

LITTLE OFFICE ON THE PRAIRIE

A Discourse Upon

Portable Towns, Commuter Trains, and Mr. Batman

Contributed by Bob Burton

One day in 1917, a group of auspicious-appearing gentlemen detrained at Canadian, Texas. Accompanied by stenographers, secretaries, and various technical experts, the gentlemen climbed into waiting autos and vanished into the vastness of the Panhandle. Looking ruffled and dusty after sixty-five miles and many hours of unpaved roads, they arrived at their destination and looked around.

On the featureless plain stood a tiny frame building. It was almost as tall as it was wide, and it did not offer much headroom. Oversized letters on the false front spelled out "SPEARMAN." From the eave of the porch depended a sign that bore the legend:

---GENERAL OFFICE---

NORTH TEXAS AND SANTA FE

RAILWAY COMPANY

The party entered the structure and convened the stockholder's meeting of the NT&SF as required under the laws of the state of Texas. After the brief agenda had been completed, the directors gathered on the porch for a photograph. Then all reboarded the autos and rolled eastward; not the way they had come, but rather alongside a line of survey stakes. The land along the route was vast and mostly empty, but where the plow had touched it, wheat grew tall and golden. Eventually the party encountered sweaty men using stubborn mules and high-wheeled steam tractors to throw together an earth embankment along the stakes. Beyond, the route wound down from the elevated plains through sage-covered hills where cattle watched the autos pass and then forgot them. Suddenly the clang of steel upon steel was heard, and the directors watched as rails were placed on oily, treated-pine ties and spikes were pounded home. The Santa Fe Railway System was coming to the northern Texas Panhandle.

The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway's interest in the Panhandle dated back decades. One of the earliest Santa Fe surveyors to visit the area was Louis Kingman in 1878. The most extensive of the early examinations was performed by Phillip Smith. During the summer of 1886, Smith explored the land between Duck Creek and the Canadian River. His purpose was to find a route from Kiowa, Kansas, to a crossing of the Canadian in the central part of the Panhandle. A year later, he explored a proposed route between Englewood, Kansas, and Las Vegas, New Mexico. From Englewood, Smith entered Texas near the northeastern corner of Ochiltree County, passed near the future

sites of Perryton, Spearman, and Dumas, crossed the Canadian west of Tascosa, and exited the state near the northwestern corner of Deaf Smith County. He considered "Sherman, Hansford and Moore Counties to be among the best in the Pan Handle, but it is probable, that owing to the land laws recently made in Texas...that settlement will be very sparse, and lands will fall into the hands of large cattle owners." Based on Smith's observations, the Santa Fe decided to lay track in the northern Panhandle "whenever the country will sustain the line with its local business, and not before."

The Santa Fe was committed to build from Kiowa to Panhandle City in Carson County and that line opened in 1888. This branch was extended to a connection with the main line in New Mexico in 1908. Settlements and farms grew outwards from the railroad and even north of the Canadian cattle herds were vanishing in favor of wheat fields. As civilization reached farther out, better transportation was demanded. When the Santa Fe hesitated to build a line north of the Canadian, several local railroad projects appeared. At least one, the ambiguously-named Mountain, Valley and Plains Railroad, actually obtained a charter before fading from view. Another notion--a bizarre one--was T. J. Morgan's plan to operate a trackless railroad on a public road. He towed a string of wagons out of the town of Ochiltree behind a steam tractor, hoping to reach fifty-mile-distant Glazier on the railroad. With no rails to guide the train through curves, the wagons overturned at every bend in the road. Morgan did not attempt a second trip.

A much more promising project began when Lynch Dodson, a farm boy barely out of his teens, took it upon himself to find a railroad promoter. He obtained the name of A. E. Wiest of Indianapolis and wrote to him about building a railroad in the northern part of the Panhandle. Wiest immediately responded that he was interested and would start for Texas as soon as Dodson sent him some money. Dodson was at a loss, so he consulted the leading citizens of Ochiltree, Judge George M. Perry and James Whippo, who gladly paid Wiest's way.

Wiest's efforts led to the November 2, 1908, chartering of the Enid, Ochiltree and Western Railroad. The projected route ran from Dalhart to Dumas, then north and east roughly along Phillip Smith's line to Ochiltree. Eventually, the line would extend into Oklahoma and New Mexico. Connection was made with the Rock Island System and the Fort Worth and Denver City Railway at Dalhart, but the original construction would not connect with the Santa Fe. In fact, the EO&W would steal the trade around Ochiltree away from the Santa Fe, possibly as punishment for not building a line to the place.

