TEXAS HIGHWAYS--RAILROADING IN TEXAS, PART ONE

Story by Randy Mallory

Railroads brought development to Texas on…

RIBBONS OF STEEL

Her rivers, creeks, and bayous, rarely bridged, are subject to great and sudden floods, whereby teamsters are often imprisoned for days between two creeks, which in dry seasons are waterless, and halted by rivers for weeks," journalist and politician Horace Greeley wrote of Texas in 1871. "But for the railroads, Texas is doomed by nature to stagnation, impotence, and barbarism."

Even with the first railroads, train travel in Texas proved, if not barbaric, at least adventuresome.

Crossing the Brazos River by rail just before the Civil War approximated a roller coaster ride. To breech the low-water crossing's steep approaches and floating drawbridge, the train engineer barreled ahead at full steam. It was "quite common for a whole train to be dumped into the river," noted John W. Dancy, railroad advocate and state senator from La Grange. As a result, the engineer stopped at the brink of the Brazos to "give the passengers the choice of taking their chances with the train or getting off and taking the ferry."

Little did Greeley or even Dancy know that Texas was embarking on one of the grandest railroad booms in history.

During the 1870s, almost 2,000 miles of rails wound from the upper Gulf Coast through the virgin forests of East Texas, across the post oak belt, and into the central plains as far as Fort Worth and San Antonio. In the process, state population doubled to more than 1.5 million.

During the 1880s, steam engines snorted into South Texas, far West Texas, and the Panhandle on a staggering 6,000 miles of new line. Population jumped another 40 percent. By 1905, tracks fingered deep into the fertile Rio Grande Valley. Finally, all of Texas' far-flung regions were interwoven by rail lines in a network that looked like spaghetti spilled across the state map.

On the wheels of more than 270 railroad companies, Texas took only 52 years (1853 to 1905) to cannonball from first line to first place in U.S. trackage, a title never relinquished. Railroads also inaugurated, for the first time, meaningful commerce between Texas and Mexico via gateway towns like El Paso, Presidio, Eagle Pass, and Laredo.

Wherever railroads sledgehammered spikes in dirt, towns took root, and fortunes blossomed. From cotton to cattle to timber to oil, what the land produced, rails clickety-clacked to market. The powerful ribbons of steel blazed the way for towns and cities where none existed.

Before and during the Texas Republic, settlers from the U.S. and Europe arrived largely by water. They farmed profitably along bays and rivers within a hundred miles of coastal ports, according to S.G. Reed's classic "A History of the Texas Railroads."

But inland, products traveled by slow, costly ox teams. At first, the only inland road was the old King's Highway that linked East Texas to the Mexican border. Pioneers hacked new roads through the wilderness that were incredibly primitive and unreliable. To improve teamster and stagecoach service, some towns even interconnected by laying down board roads.

For a solution, Texas leaders turned to a new mode of transport catching on back east--the "rail road." In 1836, less than nine months after victory at San Jacinto, President Sam Houston signed the Republic's first railroad charter (also the first west of the Mississippi River). As one observer noted, however, the debt-ridden fledgling nation "lived and died without hearing the whistle of a locomotive."

After statehood in 1845, the new Legislature pushed for rail lines to tie the vast open interior to growing coastal communities. The California Gold Rush of 1848 heightened spirits for a transcontinental railway…and Texas wanted on that route.

A distrust of monopolies somewhat tempered the overriding desire for railroads. Serious regulation in the form of the Texas Railroad Commission was almost 40 years away. Yet in 1853, legislators passed regulation (the nation's first), just in time for the first Texas railroad--the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos, and Colorado Railroad (BBB & C).

The BBB & C spiked its tracks on the traditional English gauge of four feet, eight and a half inches (the wheel width of ancient Roman chariots), a gauge eventually adopted across the U.S.

