

Elliott Springs and “Loretto”

Elliott White Springs (1896-1959), World War 1 flying ace and stunt pilot, industrialist, creator of the Springmaid advertising campaign, author (seven books and numerous magazine articles) and farmer, was interested in anything that had a motor.

A born tinkerer, he played with cars, planes, and trains, often redesigning them to suit his whimsical brand of humor.

Springs loved to get something cheap and then turn it into something in which he, along with friends, family and employees could have fun. When surplus war materials were made available after World War II, Springs had a heyday. A lot of the military surplus went to Springs Recreational Park on the east bank of the Catawba River. Many folks still remember the park as a fun place to be on a Saturday afternoon in the summer. There were surplus planes for kids to play on and in, but especially remembered is a miniature railroad train that looped its way on a mile of track through the park.

In 1902 his parents had taken Springs to the Charleston Exposition, which had a miniature train built by the American Locomotive Works. The boy was so delighted with the train that he never forgot it.

In 1938 when he heard that the little train was still being run, he tried unsuccessfully to buy it. Finally after the war, he acquired two more engines, one of them used at the Jamestown Exposition of 1907. Springs added four coaches and two flat cars. He directed his foundry at Lancaster to build a turntable. He added a roundhouse, water tank and station. Each of the coaches carried eight passengers. Springs loved to don an engineer's cap and take over the throttle, to the delight of his passengers.

Springs already owned the Lancaster and Chester Railroad (inherited from his father) which hauled cloth and cotton between the Springs mills in Lancaster and Chester. At the end of World War II, when Springs was equipping Springs Recreational Park with surplus war vehicles, he purchased a fleet of used U.S. Army diesel engines that had seen service in Italy. With that purchase Springs could boast that the L & C was the first railroad in South Carolina to be 100 percent “dieselized.”

Even before World War II, Springs had begun his collection of used railroad cars.

In 1939 he purchased a private Pullman car called the “Loretto,” which had been built in 1901 for Charles M. Schwab. The Pullman was refurbished in New York before it was brought to Fort Mill and placed on a spur track.

A Charlotte Observer article, undoubtedly written by Springs himself although the story had no byline, said about the transaction, “Elliott Springs, who is president of a railway as well as a cotton mill, was recently crowded out of his Fort Mill office by a growing army of clerks, and has found refuge by taking up his quarters in a private car, which he bought for a song and two whistles just in time to cheat the scrap iron dealers.”

The “song and two whistles” turned out to be just \$2,300, an unbelievably low price for the luxuriously equipped, though aging, car. Among the descriptions Springs wrote of the 81-foot Loretto: “a new coat of green paint and a polished brass observation platform,” “all woodwork is of well-preserved Cuban mahogany,” “two luxurious bedrooms with connection marble bath between,” “the beds and lighting fixtures are gold-plated,” “cut glass chandeliers,” and “marquetry cupids and gilded ceiling.”

Some additions made by Springs were new seat covers made by Springs Cotton Mills,

air-conditioning, and connections for local water, sewer, electric and telephone lines, all of which could be disconnected and the car “moved to any plant where the attention of the president is required.”

Springs was proud of his finished product. His way of expressing it was: “... it looks to be a cross between Joe’s Diner and the Queen of Sheba’s palanquin. It makes the Coronation Scot at the World’s Fair look like a French troop train.”

For 40 years the Loretto stayed stationary in Fort Mill. The car was used as temporary living quarters by Anne and Bill Close as they waited for construction of their permanent home to be completed.

In 1979, Springs’ heirs, the Close family of Fort Mill, donated the private Pullman to the Spencer Railroad Museum at Landis, N.C.

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