

BABY BOOMER MEMORIES

What's in store for the fire-damaged 'Berkshire Hills,' the county's last surviving trolley car?

• By Jim Shulman

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The Berkshire Street Railway operated this exquisite "Berkshire Hills" parlor car from 1903-22, traveling between the cities and towns in the Berkshires and those nearby in the three bordering states. After 10 years of storage, the trolley was purchased in 1932, then moved to outer West Housatonic Street in Pittsfield, converted to a restaurant and operated as such for nearly 60 years until the property was bought by Fontaine's Auction Gallery in 1993.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY JIM SHULMAN

Four years ago, I wrote [a column](#) about the former Coachlite Restaurant that many baby boomers frequented growing up in the Pittsfield area.

The restaurant was located in front of the Holly K Motel adjacent to the Berkshire Drive-In Theater on West Housatonic Street. In that article, I explained that the Coachlite was originally a trolley for the Berkshire Street Railway system. The trolley operated from 1903 until 1922. It was then mothballed for 10 years before it was bought to be converted to a restaurant.

This trolley was built in Springfield in 1903 for the Berkshire Street Railway Co. as an upscale coach or "parlor car." Parlor cars were not ordinary every day trolleys, but rather plush in both the appearance and décor.

This 45-foot, 13-ton parlor car was named the “Berkshire Hills” and was purchased for the steep price of \$20,000. In 2024, this 1903 price tag would be equivalent to nearly \$700,000.

The local trolley company wanted to use it specifically for chartered trips or special excursions to and from the larger Berkshire cities/towns in south and north county, Hoosick Falls, N.Y., Canaan, Conn., and Bennington, Vt.

Trolley buffs have long held that this car was the most exquisite parlor car ever built. The exterior was painted white with gold lettering and gold stripes. The interior was fashioned with rich, polished mahogany woodwork, curved and beveled glass, and fancy light fixtures.

The windows were adorned with opulent blue curtains embroidered in gold and lined with a cream satin material. Twenty-eight upholstered wicker seats and several ornate tables graced the inside. Passengers were known to dress in their “Sunday best” to ride aboard.



The late Kinsley Goodrich, a local trolley enthusiast, crafted 40 different 0 Gauge (toy train size) trolleys in his lifetime, with his favorite being the Berkshire Hills car, shown with passengers aboard.
KINSLEY GOODRICH PHOTO

In 1932, the Berkshire Hills car was sold for a paltry \$300 and moved from a decade of storage in the former East Street trolley barn to the West

Housatonic Street location. It was then converted to a diner and eventually expanded to seat 100 patrons.

The restaurant operated under several names for nearly 60 years in addition to the Coachlite. In 1993, the trolley building was acquired by its current owner, Fontaine's Auction Gallery.

Unfortunately, four months after the acquisition, a furnace fire destroyed a good part of the former trolley car. As an alternative to razing the remaining structure, it was given to the Seashore Trolley Museum in Kennebunkport, Maine, in 1995.

The former Berkshire Hills car was then wrapped in tarps with no plans formalized for restoration by the museum. Now, some 30 years later, there are some interesting developments about this trolley worthy of an update.

I frequented the restaurant in the 1960s and 1970s but never saw it as the original trolley car, being that it was converted years before I was born. However, 40 years ago, I remember seeing an authentic replica of the Berkshire Hills car at a model train exhibit at the former Hilton Hotel in Pittsfield.



Kinsley Goodrich was known to be the leading historian on the Berkshire system's trolley lines and operations that ended in 1932. He remained active in the trolley hobby until his death in 2017 at the age of 88.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY JIM SHULMAN

I was fortunate to get to know the man who built this model, the late Kinsley Goodrich. Not only had he created an exact O-gauge (toy train size) replica of the Berkshire Hills car, but during his lifetime he handcrafted 40 models of original trolleys of the Berkshire Street Railway system. He also engineered the operation of them with electricity from overhead wires, just like real streetcars.

