous Civil War relic. Staffers on the company publication L&N Magazine dreamt of restoring the old engine to operation for the upcoming Civil War centennial (Morgan, 1962). Simultaneously, L&N President William Kendall was in the process of developing what he believed to be a solid public relations department. He hired former Associated Press staffer Warren McNeill to launch it. In addition to public relations, the resulting department also focused on corporate advertising and on operating a news bureau. It included staffers with an appreciation of history: Edison Thomas, who loved Civil War history and the *General*, and James G. Bogle, a student of history who had been involved with the U.S. Army Transportation Corps (Caster, 2015).

About 1960, Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver suggested to the L&N that the *General* be restored to operation for the fast-approaching Civil War Centennial. Early in 1961 L&N public relations chief McNeill submitted a lengthy memo to President Kendall containing a strategy for such a restoration. The memo outlined detailed plans for the centennial observance of the locomotive chase to be held April 14, 1962, at Kennesaw, Georgia. Then the locomotive would become a traveling ambassador for the railroad, including visits to major cities that especially coincided with Civil War Centennial observances. Of key interest was McNeill's admonition that marketing, not just history, was to be the primary focus:

We have in the *General* a unique and invaluable public relations tool which is widely envied by other railroads...Not to use it would seem grossly wasteful. Putting the *General* in operating condition and exhibiting it at various places would increase public awareness of the L&N and have institutional promotion value. This is not direct selling, but the more often people are reminded of the existence of the L&N, the more likely they are to think of us for business purposes or when we have legislative objectives. The goal of institutional advertising is to be widely recognized and favorably known. It will help us if we are readily recognized as the modern railroad that has possession of the historic *General* (McNeill memo, 1961).

McNeill recommended a budget of \$20,000 for 1961 and \$50,000 for 1962. These were substantial amounts (respectively almost \$162,000 and almost \$1.3 million in 2016 [Bureau of Labor Statistics]) at a time when L&N had suffered several years of declining revenue (Morgan, 1962). But McNeill noted that "the L&N has not been keeping pace with our competitors in expenditures for institutional advertising."

Meanwhile, a handwritten note in the McNeill-Kendall correspondence listed a 1961 "institutional advertising" budget, presumably for the *General*. It included \$4,345 for outdoor, \$2,500 for local magazines, \$200 for displays and \$2,200 for radio (the note apparently erroneously listed radio at an unlikely \$22,000, but totaled the overall "institutional advertising" budget to only \$9,245; if radio were \$2,200, the \$9,245 figure would be correct).

Restoring the General

L&N President Kendall authorized restoration of the *General* for the Civil War Centennial. In an April 1, 1961, memo to McNeill, Kendall said: "...[W]e have an opportunity to capitalize in a big way on the *General* during the Centennial period, but to be most effective it will take real organization and careful consideration to details in connection with the exploitation of this historical treasure..." Given the importance of the *General* project, he said "we could well afford to expand on it even more to the extent that other institutional advertising during this period is reduced." (Kendall memo, 1961).

The next step was the actual refurbishing of the locomotive. The L&N public relations department stealthily removed the *General* from Chattanooga Union Station on the night of June 6, 1961. In an *L&N Magazine* article “How We Stole the General,” public relations staffer Edison H. Thomas wrote: “For the sake of mystery it was to be removed at night with few people knowing about it...I felt a great deal as Mr. Andrews must have felt that morning at Big Shanty, Ga., April 12, 1862” (Thomas, 1961). The locomotive was taken to the L&N Louisville shops for overhaul (Morgan, 1962).

“An ounce of prevention...”

In using the *General* for the commemoration of Andrew’s Raid and as a public relations tool during the Civil War Centennial, the L&N left nothing to chance. A detailed public relations-oriented operations manual provided specific instructions regarding event planning, publicity, ticketing, lighting, security, sponsoring groups, and relationships with local dignitaries, bands, etc., with special attention given to L&N shippers (customers) (*The General Rides Again*, 1962). Given expected intense media coverage, the value of the *General* as a historical artifact, and risks inherent with thousands of people crowding busy railroad lines, L&N placed great emphasis on preparation as a means of controlling contingencies. “An ounce of prevention...” said one L&N handwritten note on planning, a reference to the old saw “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” (Anonymous, circa 1962). “Dignity, character, and discretion” were the goals for hand-picking train crews for the Centennial celebration. “One ‘incident’ may cause our company and its personnel to be severely criticized by one or more of the representatives of the press or by one of the dignitaries and this, of course, would seriously damage the value of this whole project to the L&N.” (Hurt, 1962). Crew appearance was important, too, and required historical accuracy. Few working class men, including railroaders, sported beards in the early ‘60s, but their presence was deemed to be important to add authenticity.

