

Plains Division: Fifth District

Slaton – Sweetwater

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This was part of the Coleman Cutoff project to create a new main line between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean by building new track to connect existing Santa Fe trackage. Principal surveys were conducted in 1906-1907 by F. M. Jones. Construction was begun in 1909 under the corporate name Pecos and Northern Texas Railway. The railhead from Plainview met the railhead from Coleman at Augustus. The Santa Fe's Construction Department provided service on a small scale until the Operating Department accepted the line on December 1, 1911.

Until January 1, 1917, the Slaton-Sweetwater segment was operated as part of the Plains Division of the Panhandle and Santa Fe Railway, under control of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway. After 1917 this became the Second District of the Slaton Division, P&SF. The P&SF merged into the AT&SF in 1965. The Slaton Division merged into the Plains Division on June 1, 1971, and this district became the Fifth District.

The Plains Division was abolished and the Slaton-Sweetwater line became the Slaton Subdivision of the New Mexico Division on May 15, 1988. Divisions were rearranged April 7, 1991, placing this subdivision in the Central Region. The eastern limits were extended October 25, 1992, to Tecific, the connection with the Union Pacific's Baird Subdivision, which the Santa Fe had begun to use. Another shuffling April 10, 1994, assigned the subdivision to the Pecos Division. The South Texas Division became the local authority April 16, 1995. At that time, the Slaton Subdivision expanded westward by annexing the Lubbock Subdivision (former Plains Division Fourth District, former Slaton Division First District). So things remained until the BNSF merger.

The principal topographic features of the line have been formed by erosion. In ancient times a vast talus slope extended east from the Rocky Mountains. Erosion has eaten away at it until the major remnant is the cliff-bound plateau known as the Llano Estacado. The Llano Estacado is several hundred miles across and covers a huge area of West Texas. The Caprock Escarpment marks the eastern edge of the elevated plain. East and south are badlands punctuated by smaller plateaus remaining from the old talus slope.

The Fifth District begins at Slaton on the Llano Estacado near Lubbock. The terrain here appears to be absolutely flat, but there is a slight tilt. A few miles southeast, at Southland, the railroad begins its descent of the Caprock. For five miles the track winds through a series of deep cuts and high fills. From Buenos almost to Post, the line runs alongside the

bluffs. At Post the Caprock is left behind, but the descent continues through a heavily eroded landscape to the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River at Justiceburg. The maximum grade is only 0.6%, but it is almost continuous for thirty miles from Southland to Justiceburg.

After crossing two large deck plate girder bridges over the Brazos and Sand Creek, the line begins a twelve mile climb towards a line of bluffs that greatly resembles the Caprock. In fact, this is another large fragment of the same ancient talus slope from which the Llano Estacado was carved. This fragment is the divide between the Brazos River drainage on the north and the Colorado River drainage on the south. The divide consists of a chain of long, narrow plateaus extending from Garza County into Taylor County.

The tracks cross out of Brazos drainage near Dermott, and descend the gentle slopes of Colorado drainage to Snyder. Shortly, the rails climb the divide again to the little town of Hermleigh. The divide is several miles wide here and has the endless, pancake-flat look of the Llano Estacado. At Pyron, the line crosses into Brazos drainage again, descending several miles to District's end at Sweetwater. (Sweetwater is very near the bluffs of the divide and the eroded landscape made it impossible to run tracks through town. Instead, the Santa Fe built its tracks and yard north of town and ran a spur to the depot in town. The railroad passes through the divide at Buffalo Gap.)

The up and down nature of the District determined the location of water stations between terminals. Pyron was at the top of a hill, Snyder was at the bottom. Dermott, at the top of the next hill, was also a coaling station in the very early days before oil became the favored locomotive fuel. Justiceburg was one of the lowest spots on the district. Halfway up the long Caprock grade was Dugger.

This is a single track main line with a maximum grade of 0.6%. No official helper grades existed on this line, but occasionally an extra engine would be sent to Post to help a westbound on the Caprock. This was usually done for late-running passenger trains.