As a young child, Kinsley frequently rode with his dad, on the Berkshires' trolley cars, and he developed a fascination for them. What was remarkable was that the trolleys stopped running in the Berkshires in 1932 when Kinsley was only 7 years old.

Yet his keen memory and growing collection of photos helped in his trolley creations that he began building at age 8. By the time he was a teen, he had earned the reputation of being one of the best modelers of trolleys in all of New England. (With his woodworking skills, Kinsley chose a career in cabinet making and millwork and eventually took over his dad's woodworking business, C M Goodrich & Son.)

I enjoyed my visits with Kinsley when I would come to the Berkshires. He never minded sharing his wealth of knowledge with me. He knew about every one of the 100 or so trolleys owned by the Berkshire Street Railway system. He could relate the history of the system's cars, the manufacturers of each, when they were built, their routes, where they were stored, when each car was retired, and their final demise or destruction when they were replaced by buses in 1932.

Kinsley would often talk about his favorite, the Berkshire Hills car. Since very few parlor cars were ever built and most were scrapped in the 1920s during the Great Depression, the survival of this car even after the fire was important to Kinsley.

He was instrumental in seeing the "shell" of the car brought to the Seashore Trolley Museum in Maine after the 1994 fire. Kinsley passed away in 2013 at the age of 88 and despite his optimistic nature, he doubted that this prized parlor car would ever be restored. Would he be correct?

A few weeks ago, I learned that the Seashore Trolley Museum has donated the Berkshire Hills car to the Shelburne Falls Trolley Museum, located just over Berkshire County border in Franklin County off of the Mohawk Trail.

Plans have already begun for this museum to restore the parlor car, which has been wrapped in tarps for 30 years. I spoke with Sam Bartlett, president of the Shelburne Falls group that has the overall responsibility for its restoration.

Sam, a retired electrical engineer, is a third-generation trolley buff whose dad was instrumental in 1992 in establishing this picturesque community's museum dedicated to trolleys. In the collection is a 1910 trolley of the Shelburne Falls and Colrain Street Railway that once traversed the famed bridge of flowers in the town.

The Shelburne Falls Trolley Museum volunteers totally restored this trolley and visitors remark that it looks like it was fresh from the factory. Sam shared that in restoring the Berkshire Hills car, they will leave sections of the fire damage to show the amount of work it takes to do such a restoration.

The charred parlor car is still in Maine, but the preparation is already underway. Currently with the funding from a Massachusetts Cultural Council grant, the museum is extending a trolley building to be able to accommodate the 45-foot car to do the restoration indoors.



Volunteers disassemble and restore the "trucks," or wheels, that will be installed on the Berkshire Hills trolley, which has been wrapped in a tarp at the Seashore Trolley Museum in Kennebunkport, Maine. This year it will be donated and transported to the Shelburne Trolley Museum for restoration and a permanent exhibit.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY SHELBURNE TROLLEY MUSEUM

Since the Berkshire Hills car's "trucks," or wheelsets, were removed for recycling when it was converted to an eatery, the museum was able to acquire the correct replacement sets, and volunteers have been refurbishing them. Having wheels will make rolling the body and frame easier to load and transport on a trailer from Kennebunkport to Shelburne Falls later this year.

There is no definite time line for completion of the project, and it will depend on volunteer recruitment and availability of funds needed for supplies. I urge readers to bring their children and grandchildren to the Shelburne Falls Trolley Museum for a ride on the restored No. 10 trolley and to see the restoration process of the Berkshire Hills parlor car this coming summer season.

Volunteers and donations are always welcome too. It is sad my friend, Kinsley, couldn't see this project unfold, but his adult children have made

a wonderful donation in his memory. They loaned the museum his favorite hand-built model for display, the Berkshire Hills car.

Jim Shulman, a Pittsfield native and retired Psychologist living in Ohio, is the author of "Berkshire Memories: A Baby Boomer Looks Back at Growing Up in Pittsfield." If you have a comment about this story, please write the Berkshire Eagle at letters@berkshireeagle.com and if you have a memory of a Berkshire baby-boom landmark, business or event you'd like to see in a column, write Jim at jesjmskali@aol.com

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