

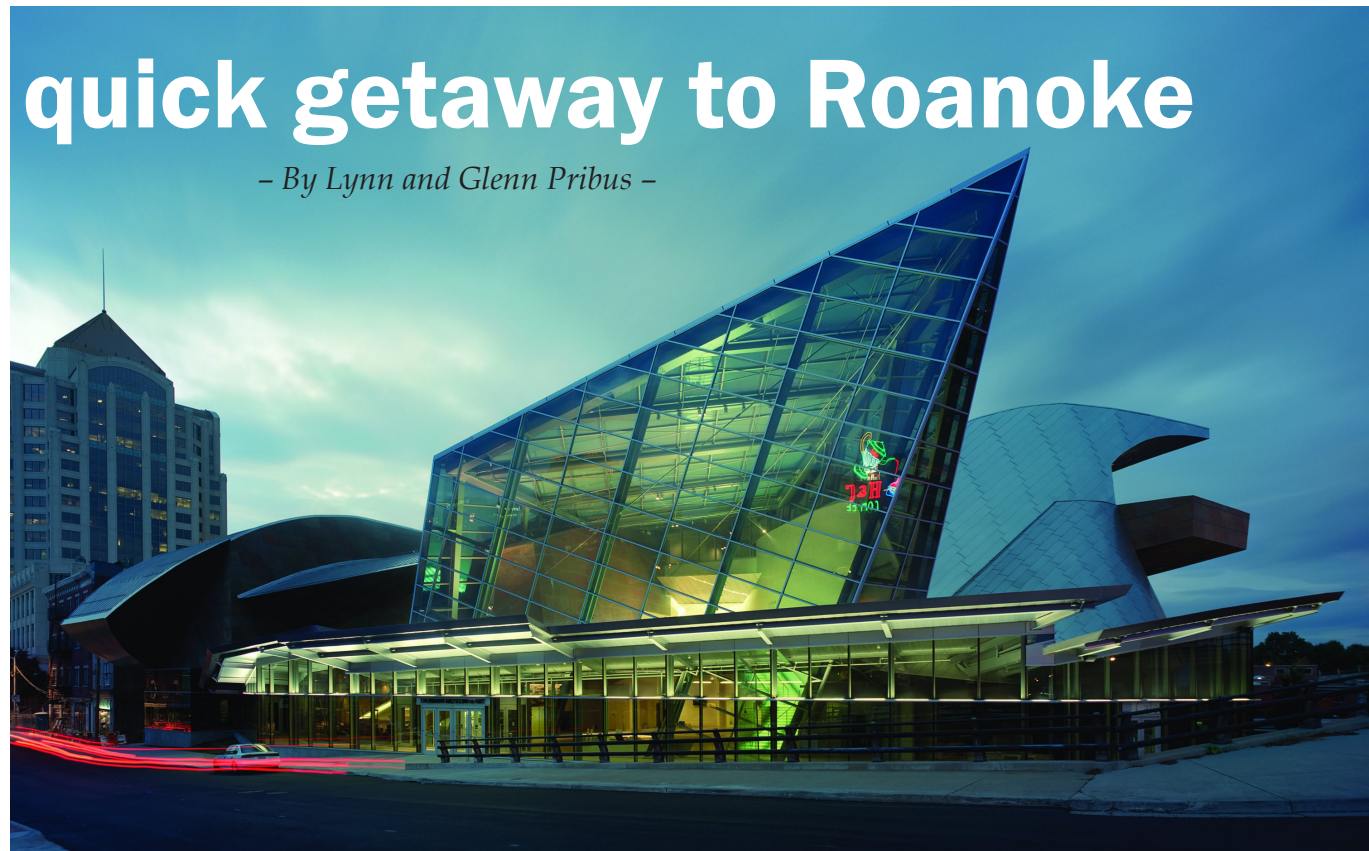
Plan a quick getaway to Roanoke

– By Lynn and Glenn Pribus –

Once upon a time, there was a notable salt lick in the piedmont of the Blue Ridge. It drew animals, which in turn attracted hunters and eventually a settlement developed complete with train tracks. When the railroad decided to build a fancy hotel there in the late 1800s, however, they decided “Big Lick” wasn’t a very classy name, so they renamed the community “Roanoke” after the local tribe.

Over the years, Roanoke became a major railroad town manufacturing and maintaining steam engines and the railyards are still important, although the leading employer is now the healthcare industry. The restoration and renovation of downtown have transformed it into a desirable living area for locals and an entertaining destination for visitors. Museums, restaurants, art galleries and recreational opportunities all combine to make Roanoke an enjoyable getaway.