One of the “human interest” features of the “General” project is the necessity of the crew members of the *General* train growing beards for the event. This will be true, not only at the April 14 [Kennesaw, Georgia] affair, but at each point where the “General” will be displayed. This feature was developed by the Personnel Department in its negotiations with the operating brotherhoods and, I might add, works in the plans of the Public Relations Department perfectly (Kirchner, 1962, quoting Hurt).

The General Rides Again

The restored *General* was officially unveiled at the Centennial of Andrew’s Raid. While the actual raid was April 12, 1862, the 1962 observance was held the 14th to take advantage of a weekend Saturday. The *General*, pulling a single antique passenger car, operated under its own power between Atlanta and Chattanooga. Highlighting the trip were ceremonies at Kennesaw, where some 10,000 people plus passengers from two special trains greeted the old locomotive (Castner, 1962). The event was a public relations executive’s dream:

Thousands of happy youngsters of all ages --waving, cheering and squealing – crowded the station areas, the right of way and overhead bridges all the way from Atlanta to Chattanooga. Everyone old enough to walk had a camera to take pictures ...Businesses were closed, school was out and north Georgia was in a festive mood” (Hot Box 1962).

Those persons who think Americans are too material-minded and wrapped up in petty things should have seen the fervor and emotion of the thousands of spectators who watched the passing of the *General* in its trip from Atlanta to Chattanooga. The attraction of the locomotive was not that it is any marvel to itself...It was a symbol, as moving as the passing of the flag, to a people deeply aware of their country’s past. It was a great spectacle and a fine accomplishment of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad and the Civil War Centennial commissions of Georgia and Tennessee...” (*Atlanta Journal*, 1962).

After the Andrews Raid commemoration, the *General* served for the rest of 1962 as a roving ambassador for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad. It attended various Civil War commemorations including the Fifth National Convention of the Civil War Centennial Commissions May 2-5 and the commemoration of the centennial of the Battle of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, July 12-14. On August 8 it was at Ewing, Kentucky, presumed birthplace of James J. Andrews; October 7 at Harrodsburg, Kentucky, in connection with the Battle of Perryville along with a Civil War centennial program at Harrodsburg, and it was at an October 14-16 symposium of the Cincinnati Civil War Round Table Group (Public Relations Representative, 1963).

There were other national commemorations featuring the *General* in 1962 including an April 26-29 visit to Washington, D. C., for the 100th anniversary of the Congressional Medal of Honor and a May 18-19 Fort Knox commemoration of Armed Forces Day, for which the Association of American Railroads requested participation by all railroads. Civic events were on the itinerary, too, including the May 8-15 Memphis Cotton Carnival and the July 31-August 5 Bluegrass Fair in Lexington, Kentucky. And the *General* was engaged in corporate promotions as well, including a June 13 visit to Calhoun, Tennessee, for dedication of a new L&N line into the world’s largest paper mill; an October 4-6 stop in the Chicago area in connection with the production of the Electro-Motive Division of General Motors’ 25,000th diesel locomotive which was built for the L&N, and an October 12 excursion in Nashville for security analysts that were touring the L&N (Public Relations Representative, 1963). As it traveled to these events, the *General* frequently operated under its own power, making whistle stops in towns along the way (Louisville & Nashville News Bureau, 1962).

Advertising the General

August 8, 1962 (WRH, 1963). The L&N provided a healthy advertising budget for the *General* even before the restoration project. Advertising entitled “The Great Chase” appeared in the Louisville Courier Journal Civil War Centennial edition November 20, 1960. Similarly-titled advertising took up 1/3 of a page in the Montgomery-Advertiser-Journal “Confederal Centennial” edition February 19, 1961. The February-March, 1962, edition of Georgia Magazine featured “The General Returns to Cobb

County,” and advertising appeared in the Filson Club Quarterly for the last three quarters of 1962 and all four quarters of 1963. Exhibition advertising, consisting of ads of at least 85 lines appeared in the Chattanooga News Free-Press Times April 15 and 18, 1962; the Atlanta Constitution-Journal September 17, 1962; the Louisville Courier Journal and Times September 16, 25, and 26, 1962; the Louisville Courier Journal, July 22, 1962; Louisville Magazine in July, 1962, and in the 1962 Kentucky State Fair Horseshow program, and the Shelby Sentinel of Shelbyville, Kentucky

