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Richard Garrity

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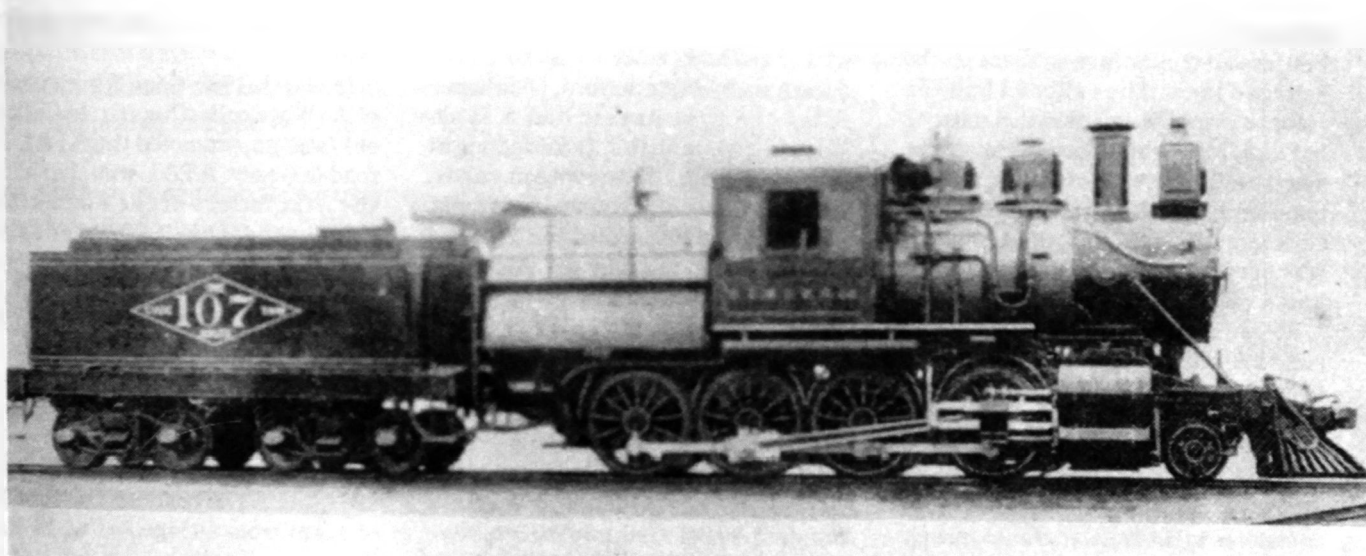
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# West With The Rock Island

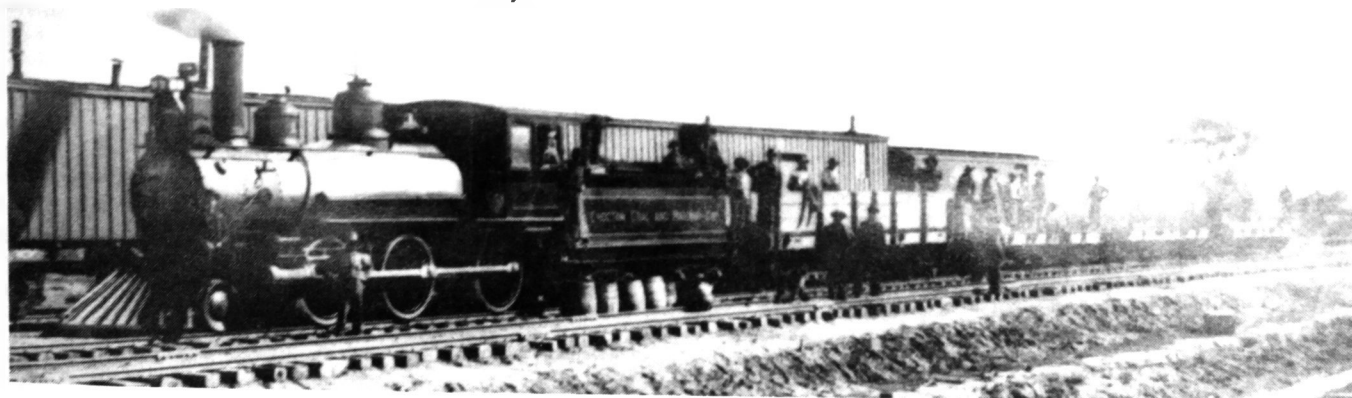
By Richard Garrity



After years of restraint, railroads were entering Oklahoma in the late 1880's. The Santa Fe had arrived. By 1889, the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska Railroad began construction from Caldwell, Kansas, south through Oklahoma. Much of it was on the old Chisholm Trail. In April, the first train

arrived at Hennessey, Oklahoma. The following year it entered El Reno and then continued to Minco. Because of many financial problems, the fledgling line was sold to the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific in 1891. El Reno, located on that north-south line, desired to connect with the Santa Fe in Oklahoma City.

The Choctaw Coal and Railway, which was incorporated in Minnesota in 1887, filed an Oklahoma charter in 1891. It was to operate in the Wister-McAlester coal area. Another section of the railroad was surveyed from El Reno to Oklahoma City. It was to connect with the parent line at Mc-



Choctaw and Coal Railroad at El Reno about 1890 Canadian County Historical Society

Alester. The El Reno portion planned to be in Oklahoma City in April, 1889. This would give it access to the north-south Santa Fe Railroad.

Promoters of the proposed trackage complied with all regulations in regard to crossing government lands. The right-of-way had been surveyed, staked, and approved for an entry into Oklahoma City. It didn't work that way.

