

When the Railroads Came to Hopkins County

By Thomas J. Minter

When the 1870's rolled around Jefferson, Texas, had been a port city since 1844. It was second only to Galveston in Texas. From it supplies moved over the Jefferson Wagon Road, and its branches, to the settlements in the interior of Texas. And from these same settlements raw materials and goods were hauled to Jefferson to be shipped out. This Road was truly the "mother road" of its time.

In the early 1870s some businessmen in Jefferson began to worry about the threat of the railroads which were being planned and built. The fear was Jefferson might be bypassed in an economic sense.

In an effort to protect the town's trade area, the concerned businessmen decided to build their own railroad. It, they envisioned, would do for them what the Jefferson Wagon Road had done for them in the past — transport and distribute commodities. To this end they formed the East Line and Red River Railroad Company to promote their efforts.¹

The company was chartered on March 22, 1871 for a railroad to run from Jefferson to Sherman, and from there to the western boundary of Texas. The route was somewhat vague and seemed to depend on the financial incentives offered by towns along the way.²

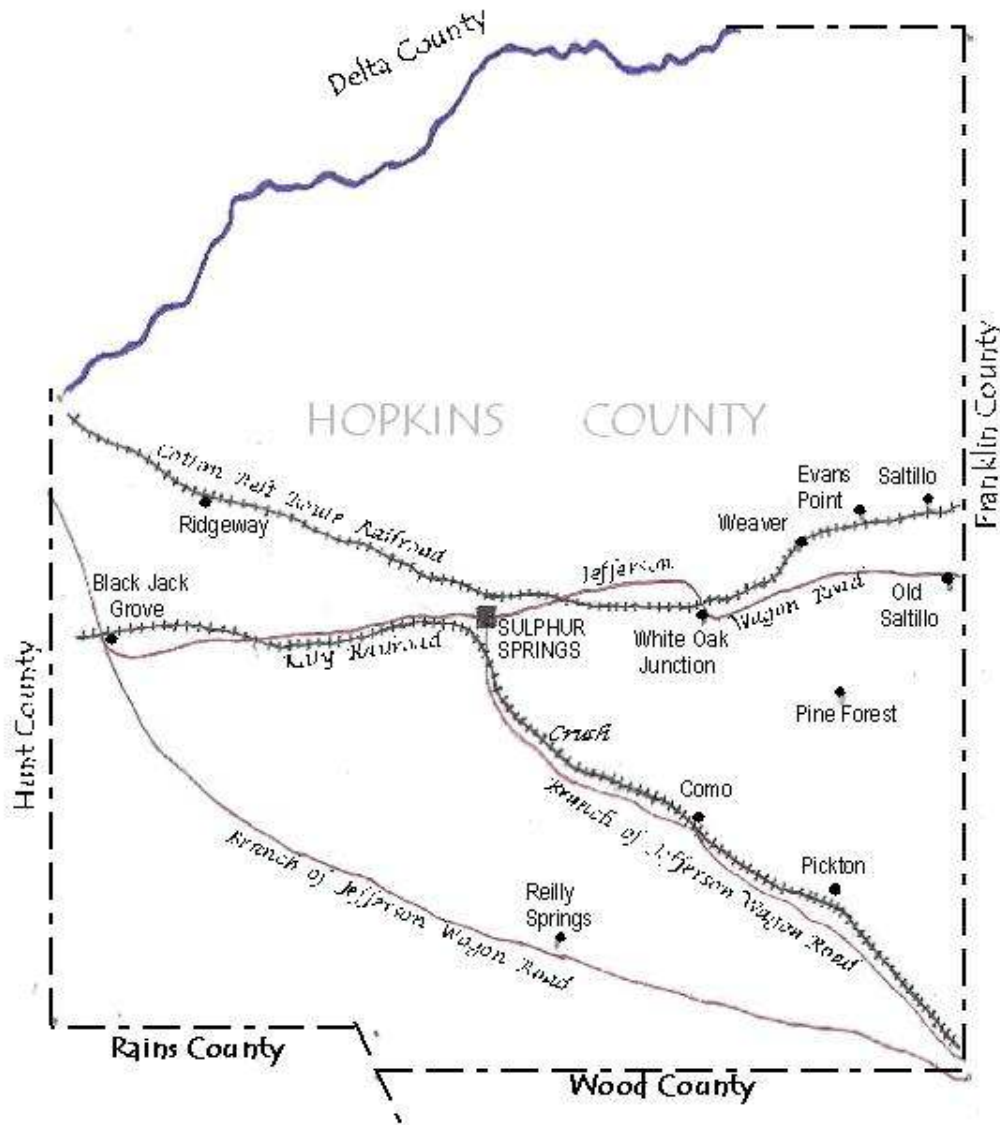


The charter was amended twice, in 1873 to change the route to run via Greenville and in 1875 to again run via Sherman. Construction finally began on the line in 1876.³ It was a narrow gauge railroad, which was cheaper to build and equip than a standard gauge. Convict labor⁴ was used, for at the time it could be leased from the prisons.

From Jefferson going west the line reached Hickory Hill, some twenty miles distance, on December 5th. On July 4, 1877, it entered Daingerfield, and then Leesburg in 1878. It then went into Hopkins County in its southeastern corner. When it reached

what is now Pickton in 1879, the people of the settlement were asked to pick a name for the town as it would have a station. A committee chose "Pick Town." The railroad shortened this to "Pickton".⁵

The track reached Sulphur Springs in that same year of 1879. It arrived at Greenville, Texas, 124 miles from Jefferson in late 1880s.



The railroad was acquired by Jay Gould, a railroad developer and speculator, in June of 1881, who sold it to Missouri Kansas Texas Railway Company (MKT) on November 28, 1881.⁶ This railroad was popularly known as the "Katy," derived from its stock symbol of K-T. The Katy line was from Missouri and Kansas, and was built through Oklahoma Indian Territory paralleling close to the old Texas Road and the Shawnee

Cattle Trail. It reached the Red River in 1872 bound for Dennison, Texas.

Having picked up where the East Line and Red River railroad had been built to Greenville, Texas, in May of 1882 the thirty-one mile extension from Greenville to McKinney was completed by Katy.