Public relations for the General

Besides advertising, the L&N planned detailed public relations for the *General's* tours. Black-and-white 8 x 10-inch photos accompanied press kits aimed at newspapers; no photos went to radio stations and despite big demand for them, the railroad had to limit photos to bonafide reporters. To keep newspaper photo appearances fresh, pictures of the *General* were regularly updated. Also press kits were limited to media along the rail lines visited by the *General*, unless there were good prospects for publicity. For instance, the Associated Press in New York developed photo and artwork that appeared in many newspapers during the *General's* travels (Thomas, 1966).

Upon announcement of an appearance by the *General*, a news release and press kits went to all media along the line, with news releases directed at specific local media timed to arrive a day or two before the *General* came to town (Thomas, 1966). A standardized L&N news release consisted of a lede that read “The nation’s number one steam locomotive, the General, will arrive in _____” and said “En route on a ‘whistle-stop’ tour of cities along the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, the historic engine of Civil War fame will be running under its own steam just as it did on the Western & Atlantic Railroad a century ago.” The news release touted the coach pulled by the *General* which was a rolling museum about Andrews Raid and featured an exhibit about modern railroading. Finally, the release summarized the reconditioning of the old locomotive, the Kennesaw centennial, and the *General's* modern-day trips (Louisville & Nashville News Bureau, 1962). L&N invited reporters to ride the *General's* train since having them on board resulted in a “captive audience” (Thomas, 1966).

Measurement

Given the importance of the General as a serious public relations tool, measurement of its effects were critical. A handwritten note in the L&N archives called for metrics regarding favorable local newspaper coverage, letters, followup reports, broadcast coverage, and business gained by appearances of the General (Anonymous, circa 1962). A detailed newspaper clipping report dated July 24, 1962, is contained in Table 1. It showed initially heavy national and local coverage on or before the Kennesaw Centennial of April 14, 1962, with national coverage then diminishing but with substantial numbers of local stories in newspapers continuing along the General’s routes.

Table 1 Newspaper Clipping Report July 24, 1962

	Wire Service Move-ments (AP, UPI, CP, NEA)	Wire-based Stories	Local Stories
On or before 4-14-1962	29	1,413	289
Washington D.C.	8	449	13
Columbus, Ohio	12	72	30
Memphis	4	156	13
St. Louis	2	28	9
Chicago	2	12	77
East St. Louis-Nashville	2	4	99
Calhoun			9
Evansville, Indiana			8
Evansville-Chicago			52
E. Kentucky road trip			6

From: Newspaper Clipping Report (1962).

The L&N developed a lengthy public relations log listing details of each stop the *General* made. Categories in the log included accounting of radio and television coverage, listings of people meriting letters of appreciation, a description of other activities during the visit and a list of benefits L&N received as a result of the locomotive's visit. Sample entries include:

...it is felt that the time effort and expense...will pay off over the years thru patronage of and good will toward the railroads in general.

Our patrons and public relations contact(s) have been profuse in their praise.

Definitely considered by public as most remarkable publicity project ever put on in this area.

Also improved morale of L&N employees. Project was sponsored at Anniston by L&N employees who all seemed anxious and happy to assist.

The *General* did a superb public relations job, which resulted in pledges of additional business for the L&N.

...It gave the members of the Traffic department an excellent opportunity to become better acquainted with our shippers, and this was taken very good advantage of...It enabled the members of the Public Relations Committee and traffic department representatives to become better acquainted with city and civic leaders with whom they would not ordinarily have the opportunity to know personally (Schedule of Tours, 1965).

The primary years of the *General's* operations (1962-1963) ultimately resulted in nearly a million (980,795) people entering the traveling display housed in the passenger car pulled by the *General*. In visiting 287 cities and towns in seventeen states

and the District of Columbia, the *General* ran 11,203 miles under its own power (plus 9,962 miles transported on a flatcar), and carried 87,082 passengers (NFH, 1963).

In 1964 the *General* ended its publicity travels and was set up on display at the New York World's Fair through fall of that year. To go to the fair L&N once again applied intense planning to the event and highlighted it on May 30, Memorial Day, as the engine charged under its own power from the Bronx to Queens across the Hell Gate Bridge on the East River ("General Captures," 1964).