The original rail was used #75. New #90 was laid in 1922 and #115 in 1956. Welded #136 came in 1979 and 1981. Side tracks have been extended over the years, notably in 1942. Most sidings are roughly a mile long. The sidings at Gannon and at Southland were extended to about two miles in length, apparently when welded rail was laid through here. Rail at these two sidings is welded #136. The rail in most other sidings is #90.

Automatic block signals were installed between Southland and Justiceburg and between Pyron and Sweetwater in 1931. These two segments were on curving, climbing track. The entire district received centralized traffic control in 1950. The CTC system was revamped during the 1980s.

Originally, mileage was measured from Galveston and timetable direction was "west" from Sweetwater to Slaton. However, in 1926 a huge amount of oil traffic began moving

through here from Borger. The railroad appears to have found some advantage in reversing timetable direction and made Slaton-Sweetwater "west." At the same time mile posts were rearranged to show mileage from Kansas City, coming down through Amarillo and Lubbock to Orient Junction at Sweetwater. In 1953, timetable direction was reversed again, although the mile posts remained the same.

Oil development began between Post and Snyder in the late 1940s. Extra trackage and oil loading racks were installed at Brand and Fullerville and an eleven-mile spur was constructed from Brand into southwestern Scurry County. For a decade a traveling switcher, usually a GP7, operated out of Snyder to service these facilities. Local trains later answered the need. The Santa Fe Pipeline Company constructed the Chaparral Pipeline between Houston and Snyder (actually Brand, tapping into an existing network of collecting lines) during the early 1970s. This reduced oil shipping by rail. In the 1990s many of the old oil facilities including the long spur have been removed.

The Santa Fe connected with the Roscoe, Snyder and Pacific Railway at Snyder, but between Hermleigh and Brand the railroads were often a few feet apart. The RS&P had already been in place between Roscoe and Fluvanna when the Santa Fe was constructed. It has often been claimed that the Abilene businessmen behind the RS&P used the small company in an attempt to force the Santa Fe to build through Abilene instead of Sweetwater. The RS&P abandoned its line north of Snyder in 1942.

The RS&P survived on salesmanship. The company's large force of traffic men were spread through the major cities of the East and West. They routed a large amount of traffic (20,000 cars in 1967) over the company, which also was routed over the Santa Fe and the Texas & Pacific. The little company was one of the earliest short lines to own a large fleet of colorfully-painted cars for per diem purposes. The RS&P also entered the car repair business and at one time designed and built cars to meet shippers' needs.

Deregulation resulted in the abandonment of most of the RS&P in 1984. A couple of miles remain at Roscoe to serve the car shops being operated under the name National Rail Car.

Since the south part of this District was constructed by Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe Railway forces, the depots at Hermleigh, Dermott, and Justiceburg were built to GC&SF standard plans. The depot at Pyron, built six years later, was built to AT&SF plans. All four structures were retired just before World War Two.

Depots of an unusual design were constructed at Lubbock, Post, Snyder, and Sweetwater. Only the ones at Post and Snyder still stand and the one at Snyder is closest to the original appearance. These passenger stations were constructed of concrete and covered with elaborate tile work (terra cotta). The tiles were an esthetic mottled creme color that looks white in photographs. The tiles have been painted over in recent years.

These terra cotta depots were used in conjunction with large frame freight houses. When the freight house at Post was retired during World War Two, the passenger station was heavily rebuilt as a combination depot. Two decades later, when the freight warehouse at Snyder was retired, railroading had changed and smaller facilities would serve, so the depot received only interior changes. During its last years, Snyder's freight house had mostly handled shipments via Santa Fe trucks.

East of Orient Junction at Sweetwater the Plains Division operated into the terminal over the Northern Division of the Gulf Lines.

This was one of the last haunts of Santa Fe steam locomotives in regular main line service. Twenty years later EMD F units ran their final days here as well.