In 1892 at considerable expense Katy converted the narrow gauge tracks and equipment to standard gauge.⁷ The advantage of this conversion meant interchangeability, where the equipment of other railroads could use the tracks and exchange equipment.

Five years earlier in 1887, the St Louis Southwestern Railway (SSW) laid its tracks through Hopkins County, entering just west of Mt. Vernon and leaving the county near Commerce to the west.



Picking Alberta Peaches in East Texas along the Cotton Belt Route

This railroad known by the nickname “Cotton Belt Route” was a 1542 mile system originating at St. Louis, Missouri, with its western terminus at Gatesville, Texas, south of Dallas, Texas. The railroad was joined in Arkansas by a track to Memphis, Tennessee. The Texas trackage was 803 miles. The company located its repair shops in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.⁸

For the railroad to operate in Texas, it had to have a separate charter, which was St. Louis Southwestern Railway Company of Texas. The business offices were located in Tyler, Texas, which was on the main line from Mt. Peasant to Gatesville to the west.

The Cotton Belt Route was of standard gauge⁹ and was a single track system. The line relied on sidings and telegraph communications to handle traffic. Its construction as well as that of the Katy line required several accommodations.

The line bypassed the town of Saltillo near the county line. As a result, a grocery store and the post office was moved 1-1/2 miles north to be on the railroad. The new town near the railroad was at first referred to as "Switch," then later as Saltillo. The bypassed town took on the name of Old Saltillo, and is still referred to by that name today.¹⁰

A couple of miles on west of the new town of Saltillo, the railroad spawned a town called "Evans Point," which straddled the track. The town was named after the Evans family who lived in a point of woods near the railroad. Evans Point became extinct in the 1930s.¹¹

Going on a few more miles to the west, another town was established with a station called "Weaver," which resulted from the line bypassing White Oak Junction a few miles on west, which had been a prominent place on the Jefferson Wagon Road because of Veal's store. The White Oak Junction post office was moved to Weaver. The railroad first wanted to name the town "Dupree" after some prominent first settlers, but the family objected, and it was named Weaver after the first sheriff of the county.¹²

Southeast of Sulphur Springs near the Katy Railroad was a community causally called "Crush," which was named after a big rock crusher it had that produced aggregate for the railroads. In 1900 Crush got a more formal name of "Thermo"¹³ after the community's Fire and Brick Company.