April 22, 1889, thousands of homemakers rushed into Oklahoma Station (Oklahoma City) to establish their claims. During the bedlam, the railroad stakes were trampled or removed. Settlers erected homes or shops on the railroad land. The railroad had the right to evict the misplaced claimants but didn't. Instead, it compromised for one hundred feet, not the surveyed two-hundred-foot easement. Later, the Choctaw Coal and Railway Company was purchased by the Choctaw, Oklahoma, and Gulf Railroad.

Following the Cheyenne-Arapaho run on April 19, 1892, and the lottery of the Comanche, Kiowa, and Apache land from June 9 until August 6, 1901, settlers had entered Western Oklahoma to build homes and towns. Railroads would provide transportation and commerce to the isolated communities. Some railroads were on the fringe of the area.

Early in 1892, railroad construction crews were slicing through the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation from El Reno toward Geary, Oklahoma, a station on the Choctaw, Oklahoma, and Gulf Railroad. Geary was a corruption of the name of Edmund Guerrier, a well-known scout of the plains.

The Watonga and Northwestern Railroad was incorporated in May, 1900 to provide passenger and freight service to the gypsum deposits north of Watonga and Geary. Acquired by the Rock Island in 1902, it was abandoned in May, 1920.

Bridgeport was nine difficult miles from Geary. The railroad construction crew graded and moved through the hills and canyons in the right-of-way before it reached the South Canadian river. This major river which had a mile-wide flood plain was spanned with a steel truss bridge. Other traffic was forced to ford the river until a suspension bridge was built in 1921.

Helen Ruth, sister of Oklahoma historical writer Kent Ruth of Geary, Oklahoma, remembers when the rail-

road structure was destroyed in a flood.

In 1914, the South Canadian was flooding and the bridge was threatened. Six railroad men were on the truss. They had different opinions on the security of the span. When the water washed out the approaches, some of the men walked the ties to the bank. Four men were washed into the river and were drowned. Two weren't recovered. The bridge was rebuilt and is still in service in 1987.

Driving west, by August, 1898, the Choctaw, Oklahoma, and Gulf arrived at a cornfield, which was to be the future site of Weatherford, Oklahoma. After the first day, it had a bank. Within two months, it added eight lumber yards, fifteen wagon yards, fourteen saloons, and five dance halls. For a time, it was called the "wildest and wooliest" town in the area. The town was named after William Weatherford, a homesteader in 1892.

Early in 1901, the Choctaw, Oklahoma, and Gulf was in the vicinity of the present town of Clinton, Oklahoma. By 1903, the then southbound Blackwell, Enid, and Southwestern crossed the CO&G tracks. A townsite Washita Junction was platted, and the lots were sold June 3-5, 1903. The Post Office Department changed the name to Clinton. It became an important rail hub. In 1907, the Blackwell, Enid, and Southwestern Railroad was transferred to the Frisco.

Continuing west, the Choctaw arrived at Busch. It was named after a beer company. After statehood and prohibition, it was changed to Elk City. At Elk City, further extension of the Choctaw to the Oklahoma-Texas line was almost ready for operation when the Rock Island purchased the Choctaw Railroad.

When the Rock Island arrived at Erick in the fall of 1901, Beeks Erick, president of the Choctaw Townsite and Improvement Company was engaged in promoting a railside town. The town was called Erick.

Early in 1902, the Rock Island reached the Oklahoma-Texas state line. The town of Texola came into being when the railroad arrived and continued to Amarillo, Texas.

Rock Island had 760 miles of trackage from Amarillo to Memphis, Tennessee. Oklahoma had 364 miles of the only east-west line in the state. The route was known as the Sunbelt.

In 1980, Rock Island went bankrupt and was ordered to sell for whatever value could be salvaged on about one thousand miles of trackage in Oklahoma. This action left many towns without rail transportation. Area interest and the state attempted to put the idle railroad into operation.

The Farmrail Line, locally owned, slowly updated the rails from Hydro to Erick. A section from Watonga to El Reno was idle three or four years before the North Central Railroad (NCOK) began service between the towns. After 1½ years, it was discontinued in 1984.

In March, 1985, Gene Wheeler, owner of the Wheeler Brothers Grain Company of Watonga, promoted the AT&L Railroad to Geary. AT&L was coined from the first letters of the names of his three grandsons--Austin, Todd, and Ladd Lafferty. When it was extended to El Reno, he had an outlet on the north-south Oklahoma, Kansas, and Texas (OKT).

In the spring of 1987, Bob Hussey, a railroad contractor from Oklahoma City, rebuilt and ballasted the roadbed from Geary to Bridgeport. By June, 1987, the AT&L carried the first load of grain from Bridgeport to El Reno. With the exception of a washed-out section between Bridgeport and Hydro, rail service has been restored to Erick.

Presently, CORA, a rail fan group from Oklahoma City, is promoting rail excursions on sections of the AT&L Railroad. They will use two vintage cars, one from the Union Pacific; the other, from Santa Fe. The cycle has been completed. ■

*CREDITS: Kent Ruth and Helen Ruth, Canadian County Historical Museum; Steve Snola of AT&L; Warren Cusick, station agent at El Reno; and Western History Collections.*

*REFERENCES: Kent Ruth's OKLAHOMA TRAVEL HANDBOOK; Department of Highways, RAILROADS OF OKLAHOMA; Department of Transportation, OKLAHOMA STATE RAIL PLAN; George Shirk's OKLAHOMA PLACE NAMES; Muriel H. Wright's THE STORY OF OKLAHOMA; Arrell M. Gibson's HISTORY OF OKLAHOMA; William Edward Hayes' IRON ROAD TO EMPIRE (Rock Island); BLAINE COUNTY HISTORY.*

*RICHARD GARRITY of Oklahoma City is a valued WESTVIEW writer, photographer, and historian.*