That fall, the *General* was taken to Chattanooga to be part of the city's sesqui-centennial celebration, but was not under steam (The Great Locomotive Chase web site, circa 2001)

It's About Marketing – Tying the General to L&N sales.

Always, the General project focused on the link between publicity and sales. Contained in the L&N archives is a crude document containing promotional copy and on which photographs were glued. It was perhaps a mockup of a brochure that was planned or actually printed. It contains perhaps the best summary of the mission of the General:

The publicity and appearances of the GENERAL create a strong public desire to see and to ride on the train, and the attention thus attracted is focused on the L&N modern facilities and new services. Among those attracted are officials of all levels of government, civic leaders, customers and prospective customers. Freight solicitors invite these people, including hard-to-reach business men, to leave their desks and to bring their families for a ride on the GENERAL train. The train, like any institutional advertisement, makes an indirect contribution to selling by bringing the L&N into a favorable light and calling it to the attention of those in a position to give us business. We promote the personal element in selling, believing that salesmanship is a distinctive personal endeavor (And Then—Focusing, circa 1962).

The ambitious L&N promotion project featuring the *General* did not go unnoticed among railroad and marketing observers. L&N received the prestigious Centennial Medallion of the Civil War Commission (Robertson, 1963) and the 1962 Gold Spike Award of the Trinity Valley Railfans of Fort Worth, Texas, (Trinity Valley, circa 1963). Also, the *General* project caused the Railway Progress Institute (RPI), a railroad suppliers group, to give its *Golden Freight Car Award* for sales efforts to L&N (two other railroads also were cited). A joint statement by three RPI judges said "we were more than favorably impressed with the modern vigorous means of sales promotion being effected by the railroad industry" (L&N Gets Award, 1962). In addition, *Public Relations News* featured the *General* project in a case study (Priswold, circa 1963), and the railroad's public relations effort was noted in an *Atlanta Journal* column (Aikman, 1963).

End of the Project

The Civil War Centennial ended in 1965, and so did the General's travels. Placed in storage, the locomotive operated one more time, in September, 1966, for the Southern Governor's Conference near Paducah, Kentucky. In February, 1967, L&N President Kendal promised that Georgia could have the General. However, on September 12, Chattanooga Mayor Ralph Kelly stopped and seized a train carrying the General through his city enroute to Kennesaw. A legal battle resulted and in 1970 the U.S. Supreme Court awarded the locomotive to Georgia where it is now displayed in a museum in Kennesaw (The Great Locomotive Chase web site, circa 2001).

Lessons from the General

As a major contribution to the Civil War Centennial, restoration of the General was significant from a historic standpoint. And its restoration was timely, given the Disney film "The Great Locomotive Chase" just a few years earlier. But the bottom line was the bottom line, and L&N documents show the project was first and foremost about public relations. The times were difficult for the railroad industry, which came out of World War II facing the emerging interstate highway system and jet technology that resulted in freight and passengers abandoning trains for trucks, cars, and planes. Joining these challenges were the burdens of heavy regulation and government-mandated money-losing passenger trains (Gallamore and Meyer, 2014). Thus the need for the L&N to be an advocate for railroading in its course of celebrating history. At the General's public appearances, people filed through the attached passenger car to learn of the contemporary railroad story, especially that of L&N (Castner, 2015). L&N President Kendall said "building interest in the General is to be regarded, not as an end in itself, but as a means of gaining an audience for the story of L&N progress" (Priswold, circa 1963). Besides documenting the numbers of people flocking to the General, there was careful tracking of the influence of the old locomotive on communities, customers, potential customers, and ultimately upon sales.

Aftermath

Indirectly, the legacy of the General project remains. Its public relations successes prompted another carrier, the Southern Railroad, to run steam locomotive excursions for nearly thirty years beginning in 1966 (Castner, 2015; Wrinn, 1991). In 1994, under the new merger name Norfolk Southern, those steam operations ended due to costs, limited personnel and capacity, overexposure, and liability issues (Wrinn, 1995). However, NS recently resumed its steam program. A locomotive of predecessor railroad Norfolk & Western was overhauled for use in steam excursions beginning in 2015. It is no stretch to say that the appearance of an operating N&W steam locomotive at the time of this writing can be traced back to the legacy of The Great Locomotive Chase and its centennial celebration by the Louisville & Nashville Railroad.

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