Built with Bostonian backing, the line connected a terminal site (now inside Houston) with upriver farming communities. Some 50,000 bales of cotton waited shipment at 75 cents per bale, one-third the cost of ox teams. The BBB & C required prepayment on exotics like ice, oranges, and jewelry. An "owner's risk" clause claimed "the company will not be accountable for bursting of cider, beer and other barrels," unless at obvious fault. Passengers paid five cents per mile.

Two other Houston-controlled railroads of the 1850s established that city as an aggressive railroad center, as nearby Galvestonians noted with dismay. Galveston feared losing dominance as the state's largest and wealthiest city. So it built Texas' first train to the sea--the Galveston, Houston, and Henderson Railroad.

Though exciting and promising, ante-bellum railroad construction had little to show for a decade of posturing. By 1861, Texas had less than 500 miles of track and little rolling stock (steam locomotives, passenger coaches, and freight cars). The Civil War stopped even that development in its tracks. After the war, virtually every mile of track had to be rebuilt.

Back in the Union by 1870, Texas exploded in four decades of unprecedented railroad construction.

A liberal land grant program proved the carrot that coaxed the iron horse. To spur development, the Legislature gave the railroads eight sections (5,120 acres)--and later 16 sections--of state land for each mile of track. In all, railroads received 32 million acres of land. The state also loaned construction money from its school fund, and towns pitched in bonds to put themselves on railroad maps.

Aggressive railroads also expanded by buying up smaller or ailing railroads in areas of economic interest, renaming them along the way. That meant almost constant, and often confusing, reorganization of railroads during the boom era. Chronicling the ancestry of Texas railroads is like reciting the genealogy of Adam. Both require plenty of "begets."

Charles Zlatkovich details that complex railroad evolution in his authoritative "Texas Railroads; A Record of Construction and Abandonment."

As the boom unfolded, only a handful of nationwide railroad giants dominated long-haul traffic in Texas. Steely rail magnates forged empires…and intense rivalries.

None clashed more than C.P. Huntington and Jay Gould, both in the race to forge the first southern transcontinental line through Texas.

Heading from California, Huntington pushed his Southern Pacific Railroad (SP) eastward. Jay Gould's Texas & Pacific (T&P) headed west. The stakes were high--20 sections of land per mile in Texas and 40 sections per mile in Arizona and New Mexico.

May 1881, the SP reached El Paso, with T&P track still 150 miles away. By November, the SP reached Sierra Blanca. There, Huntington and Gould penned "joint track" arrangements which resulted in the T&P dominating North Texas rail traffic and the SP dominating the south for years.

Huntington had already allied himself with Thomas Wentworth Peirce, an ambitious Bostonian who bought Texas' first railroad (the BBB & C) and renamed it the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio (GH & SA).

Pushing from Houston toward San Antonio, the GH & SA worked convicts, paying them with company tokens accepted as currency at groceries and restaurants. Peirce organized an immigration bureau enticing foreigners with special fares if they settled along his line.

By 1883 the GH & SA met Huntington's SP in the trans-Pecos where Peirce drove a silver spike forming the first continuous rail line from New Orleans to Los Angeles.

As railroads prospered, so did the state's original industries.

In 1867 a new line to Abilene, Kansas, spawned the heyday of the Texas trail drive. Cowboys herded cattle along the Chisholm Trail from South Texas to far-off railheads. As rail lines spilled into ranch country, unlikely burgs like Dallas and Fort Worth became railroad and cattle centers.

The ways of the West prevailed for a time, Laura V. Hamner says in her "Short Grass and Longhorns." At first, railroads accommodated ranchers by installing wire gates where rails penetrated fence lines. Crewman opened the gate for the stopped train and, once it passed, the rear brakeman closed the gate and hopped aboard the slow-moving caboose…to the amusement of passengers

When the Fort Worth & Denver Railroad extended into the Panhandle in 1886, cattleman Henry Sanborn wanted a town built where the line crossed his Flying Pan Ranch. But Ragtown, also on the line, was already the county seat. So, little by little, Sanborn bought up Ragtown's buildings and hauled them to his ranch. Finally, Ragtown's courthouse followed suit, and local cowboys named the town Amarillo--Spanish for yellow, the color of nearby cliffs.