The first spike was driven at Dalhart September 23, 1909. Soon the roadbed reached Dumas and 13.7 miles of track had been laid. Then the railroad began to miss monthly payments to the contractor and work stopped. The resulting investigation revealed problems ranging from drought to Wiest's questionable credentials to faulty accounting to extravagance. The EO&W was ill. It would not take much to destroy it completely.

The death blow came one morning during a casual conversation aboard a commuter train. Santa Fe president E. P. Ripley lived in Riverside, Illinois, and daily rode the Burlington

into Chicago. He usually shared a seat with J. G. Wurtele of the Farm Land Development Company. Ripley rarely spoke of his company's plans due to the danger of speculation, but one morning he talked about building a line from Shattuck, Oklahoma, to Ochiltree and beyond. Wurtele listened with all his ears. After Ripley had said good day and turned his steps towards 80 East Jackson Boulevard, Wurtele dashed for Union Station's telegraph office. Within hours Wurtele's partners in the Panhandle were headed for Ochiltree, where they quietly conferred with Judge Perry and Jim Whippo. Soon, all available land in town changed hands and there was a new hotel and bank.

Eventually, Santa Fe plans became general knowledge and the Ochiltree boom began in earnest. Remaining support for the EO&W vanished. No one even showed up for the bankruptcy sale. Attempts to sell to the Santa Fe failed. In 1912, Dalhart businessmen purchased the line, apparently for investment since they neither improved the property nor purchased rolling stock. The line was eventually abandoned.

The Ochiltree boom continued for months but came to an end on another Burlington train when Ripley told Wurtele that construction of the branch had been postponed. Still, investors held onto Ochiltree property in hopes that the railroad would come some day.

The upper Panhandle continued to develop and established railroads began taking interest in the area. One of these was the Clinton and Oklahoma Western Railway, which contemplated extending its Clinton-Cheyenne line westward into Texas and through the counties of Lipscomb, Ochiltree, Hansford, and Moore. A more important company was the Fort Worth and Denver City Railway, which begrudged the recent decline in its grain traffic. Prior to the opening of the Santa Fe's line through Sweetwater, grain loaded >along the Santa Fe east of Amarillo had been passed to the FW&DC for transport to the Gulf. That traffic now rode Santa Fe rails all the way south. FW&DC hoped to regain some of that business by building into the northeastern part of the Panhandle, providing the shortest single-line route to the Gulf.

FW&DC's original thought was to build northward from Childress through Wellington, Wheeler, and Canadian, then westward to Ochiltree before terminating at Grogan. Hansford and Texoma were also potential terminals. More refined plans called for either a line from Childress or from Channing to the town of Lipscomb. However, plans were not far along before rumors began reaching the ears of the FW&DC.

One story claimed that "Chicago parties" were purchasing land in a ten-mile-wide strip from the Oklahoma border westward into Moore County. Another tale stated that president Ripley was himself purchasing land in the upper Panhandle. Finally, early in July of 1916, FW&DC general manager D. B. Keeler encountered Santa Fe general manager F. C. Fox aboard a Denver-bound FW&DC train. In conversation, Fox admitted that the Santa Fe had been the mysterious purchaser of about 250,000 acres of Panhandle land. Citing the recent example of the Santa Fe's branch to Elkhart, Kansas, Fox spoke of

building a railroad into the area and of selling the land at reasonable rates to actual settlers, thus avoiding the problem of speculation.

Fox knew his subject, for on July 25 the Santa Fe obtained a charter for the North Texas and Santa Fe Railway. Construction began on New Year's Day 1917 at Shattuck, Oklahoma. Out from Shattuck 9.22 miles the roadbed entered Texas. The route as laid out by surveyor J. W. Stewart passed several miles north of Ochiltree, partly because the land was smoother away from the Canadian River, allowing easier railroad construction and a larger area for farm development; partly because land away from the town was undeveloped and cheaper to purchase. The major new town in Ochiltree County would be Perryton, named for the judge.

