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a favorite topic

A New Name For An Old Railroad

By Richard Garrity

Once again, the whistle of a diesel engine and the rumble of loaded freight cars echo across the historic hills of Blaine County. After years of absence, rail service has returned to Watonga. On December 4, 1984, Gene Wheeler of the Wheeler Brothers Feed and Grain Company of Watonga purchased a section of the defunct Rock Island Railroad.

Until 1898, El Reno was the nearest railhead to the lottery-opened Kiowa, Comanche, Apache, Washita, and Caddo Indian lands on August 6, 1901. Shortly after the opening, the Choctaw, Oklahoma, and Gulf Railroad, later the Rock Island, built west. From the station in Geary, the Choctaw Northern Railroad constructed a line through Watonga to the gypsum mines north of the town. Eventually, it became a busy Rock Island Railroad with two freights and four passenger cars daily. In 1980, the Rock Island went bankrupt. Rail service to Watonga ceased.

After the bankruptcy of the Rock Island, the rails were unused for three or four years before the entry of the state-owned North Central Railroads (NCOK). It operated about a year and a half before service was discontinued in September, 1984. During this brief operation, the bridges and roadbed had been repaired.

Aware that Watonga needed a railroad, Gene Wheeler constantly attempted to promote new ownership in the railroad. When he failed to stimulate

any interest, he opted to get the line as part of the Wheeler Brothers' Feed and Grain Company.

In 1985, Wheeler hired Don Kukull, a retired Katy railroad employee from Denison, Texas, to supervise the reconditioning of the roadbed. Bob Hussey, a railroad contractor from Oklahoma City, was employed to repair the track and bridges. On May 12, 1985, Wheeler was granted a lease purchase right from Geary to El Reno. He didn't have a connection with Watonga.

Gene Wheeler purchased a diesel engine, a 1958 General Motors G. P. 9 which had been in service on the Great Northern Railroad at Helena, Montana. Kukull recommended the purchase of the unit as he had worked on the Great Northern. Before entering the AT&L roster, it was overhauled at the Wilson Railroad Company in Ames, Iowa. The engine was painted green with a white stripe and white AT&L lettering.

The AT&L Railroad name was coined from the first initials of Gene Wheeler's three grandsons--Austin, Todd, and Ladd Lafferty. It's a Class I railroad limited to ten miles on a mixed assortment of 80 to 100 pound rails. The bridges were repaired, the rails aligned, and the ballast tamped.

Prior to the first consignment of wheat, Mr. Don Kukull died. On May 18, 1985, the day of Don Kukull's funeral, the first trainload was to be shipped from Geary to El Reno. The program which had been planned



The Old Rock Island station at Watonga.

about this event was cancelled because of the death.

On June 18, the Corporation Commission gave the AT&L permission to move freight on that section of track from Watonga to Geary. Wheeler was no longer boxed in at Watonga as this grant gave him trackage with a connection with the Katy at El Reno and a nationwide interline.

During the peak season, the diesel pulls as many as forty cars on a run, often twice a day. The return cargo is fertilizer to be reprocessed and supplies

for Wheeler's 11,000-head feedlot. They don't expect to get any revenue from the local oil industry. During off seasons, the railroad will operate on an as-needed basis schedule.

In September, 1987, Tom Mendenhall, General Manager of the AT&L Railroad, said the line was operating safer, not faster. Increased revenue is used to improve the track. A railroad at Watonga has promoted additional activities.

During Railroad Day at Watonga, a ribbon-cutting ceremony was conducted by the AT&L shop to note the departure



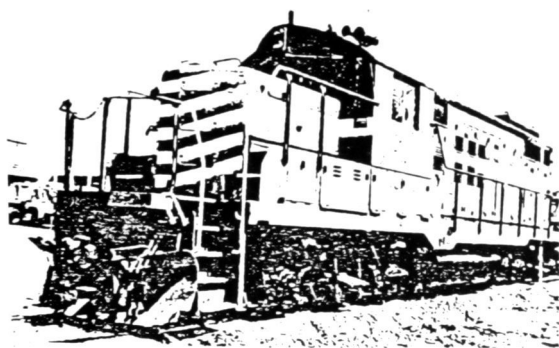
A T & L diesel at Watonga.

of the only operating passenger train in Oklahoma. It was a VIP conveyance for city officials and the news media. At eleven o'clock, it was "all aboard" for persons on a ride to the North Canadian River bridge. On September 26, regular trips were scheduled from Watonga to Greenfield, a 23-mile trip of 1½ hours. It was the first train ride for many of the passengers.

THE WATONGA CHIEF, as the train is called, consists of two vintage passenger cars and three cabooses. Restored by CORA, a rail fan group from Oklahoma City, one is a Santa Fe lounge car. The other is a Union Pacific Observation car. The plan is for the Santa Fe unit to become a dining car. At the Watonga Cheese Festival on November 6-7, the entire train was operating. In each car, two members of the CORA group were conductors.

Everyone in Watonga talks railroad.

CREDITS: Mrs. Patsy Stotts (Bridgeport), Mr. and Mrs. Travis Cackler (Hinton), Thomas Mendenhall (AT&L, Watonga), Steve Smola (AT&L, Watonga), Eddie Birch, WATONGA CHIEF), Watonga Chamber of Commerce, HISTORY OF HINTON by Marie Main Worenstaff, and BLAINE COUNTY HISTORY.



RICHARD GARRITY of Oklahoma City spends much time researching, photographing, and writing. He shares graciously with WESTVIEW.



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