A great place to start is at the Visitor Center, housed in the former railroad station and offering brochures, information and personal recommendations from the greeter. This is also home to the Link Museum where a video introduces the remarkable work of O. Winston Link, a renowned photographer of



The Taubman Museum punctuates the Roanoke skyline. Photo by Timothy Hursley.

steam engines. Some 300 of his striking photos are on view and making it well worth a stop.

The nearby Hotel Roanoke — originally built in the late 1800s — is an elegant lodging with a dining room open to the public and offering its signature dishes of peanut soup and spoonbread and a very nice lunch buffet. A glass-enclosed skyway over the train tracks takes visitors to the downtown area where the Historical Roanoke City Farmers

Market, open every day but Christmas and New Year, has as many as 60 vendors on Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Originally launched in 1882, it’s Virginia’s oldest continuous farmers market. Permanent stalls offer flowers, veggies and artisan works. Some vendors have had their spots for years. There are also many eateries ranging from Thai to Cuban, and from “Local Roots” with farm-fresh regional selections to “Blue 5”

with an extensive microbrew list and nightly live music. The former City Market Building, with Cheryl Foster’s distinctive mosaics at the entrances, has recently been converted into a food court with a variety of grab-and-go food choices to eat at tables in the bright interior or, in some cases, at outdoor sidewalk seating.

There are art galleries plus the History Museum of Western Virginia which is in temporary quarters while

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Above: The Historic Hotel Roanoke is visible beyond Roanoke’s Railwalk. Left: Charles, a docent, brags that this engine was built in Roanoke in two weeks instead of the usual six to eight months. Photos by Lynn Pribus.

IF YOU GO:

From the center of Richmond to the center of Roanoke is a pleasant drive of about three hours via routes 60, 24 and 460. Lodging ranges from the elegant Roanoke Hotel to B&Bs to national motel chains. The Visitor Center has many publications including a magazine called The Menu, which provides information and menu samples of more than two dozen eateries.

For more information visit www.VisitRoanokeVa.com. This website is also enhanced to be accessed via smartphone. Included are maps, festival listings, special package offers for everything from lodging to dining, shopping and golf as well as a virtual visitors guide.

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developing impressive new exhibits which will open early in 2013 in the Center in the Square. “The museum will be highly interactive,” explains one of the guides, adding that education for local schools is a key part of its mission.

Downtown is punctuated by the dramatic architecture of the Taubman Museum. “It’s a wonderful calling card for Roanoke,” declared docent Judy Bishop, “a piece of art inside and out and amazing in any weather.” Without the overwhelming collections of larger institutions, Bishop said, “You have time to engage in this museum.” The soaring windowed lobby has wide stairs leading to the second floor with exhibits from contemporary to early American art plus Art Venture — a large activity room for kids. Every Saturday is free admission for all.

From the Taubman, it’s an easy stroll along the Railwalk to the official Virginia Museum of Transportation which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Along the way visitors can trigger a train horn and lower a crossing gate. Originally a station for transferring freight between trains and trucks, the museum today has exhibits of transportation by road, rail and later this year, aviation. Displays include an antique auto collection with the oldest dating back to 1904, a four-tier O-gauge model train layout depicting the region, and even a model circus. Trains, with specially designed railcars for equipment and