On March 27, 1918, 75.42 miles into Texas and a few miles inside Hansford County, the grading contractor called off his forces. Back in August, ties and rail had begun to stretch outwards from the small yard at Shattuck. But after about 29 miles of used #85 rail had been laid in the Wolf Creek drainage, the European war cast its shadow over the NT&SF, and further construction was halted by government edict May 1, 1918. The hiatus lasted one year. The last spike was driven in 1920 on the first of July. The line opened the same day amidst much celebration.

Virtually every siding along the line was named for a figure in Santa Fe history. Among the presidents and directors, such as Magoun, Sherlock, Twichell, Lord, and Burnside, were surveyors Follett and Booker, and other >lesser lights. The first station out of Shattuck was named for A. E. Touzalin, the Santa Fe's first super land salesman. The end of the line was named for the Santa Fe's current land commissioner, Thomas Spearman, who was building the towns along the line. Rather, the Spearman Land Company was surveying and platting the locations. For the most part pre-built towns, complete with buildings and population, were moving onto the sites.

Ivanhoe had been founded in Oklahoma in 1892 and had prospered until the water supply failed. An adequate supply was found three miles to the southwest, so in 1909 the frame structures were placed on skids, mules and steam tractors started tugging, and shortly the entire town had moved. But in 1917, the railroad bisected the survey stakes of Follett, just six miles away in Texas. Mr. Spearman offered free lots to the citizens of Ivanhoe, who were not at a loss as to what to do. The skids were reapplied as was the horsepower, and the town moved again, this time to a new state and new name. Legend claims that the doctor's office remained open and that a patient was examined as the building slid along.

In 1909, the founders of LaKemp, Oklahoma, had thought they knew where the Santa Fe's line from Shattuck would go. A decade later, the rails were in the location called Booker, five miles south. The town moved. History records that one of the portable businesses was a hardware store owned by one Sam Batman, though whether he carried exotic gadgets is not recorded.

With the railhead stalled during the World War, a town was established at end of track. Named "Lourwood" for the first child born there, the town did poorly because the railroad was not running. Resumption of construction spurred growth, and the future was assured when the town of Sunset, another Oklahoma expatriate, skidded into town. Lourwood was later renamed for state legislator John Darrouzet.

Wawaka, Texas, moved to Burnside siding and changed the name of the new location to a fragment of the old: Waka.

Hansford, Texas, moved eastward to become part of Spearman, and Ochiltree moved onto the plains as Perryton, where they were joined by folks from Gray, Oklahoma. Unlike many of her sisters, the entire population of Gray did not move to Texas and the town survived.

While all these towns were relocating, archeologists were excavating an ancient Indian pueblo a few miles southwest of Ochiltree. The town had been abandoned centuries before, but it is doubtful that a railroad had anything to do with the matter.

Standard frame combination depots with extended freight rooms were erected at the important stations, but they were not painted in a standard manner. The lower halves were painted brown, the upper tan or yellow. The color separation did not follow the architectural lines of the structures.

Other facilities included stock yards at most locations, a large stucco depot at Shattuck, locomotive servicing facilities at each end of the line, and water tanks at Follett, Booker, and Perryton as well as at the terminals.

As expected, wheat was the principal traffic on the line, but unexpected difficulties arose in the movement of the harvest. Cars suitable for hauling grain had been scattered countrywide during the War, and now the bulk of the cars that had returned home needed heavy repairs. The harvest exceeded elevator capacity and much grain was stacked on the ground before the railroad could haul it away. New cars were purchased and old ones were refurbished, but circumstances preserved the car shortage. The 1925 wheat rush was almost double that of the previous year, while the following year's was more than four times the size of 1925. This was due not only to enlarged crops, but also to a new method of harvesting.

Under the old method, a machine cut and stacked the wheat in the fields and later another machine would thresh the heads from the stalks. Now, a single machine called a combine cut and threshed the grain in a single operation. The result was that the harvest came in earlier and all at once, overwhelming elevators, creating car shortages, and jamming the railroad.

Adding to the problems, wheat harvested by combines had a high moisture content because it did not cure in the fields after being cut. Wet wheat was considered low

quality. It had to be dried before inspection. Spearman branch wheat, instead of going eastward as the railroad had planned, began taking the roundabout path via Shattuck to Amarillo, the location of the nearest drying plant. Not only was this a long route, it was also at interstate rates. Also, the grain had to share the main line with heavy traffic in California fruit heading east and with traffic growing out of the Panhandle oil boom.

