



The DERAIL

The Official Monthly Publication of the San Jacinto Model Railroad Club, Inc

March 2015

Volume 46, Issue 3

Brownsville

By David N. Currey

Interestingly, as I was typing in the title of this article, I typed an “f” in between the “B” and the “r”, thus making it “Bfrownsville”. I certainly don't think of Brownsville, Texas with a frown, however. I have only fond memories of the town during my railroad days and other visits.

Brownsville, and the surrounding area, is virtually unique in the entire country. For one thing, it's the farthest south you can get in the continental United States on steel rails except for the southernmost tip of Florida. However, unlike Florida, there is no huge city, port, and noted beaches to attract tons of railroad traffic, snowbirds, and vacationers. Brownsville and its port are smaller than Miami and its port.

Another, at least slightly unique thing, is that the main rail line to Brownsville, due to the curvature of the Texas coast, does not go in a straight bee line between Houston and Brownsville. A more-or-less straight line would have passed about 35 miles off the Texas Coast near Corpus Christi. (It would have required one heck of a trestle.) Furthermore, the Missouri Pacific's line did not just barely skirt the beach, nor was it just a mile or two inland. It was built way inland in order to stay clear of the wrath of hurricanes and the marshy unstable lands in some areas, though there were several rail lines accessing ports on the coast (such as Corpus Christi, Freeport, and Seadrift) that ventured in on tippy toe mostly perpendicular to the coast. The Houston-Brownsville line generally stayed between about 20 and 30 miles from the coast. As a result, the line was built in an arc—nowhere close to a straight line. Southern Pacific's line played it even safer, and averaged about twenty miles further inland than the Mop's line.

In fact, as the original StLB&M line was being built towards the north end, it's almost like the engineers were so intent on keeping the line a certain distance from the coast, that they forgot they were heading for Houston, and then had to curve back the other way at the north end to get there. Or maybe the land surveyor crew apologized to the President of the company and said, “We're sorry, we thought you said Galveston for the northern terminal.” Then the big bigwigs had a big powwow and said, “What the heck. We'll just connect with the ATSF at Algoa. It'll save us the costs to resurvey the north end.”

So whereas, in most of the other extremities of the country, San Diego, Seattle, Boston, and Miami, there are huge metropolitan areas, in contrast, in south Texas, there is a much smaller metropolitan area. Upper Michigan and the state of Maine are similarly size-of-town situated, though I should mention that the Miracle Strip, as they call it down there, is growing at a pretty good clip.

I don't know if it is still the same, but historically, most of the traffic going into the Port of Brownsville was actually headed into Mexico. In some respects, the port was more important to Mexico than the United States.

This is not to mean Brownsville does not have a significant impact on rail traffic, however. With NAFTA, things have really picked up down there. When I was on the Mop, during the big recession in the early 80s, one train averaging about 30 to 40 cars was the only train south of Kingsville. It ran as a turn from Kingsville to Harlingen and back. A traveling switcher took Brownsville cars on down to Brownsville. A few years ago, while on a research

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expedition to Brownsville on the razed Mop passenger depot, I was amazed at the rail traffic down there. On the way back from Brownsville, there was actually what appeared to be a logjam near Sarita, with several back-to-back trains headed north.

The facilities have drastically changed since I was there. The old approximately six or seven track yard was not far from downtown when I was a Mopper. Now the rails in Brownsville proper have all been ripped up except for the line over the international bridge. Interestingly, the international bridge over the Rio Grande is a swing bridge, and was only opened once during a test after its construction. By the time it was completed, the paddle wheel river traffic had dried up. In fact, the river itself had nearly dried up at one point recently, and for a number of years, its waters no longer reached the Gulf of Mexico. However, a few years ago, partially due to some dredging and removal of choking vegetation, its flow was restored to the Gulf. Part of the problem has been cities along the Rio Grande using up so much of its water.

The last time I was there, the ex-Mop freight station was lording over an expanse of ballast and weeds, as a new twenty or so track freight yard had been built way north of Brownsville near Olmito. Not only that, but a new rail line to the Port of Brownsville had been built, and the old one that wound its way through the northern part of Brownsville had been pulled up as well.

A new international rail bridge was set to be opened in December of 2012. Though construction on the American side has been completed for months, due to construction delays on the Mexican side, it was projected to open early in 2014. (To my knowledge, the new international bridge and rail line has not been open as of February, 2015, due to various delays and controversy over who should pay for the relocation of some Border Patrol electronic equipment, though plaques marking the border have been affixed to the bridge.) The new bridge is located about fifteen miles upstream from the current bridge. Perhaps by the time this article is published in the Derail, it will have been completed and opened. The bridge is reported to be off Highway 281 just west of Veterans

Memorial High School. It is hard to say by looking at Google or Mapquest maps (that are a few years old) exactly where it is, but extending the line from the new yard track lead further to the west southwest and crossing the current line to the bridge should put it in the vicinity of the new bridge location, and is probably a reason for the location of the new yard, which is generally between the port and the new bridge.