The town of Ridgeway, 15 miles west of Sulphur Springs was a result of a store being located there to accommodate workers on the Cotton Belt Route in 1888.¹⁴

The railroads heralded better economic times for the citizens of Hopkins County, as the area had been slow in recovering from the effects of the Civil War. Saltillo at the eastern edge of the county was an important shipping point for fruit and melons, with seventy-five to one hundred cars of these being shipped each season. Poultry, rabbits, and nursery stock were also shipped from Saltillo.¹⁵ Produce that was perishable was packed in barrels with ice. It is said that Pickton was once a large shipping center for Elberta peaches, with as many as seventeen cars of them being loaded in one day.¹⁶ Records show for 1925 that 730 railroad cars of peaches, berries, and potatoes and 300 cars of poultry and dairy by-products being shipped from the county.¹⁷

Not only did the railroads stimulate economic development in trade, but the Cotton Belt Route in particular was the biggest taxpayer in the county, which aided government and schools.¹⁸

The Cotton Belt Route gave its freight service the title of “Blue Streak,” and it advertised its trains as being “on time ... all the time.” It took a freight train, which was limited to a maximum speed of 25 MPH, 55 hours, including its stops for loading and unloading, to make it from St. Louis to the end of the line at Gatesville, Texas.



The Cotton Belt (heading to Commerce, Texas) and the Katy (heading to Greenville, Texas) cross in Hunt County Texas., in a crossover known as “Diamond.”

Cotton Belt operated passenger service from St. Louis to Texas points and from Memphis to Shreveport and Dallas. Cotton Belt’s Lone Star operated from Memphis Union station to Dallas Union terminal with a branch from Lewisville, Arkansas, to Shreveport, Louisiana. The Morning Star was the second named train over much of this route, operating out of St. Louis Union Station.¹⁹

The Katy Railroad operated several named passenger trains. The Texas Special (trains 1 & 2), Katy Limited (trains 3 & 4), Katy Flyer trains (trains 5&6), and the Bluebonnet (7&8).²⁰

Although the railroads in Hopkins County did not pass through every town, they had a close proximity to them. Residents in Pine Forest, for instance, could travel south to the Katy line at Pickton, some six miles distance. Or they could journey north for four and a half miles and reach the Cotton Belt Route depot at Weaver. It was reported, however, that Katy at Pickton did not always provide passenger service.

The closest the Katy and Cotton Belt tracks came to each other in Hopkins County was at Sulphur Springs, the county seat. They did, however, actually cross each other in neighboring Hunt County near Greenville.

Both Katy and the Cotton Belt Route named their passenger train service. The

As in many decades before when people would stop what they were doing and look up into the sky and marvel at an airplane flying overhead, people were equally fascinated and curious about trains when they came into their own. If they were near a track or depot when one was in the vicinity, they moved closer to take in the scene. And so it was when the railroads came to Hopkins County.

 Note: The writer visited the Pine Bluff, AR, railroad museum in 2010, which has rolling stock for viewing as well as many displays of the Cotton Belt Route memorabilia.

He also visited Jefferson, Texas, in 2009 where Jay Gould's personal railcar is on display.

Many times he has passed through East St. Louis, where the Cotton Belt Route railroad's marshaling yards were located. These yards, still being used by railroads, are still called "Cotton Belt Rail Yards," although the railroad no longer exists.

The writer has also visited Union Station in St. Louis where in its heyday there was space for 31 trains under the roof to take on passengers. This terminal served 22 different railroad companies. St. Louis is also the location for the Cotton Belt Railroad's freight depot built in 1913 is a five story structure (30'x750'). Although the concrete building is decrepit and defaced with vandals graffiti, it still stands defiantly today.

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Notes:

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