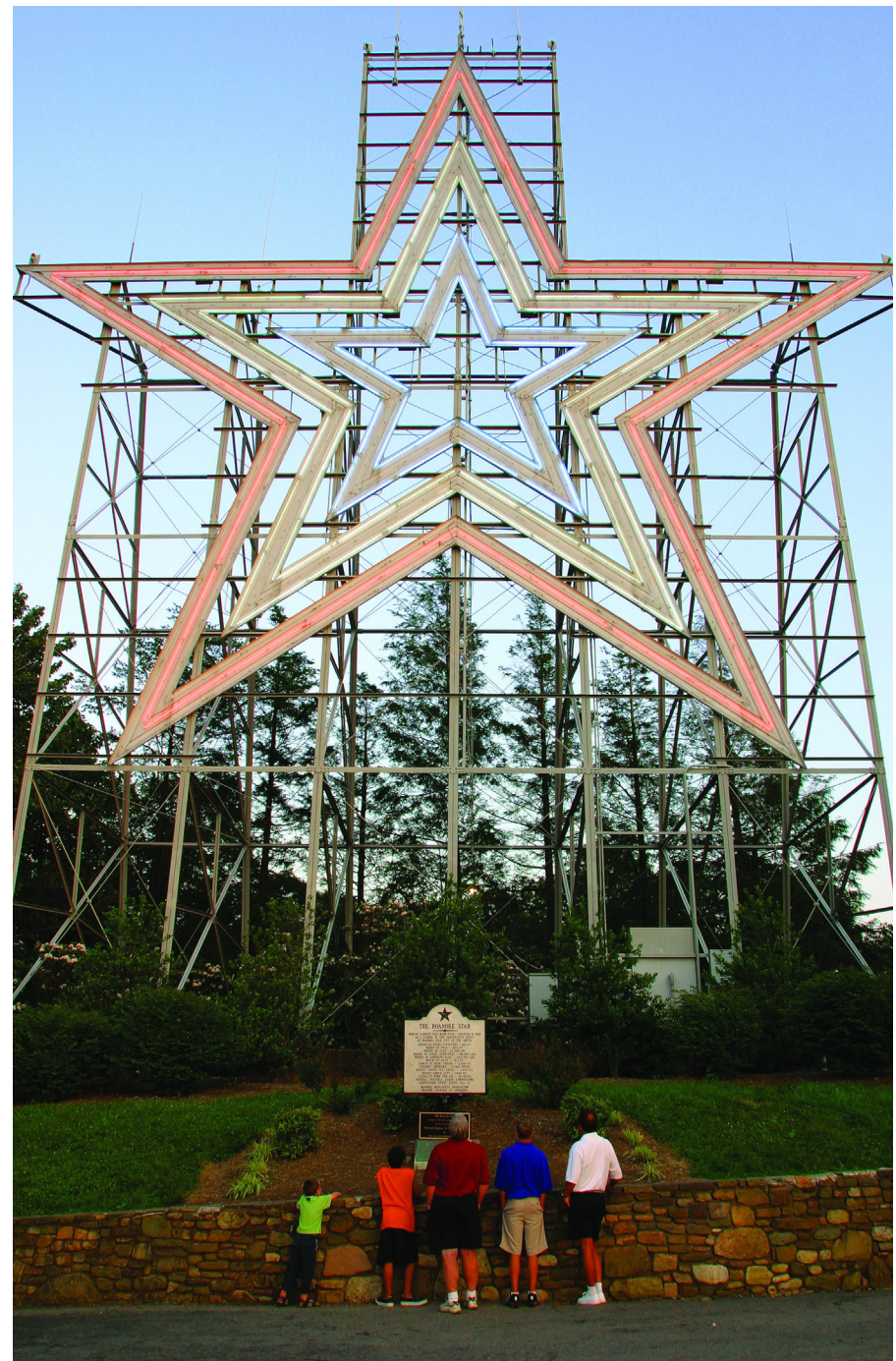
animals, enabled circuses to travel easily from city to city.

There are more than 50 pieces of rolling stock including electric, diesel and steam locomotives. “This engine was built in two weeks,” boasted Charles, a docent, with one hand resting on the cow-catcher of Engine 1218. The rush job was in response to an urgent need during WWII. Usually it took six to eight months. “Most powerful steam engine in the world,” he said, explaining it was entirely forged and assembled in Roanoke except for the roller bearings and fire-box doors. “It could go 80 mph, hauled 180 freight cars of 50-70 tons each and traveled 15-20,000 miles a month.”

The tender, he explained, carried about 30 tons of coal and a good fireman handling the auto-feed was essential because Engine 1218 burned four to seven tons an hour. “The better the fireman the better the engine gets down the road.”

To make like a local, hit The Roanoker Restaurant, an institution for more than 70 years, with some servers working there for more than 40. Then head up Mill Mountain with its zoo, wildflower gardens and hiking paths. There’s a lookout beneath Roanoke’s iconic 100-foot-tall star, erected in 1949 as the world’s largest man-made star and still illuminated nightly. The view of the city below and the Blue Ridge beyond spell the beginning or end of a perfect day. **FP**

Lynn and Glenn Pribus travel from their home in Albemarle County near Charlottesville.



Above: One of the new mosaics at the entrances to the renovated Historical Roanoke City Farmers Market.

Left: A scene from the Farmers Market. Photos by Lynn Pribus.

Top: The iconic star has shown over Roanoke since 1949. Photo by Jeff Greenberg.