Far-flung lines like the Southern Pacific scattered cattle facilities across the state--stock pens at Alpine, Marfa, Ryan, Valentine, Lobo, and Llano, and water and feed lots at El Paso, Waco, Hearne, and Ennis.

The Fort Worth and Rio Grande, later part of the Santa Fe, even built a fenced lane 250 feet wide and 100 miles long to herd cattle from Sonora to its railhead.

Farming, more than ranching, promoted population growth. So railroads promoted farming. "Turn the lariat into a plow line," railroad mottoes campaigned. Easy terms encouraged farmers to buy land along tracks.

Rail access to distant markets made large-scale farming possible for the first time. Mammoth railside grain elevators sprouted up all across West Texas. In the Valley, a fruit and vegetable industry blossomed once refrigerated rail cars began carrying perishables cross-country. Rail transport boosted roses from Tyler, sweet potatoes from Gilmer, peas from Athens, tomatoes from Jacksonville and Yoakum, and spinach from Crystal City.

Texas' timber industry also rode the rails to prominence.

At first, backwoods timber trams hauled logs to mill on wooden rails. After the Bessemer process made steel rails the U.S. standard, entrepreneurs like Thomas E. Durham of Harrison County moved virgin timber at ever-increasing rates. Durham's pertly-named Great Sweetgum, Yubadam, and Hoo Hoo Route ran a 20,000-pound shay locomotive at a top speed of 10 miles per hour--day and night during busy seasons.

Fueled by split pine, "sparks emitted from the cabbage head smokestack on a dark night would have made a modern fireworks display appear uninteresting," Durham's son wrote later. The steam engine carried two log cars, one in front and one in back. At steep grades, the little engine disconnected the rear car, pushed the front one over the hill, then retrieved the rear car to continue the lumbering ride.

Texas specialty railroads funneled freight and passengers to major rail lines. Many of these "short lines" garnered telling nicknames.

One Central Texas short line, the Bartlett Western Railway, had four stations between Bartlett and Florence, each named after a book of the Bible. Stations at St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John each displayed a framed copy of the appropriate gospel. For some reason, however, the line was nicknamed the "Bull Frog."

Another short line--the Houston, East, and West Texas--was called the "Rabbit" because its geographic profile seemed to hop from hill to hill. Its ride reportedly was so rough people took the initials (HEWT) to mean "Hell Either Way you Take it." The Houston and Texas Central got the moniker "Hoboes and Tin Cans" from some of its unpaid passengers. The New York, Texas, and Mexican line was called the "Macaroni," because it was built by crews imported from Italy.

To surmount geography, railroads constructed ingenious trestles. The most spectacular, according to T. Lindsay Baker's "Building the Lone Star," was the Pecos Viaduct. Built in 1891, it spanned the Pecos River canyon with 2,180 feet of track resting on wrought iron and steel towers 320 feet above the water. It was the highest bridge in the U.S. and third highest in the world.

The picturesque bridge appeared in several early motion pictures. It even attracted daredevil General Jimmy Doolittle whose open-cockpit plane negotiated the span by tipping its wings to clear the towers. Guarded during two world wars and the Mexican Revolution, the viaduct was dismantled in the late Forties. Today, a rest area on U.S. 90 overlooks the site.

Another monumental trestle, the concrete Galveston Causeway, replaced a wooden bridge destroyed by the great hurricane of 1900. Carrying two steam train tracks, one electric interurban line, and two lanes of brick-paved highway, it featured one of the world's largest rolling lift drawbridges, weighing more than three million pounds. The causeway now is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1916 the Houston and Great Northern built another unique bridge, the Riverside Swing Bridge. Fifteen feet wide and 294 feet long, the structure was designed to pivot by hand 90-degrees to let steamboats pass down the Trinity River. The bridge turned only twice--once as a demonstration and later to let a driftwood logjam float by. In the Fifties, rail crews welded it into a fixed bridge. Travelers can view the one-of-a-kind bridge at the Texas 19 crossing over the Trinity north of Riverside.