Interestingly, the old SP line from Harlingen to Brownsville still exists as far south as the junction with the line to the port, on which the new yard is located. Judging by the amount of freight cars in that yard when I was there, things are really humming down in Brownsville nowadays, or at least north and east and west of Brownsville, as the rails in the city proper are no more. Brownsville, which once had four railroads, now has only one on the far north side.

When I worked on the Mop, there were about five jobs in Brownsville. If memory serves me correctly, two of those were yard jobs, two were port jobs, and one was the international interchange job. The yard jobs switched the Brownsville Yard which was several blocks to the southwest of downtown. The old freight station was serving as the yard office. I never went all the way down to the south end of the yard, but I believe it was a stub yard at this time, whereas in earlier times it was double ended with a wye at the south end. The east leg of the wye served the passenger station, Railway Express Agency, and several businesses. The west leg served a quarantine station (whatever that is). The port jobs left out of the yard and went and switched the port all night or all day. The port included a single track that went into a small refinery.

The international job was a bit unusual, in that it went across the border into Mexico. It backed out of the yard, and then headed up the line to the international bridge. A mile or two into Mexico, it arrived at a small six track or so yard that was opposite the Mexican passenger station. I worked this job in training, and it was an experience. The crew cautioned me to keep a low profile, and not to draw attention to myself. We pulled the train into the yard into a designated track, and then waited. I had plenty of time to

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Brownsville (cont.)

By David N. Currey

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study the surroundings. I never saw so many people around a freight yard before. They were everywhere. In the US, there is usually no non-railroad people in a freight yard, but here there must have been dozens all over the place--mostly just standing around.

As I was looking at the depot, three Mexican soldiers with rifles rounded the end of the depot and walked up along the opposite edge of the yard. They were slouching along with their uniforms unbuttoned half-way to the waist, and the chin straps on their helmets dangling down past their shoulders. Not exactly the A Team, I guess, but I imagine it was pretty hot that August day.

Finally, after about a half hour, we got the word, and I got off the engine to line us down the lead and back down to the north end of the yard where we got on our outbound train. Thanks to the cautions of the

crew, I felt like I had a target drawn on my back, and was darn happy after I'd cut in the air and gotten back on the engine. It felt good to get back into the good old USA.

I mentioned that the Mopac depot was razed—probably back in the late sixties. A preservation movement to save the depot did not proceed fast enough, and the railroad, worried about vagrants and the possibility of a fire, razed the depot. Oddly, the original depot outlasted the newer one. I might mention that the SP depot, of a Spanish Colonial style architecture instead of the Mop's Mission Revival, still exists, and is a railroad museum worth a visit if you are down there. They have a locomotive on display from one of the early railroads in Brownsville—a 2-4-0 I believe.

Let's tie this thing up. See you next trip, I mean, article.

Derail Article Submission Guidelines

We welcome all articles which will be of interest to our readers. If you would like to submit something, we have the following requests.

- Please indicate if the article is an original and if you are the author. If you are not the author, please indicate where you received the information. Before we publish, we need to get the ok from its original source.
- Pictures help add to articles. Please state who the photographer is and if we have permission to include the picture.
- To give you proper author credit, please indicate how you want your name to appear. For example: Is it Robert or Bob? Do you want a middle initial used? Etc.
- Please save your article in Word using Times New Roman size 12 font and make the name of your article the file name.
- Please submit all information to both bsabol@stillmeadow.com and tbrogioitti@stillmeadow.com by the 15th of the month before publication. We will do our best to include your submission in the next issue. Any additional notes to us about the article or publishing requests can be made in the email when you attach your article and pictures.
- Please limit each email to 10MB (with picture attachments) to ensure that the email servers will send and receive them okay. You can submit your pictures over several emails or reduce the size of each picture to a medium resolution.

Narrow Gauge Convention

The \$45.00 reduced registration will end March 1. After that time, it will increase to the regular convention rate of \$95.00. If you plan to volunteer, the \$45.00 registration will be good and you will receive a free T shirt for helping. If you would like to do a clinic or have your layout on the tour, please contact Craig Brantley, Chuck Lind or Eddie Carroll.

More Wood Pallets

In case you can't get enough about wood pallets after David Currey's last article, here are a couple links to keep you busy. There are some great projects for repurposing pallets.

<http://www.wimp.com/homepallets/>

<http://www.houzz.com/wood-pallet> (warning- lots of ads)

Meeting minutes February 3, 2015

President Rex Ritz called the meeting to order at 7:00PM and welcomed all current members. We had 3 visitors.