Most of the oil production, which began in earnest in 1926, was south of the Canadian River, and the Santa Fe built several spurs from the main line to service the field. Part of the field, however, was north of the river and there was no bridge handy. Spearman became the railroad station for the drilling on the north side although it was miles from the development. The yard was enlarged, but any thoughts of extending the branch were stillborn when a rival railroad was built.

Prominent citizens of Perryton had been petitioning the FW&DC to build from Dalhart to their town, but it was A. S. Stinnett's courtship of the Rock Island that bore fruit. On August 5, 1925, the Rock Island asked permission of the Interstate Commerce Commission to build from Amarillo to Liberal, Kansas, via Stinnett's ranch. This line was to serve agricultural interests and would also serve as an alternate main line. The development of oil along the proposed route in 1926, was very thick icing on the Rock Island's cake.

The line came within fifteen miles of Spearman, cutting off much of the NT&SF's oil and agricultural business. The Santa Fe protested the project, but could only give feeble technical arguments that in those days had little effect on multi-million dollar projects. The ICC approved of the Rock Island project in May of 1926 and the line was completed a couple of years later.

On October 12, 1929, the Santa Fe filed with the ICC to build a line from Amarillo into Colorado. Several branch lines, including one between Spearman and Dumas on the proposed north-south line, were included in the proposal. The Texas portion was to be constructed under the name of the Panhandle and Santa Fe Railway. This would open a short, intrastate route to Amarillo for Spearman branch products.

Before the Santa Fe's case could be heard, however, the ICC granted on December 14 the Rock Island's petition to build from Dalhart to Morse on the Amarillo-Liberal line. The Santa Fe had not protested against this project, but the Rock Island lost no time in protesting the Santa Fe's proposal. West of Morse, the lines would be very close together.

However, a compromise was proposed and on April 28, 1930, the ICC approved of the plan to share the Rock Island track between Morse and Etter on the Santa Fe's north-south line. Construction of the Santa Fe's Spearman-Morse line began in January of 1931 and operations began on May 15.

Times had turned bad, though, and a change became necessary in scheduled service. The line had been receiving mixed train service daily except Sunday. At various times, one

train had put in a long day making a round trip in one day. Most of the time however, two trains had run in opposite directions on alternate days, each train making three round trips weekly. In 1933, the service was cut to one mixed making three round trips each week. To provide passenger service on the alternate days, a motor train or "doodlebug" was provided. With no freight switching to perform, the doodlebug was scheduled much faster than the mixed.

Harvest extras still ran in season, Dust Bowl or not, and wheat loadings continued at astonishing levels. One day in 1938, 126 cars were loaded at Perryton alone. Between Shattuck and McKibben, 3,219 cars were loaded between June 15 and July 31.

The extras continued to run, but scheduled mixed and motor service was discontinued west of Morse. The motor began running daily the next year, while the mixed continued tri-weekly.

War years brought an ordinance plant to Etter, but traffic continued to decline in peacetime. The mixed was discontinued in 1947 and the doodlebug was cut back to Spearman. The doodlebug lasted a little over a decade more. Regular unscheduled freight service continued, as did the harvest extras.

The section west of Spearman, although laid with #90 rail in contrast to the #85 rail on the original NT&SF, was not maintained to the standards of the rest of the line. This was partly due to conditions on the Rock Island, which was a poor company that had little cash to spare for upkeep of branch lines. As the Rock Island decayed, fewer Santa Fe trains exercised trackage rights between Morse and Etter. The Rock Island failed as a going concern in 1979 and in the following January, the bankruptcy court ordered the property liquidated. Santa Fe promptly closed the last nine miles into Morse, although the track remained in place. In 1982, the newly-formed Texas North Western Railway bought the remains of the Rock Island's lines out of Etter, but the Santa Fe showed no interest in renewing trackage rights on the line.

Changing transportation needs, recession, and attempted hostile takeovers endangered the Santa Fe during the 1980s. In need of cash the Santa Fe decided to follow the example of other beleaguered Class 1 railroads and sell many of its branch lines to small companies. The theory is that a little company unburdened by union rules can make profits and provide better service. The Shattuck branch was duly sold to the Southwestern Railway April 14, 1990.

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