Some railroads couldn't cross over natural obstacles, so they tunneled under them.

In 1929 the Fort Worth & Denver City stretched into the South Plains' irrigated farmlands. The roadbed had to climb from 2,560 feet elevation at Quitaque to 3,200 feet atop the Cap Rock escarpment, a task requiring two tunnels. After a massive derailment in one of them, crews removed its top, converting the tunnel into a deep open cut.

The other tunnel, now 672 feet long, remains the state's last railway tunnel. Abandoned in the Eighties, the tunnel near Quitaque is part of a 64-mile hike and bike trail recently opened by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Starting in the Twenties, rising interest in motor buses, trucks, and automobiles began denting demand for rail service. "There will never be a thing as valuable," SP chief executive Donald Russell later conceded, "as rubber tires going where the people are."

Railroads responded to new competition with air-conditioned coaches, reduced fares, better food service, and streamlined schedules.

One of the first luxury trains, the Sunset Limited, served as a hotel on wheels between Los Angeles and New Orleans. In "Trains We Rode," Lucius Beebe raved over its "watermarked stationery, silver fingerbowls, an encouraging assortment of fine whiskeys on the club cars, out of season strawberries, eastern lobster and fresh brook trout on the menu…"

The Burlington-Rock Island put its fast steam locomotives, the Zephyr and the Rocket, on busy Dallas and Fort Worth to Houston runs. The SP's Sunbeam steamed the same 265 miles in 265 minutes…including stops along the way!

The Houston & Texas Central's Comet made the state's first special newspaper runs. Leaving Dallas at 4 a.m., it highballed bundles of the Dallas *News* to McKinney, Sherman, and Denison so readers had papers by breakfast. Connecting short lines ferried more papers on to smaller towns across East Texas.

To boost freight service, some railroads offered rail-truck combination service boasting "store to door pick up and delivery." The SP even offered overnight schedules on its Blue Streak, touted as the world's fastest freight train.

While freight traffic brought in more revenues, railroads still campaigned for increased tourist traffic, adding domed sightseeing cars and special vacation packages.

All along, trains had carried Texans on special excursions--particularly summer trips to Galveston's seashore and seasonal jaunts to football and baseball rivalries.

Katy Railroad agent W.G. Crush arranged perhaps the most famous excursion. Thirty special trains brought thousands of spectators to "Crush station," between Waco and Hillsboro to watch two steam locomotives, each weighing 100 tons, crash head-on at full throttle. The agent miscalculated the "Crash at Crush," as exploding boilers killed one onlooker (another report says three died) and caused countless injuries. A New Yorker with a kinetograph recorded the disaster, reportedly the first news reels filmed in Texas.

Crush took part in another spectacle, a railroad race between his Katy line and the Frisco line. The fastest train would get the lucrative U.S. mail contract from Dallas to St. Louis. Since both made the run averaging 65 miles per hour, they divided the Texas contract.

During World War II, passenger and freight service revived as troops and war materiel moved across Texas between East and West Coasts. For security, hoods covered engine headlights and trackside signals, and blinds stayed drawn on passenger, mail, and express cars at night.

After the war, railroads made headway carrying truck trailer on flat cars, their aptly-named piggyback service. The Sixties brought an era of major rail mergers. Most dropped passenger service, especially after mail contracts shifted from passenger trains to truck lines. In 1970 Congress created the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, commonly called Amtrak, which took over passenger service.

For better or worse, the Texas railroad boom proved unstoppable. West Texas author Laura Hamner says that "…the [cow]boys that rode the ranges foresaw the end when the first train crept along…the old ways were gone in the smoke of that first locomotive."

On the other hand, one pre-railroad farmer hoped that "one snort of the iron horse reverberating across our prairies will wake to life the dormant energies of our rich and productive soil."

Undeniably, the whistle of the steam locomotive signaled to the world that the sleeping giant Texas was finally awake.