Vice president Chuck Lind announced this month's program by Steve Sandifer; "9 years on the Howard Branch"

Steve gave a series of mini-clinics on techniques used in the construction of his layout. Steve started with a childhood Lionel layout. In junior high he started his 8' x 25' HO attic layout. He next built a switching layout on a door blank. In 2005 Steve expanded a bedroom to become his 14' x 20' layout. It has 2 decks with staging. 4" steel channels are used to support the second deck minimizing legs/supports. Masonite was used as the backdrop board. It was painted with an airless sprayer to create various shades of the sky. Clouds were added using stencils. Pocket screws were used for most bench work connections, providing strong joints. Plywood was used as the layout deck and 1/4" cork sheet cut into strips for roadbed. Latex caulk was used as a cork and track adhesive.

Steve noted to operate new track for months to years before ballasting to making sure it operates good first. Steve's observations revealed ties are not black as most people think. Instead they appear grey or brown. Track finishing steps:

- 1) Spray everything light grey
- 2) Apply india ink stain on ties
- 3) Paint rails with Floquil paint pens
- 4) Glue down ballast

Steve explained how he hand lays his turnouts using a few jigs. Fast-Track jigs may be a better way today. He uses Central Valley tie strips. Steve makes homemade electric uncoupling magnets from basic steel stock and 26ga magnet wire. They operate on 18 volts DC and pull about 1.2 amps.

Stripping small wire is easy with the little "v" knife tool found in the handle of most wire wrapping tools. Old fashion automotive tail light bulbs can be used as a cheap and easy DCC short circuit isolating system.

Steve has a stackable black and white PVC pipe system to be used as a story pole when taking prototype photos of large structures that will need a measuring scale system to size them up from the photo.

Steve uses 1/4" plexi-glass as a strong and stable base for his structures. Old fashion outdoor building lights were made from 603 LEDs, .012" tubing, and Campbell lamp shades. T8 fluorescence twin bulb fixtures were disassembled to make a continuous single bulb of single bulb layout lighting.

Car-card pockets along the fascia were made from styrene sheet. Vinyl siding "J-strip" makes a nice continuous car card hold to run along the layout edge. Mirrors can be mounted to the ceiling at various angles and positions to be able to see what would otherwise be hidden tracks behind view blocks.

Thanks to Steve for a collect of various tricks and techniques.

Next month's program will be by Tom Palmer.

Last month's minutes were approved as published in the Derail.

Treasurer's report, Gilbert Freitag:

Expenses:

\$75.00 Train Show NMRA Insurance policy

\$657.27 Train Show post card mail out

Income:

\$935.00 Train Show table sales

Ending balance: \$7,004.87

Train Show 2015:

Bob Barnett announced that more volunteers are needed to sign up for work slots for the Feb 21, 2015 show. Setup will begin at 6:30AM, the show will start at 10:00AM. We have decided not to have home layout tours this year due to poor attendance in recent years. The clinic schedule is on the website. It may change slightly. There will be a contest with NMRA scoring.

LSR: Jim Lemmond reported on the LSR board meeting.

The 2015 LSR convention will be in Beaumont, July 22-25, 2015. It will be at the Holiday Inn Plaza, a great facility, good food. Hotel guests get a \$12 breakfast coupon. Thursday night dinner and the banquet will be two full meals. Registration forms are still not available. The LSR is continuing to work on the process of becoming 501C3.

Division 8: Ray Byer reported Division 8 is looking for new locations to hold meetings. The annual chili cook-off will be in April. A clinic schedule is in works. Volunteers are needed to staff the Division 8 table at the San Jac Show. They are working on continuing to set up the yahoo web page.

Narrow Gauge Convention, Sept 2-5, 2015:

Chuck Lind reported about 33 people are giving 55 to 75 hours of clinics. Registration is open online.

Derail: Bob is still in need of more articles. The 15th of each month is the deadline for submissions to the Derail.

Website: Brian Jansky: The train show info is up now, with the clinic schedule.

Help Wanted: Joe Guarisco, Joeg@Allstate.com 713-504-7910-cell 281-937-0456-home is looking for help (for hire) on scenic-ing his Lionel O-Scale 12' x 12' layout. He is needing mountains, waterfalls, lakes, etc. Please contact Joe if interested.

Yahoo Group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/SJMRRRC>

Refreshments were thanks to Dick Louvet and Virginia Freitag.

Meeting adjourned at 8:45 PM

-Respectfully submitted, Gilbert Freitag, Secretary / Treasurer



San Jac RR Club Meetings take place
the first Tuesday of each month
at 7pm

Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet St. Houston, Tx

[Click here for directions](#)
Visitors are always welcome!



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Next Meeting

TUESDAY, MARCH 3

“MKT Passenger Train Operations”

by Tom Palmer

Refreshments:

Virginia Freitag (drinks)

Killeen Ryan (cookies)



Video Corner

Train Snow Removal....

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clOo9BEou1Y>

<http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2gh53r>

