

THE LAST DAYS OF STEAM OPERATION ON MO PAC'S ARKANSAS DIVISION  
by W. M. (Mike) Adams

In his excellent photographic volume "The Last of Steam", author Joe G. Collias illustrated on page 22 a Missouri Pacific 4-6-0 No. 2348 handling a local freight train near Gurdon, Arkansas in 1951 on what Joe terms the "Delight subdivision".

In his caption Joe explains: "For fully a year and a half after the Mo Pac had proudly announced complete dieselization of its entire system, the 2348 and two identical engines continued their daily trips to Norman and back because the weight restrictions on several timber bridges, which were quite numerous the whole length of the Delight subdivision, were too low to permit use of any standard diesel motive power unit. Needless to say, the movements of the 2348 and her two sisters were kept top secret during this time."

While this makes an interesting caption it is only partly correct. The overall plan for dieselization of the Arkansas Division called for progressive dieselization radiating from Little Rock. There were no attempts made to keep secret the operation of steam on the Norman Subdivision and actually steam engines operated in Gurdon and Hope yards for some weeks after the Norman-Delight Subdivisions were 100% diesel. In fact, steam operated on the Illinois Division about five to six weeks after the last steam engine on the Arkansas Division had its fires drawn. To set the record straight, No. 9301, an 0-6-0 in yard service at Hope was the last steam engine operated on the Arkansas Division. On Thursday, March 17, 1955 this engine was operated "light" from Hope to Gurdon and upon arrival at Gurdon it was killed and that wound up some 83 years of steam

operation, first as the Cairo and Fulton, then the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern, and finally as the Missouri Pacific.

In the fall of 1954 I was appointed Assistant Trainmaster on the Arkansas Division with headquarters at Gurdon. My jurisdiction extended over the Little Rock, Hot Springs, Benton, Norman, Delight, Nashville and Gurdon Subdivisions. At this time all through freight and passenger trains between Little Rock and Texarkana were dieselized. The contrary Baldwin 200 class diesels had just bumped the sturdy 1721 class 2-10-2's off the drag freights while the 5300's and 6600's had disappeared some months before. There were two daily passenger trains between Little Rock and Hot Springs and both were handled by diesels. The Hot Springs yard engine and the daily local freight to Hot Springs were dieselized as was the Little Rock to Pine Bluff (via Benton) local freight. The locals operating between North Little Rock and Gurdon left North Little Rock with a diesel, usually an EMD GP-7, and Gurdon with a 1200 class 2-8-2. At the meeting point, generally Malvern, they swapped engines. There were yard engines at Hope, Gurdon and Malvern, all steam. A little 400 class 2-8-0 was in use at Malvern while Hope normally had a 9300 class 0-6-0 and Gurdon, with a lot of heavy switching, used 9700 class 0-8-0's or 1200 class Mikes. There was a local freight daily from Gurdon to Nashville via Hope. About the time I went to Gurdon the 1200 class Mikes on this run were replaced with GP-7's. All service on the Gurdon Subdivision between Gurdon and El Dorado had been dieselized since September.

This brings us to the Norman and Joe's Delight Subdivision. The Norman Subdivision extended 60 miles in a northwesterly direction (by compass) from Gurdon to Norman. The timetable, however, showed trains operating from Gurdon to Norman as "southward". This was and is a very interesting and picturesque railroad. It was pieced together from several logging lines built in the 1880's and served such interesting places as Summit, Maple Springs, Burtsel, Okolona, Pike City Junction (later PK Junction), Winters Quarry, Graysonia, Nutts, Shawmut, Twin Bridges, Kathleen, Majors, Amity, Rosboro, Glenwood, Caddo Gap, Slates (later Birds' Mill) and Norman. Between Gurdon and PK Junction, 20 miles, it surmounted two ridges on about 2% grades. From PK Junction to near Amity it ran in the gorge formed by the Antoine River and swung back and forth across the river three times. At Amity the line climbed over the watershed between the Antoine and Caddo Rivers and crossed the Caddo just south of Glenwood and followed it to Norman. At PK Junction, formerly Pike City Junction, and now known as Delight Junction, a line branched off to the west, crossed the Antoine River and went through the village of Antoine and some five more miles to Delight. This is Joe's Delight Subdivision. Just five miles long, although in former years it had extended some 18 to 20 miles further to Pike City. Norman in earlier days had been known as Womble and during my tenure at Gurdon this branch and its trains were simply known as the "Womble". There was a water tank at PK Junction and a water crane using city water at Glenwood. All steam engines were oil burners and a 2300, with luck, could make the round trip from Gurdon to Norman including the side trip to Delight and get back to Gurdon with

6 or 8 inches of oil in the cistern. In my diary for Friday, January 28, 1955, I find the notation, "Train 881 out of oil and light to Gurdon." This happened several times in the few weeks after I arrived at Gurdon until the 2300's were replaced by diesels. Usually it was due to having an extra fireman or extra engineer. The regular crew, Chick McDonald and Jim Marshall, knew just how to nurse their fire and make it home.

Now Joe was correct in the intelligence that there were several bridges that would not take heavy engines on the Norman Subdivision, however, they were not wooden. There were several wooden bridges up there but they would take any diesel operated. It is no great problem to strengthen a wood trestle. The problem was five ancient steel truss spans fabricated in the 1880's and incapable of being strengthened. These bridges spanned the Antoine River three times, the Caddo River and a large creek emptying into the Caddo north of Glenwood, the name of which has escaped me. They carried a Cooper's bridge rating of E-35. From Gurdon to PK Junction the Cooper's rating was E-52, quite respectable, and the Delight Subdivision was E-45. All the GP-7's and F units were E-45's and could be operated from Gurdon to PK Junction and to Delight if necessary. In addition a 1200 class 2-8-2 could be operated from Gurdon to PK Junction and as you will see, frequently were. At the time I went to Gurdon, work had been under way for some time in building new piers on the five river crossings and turntable spans taken from locations on the dieselized districts had been sent to North Little Rock and tailored to fit the piers. The spans were taken to the bridge sites and the old spans slid out on falsework and dumped into the watercourses and the new spans fitted into

place. The old twisted metal was then fished out and cut up for scrap. The last bridge to be rebuilt was the Caddo River bridge at Glenwood. This was the longest and highest of the five.

Now in the Summer of 1954, Trains 274 and 275, a redball freight train operating between Gurdon and Monroe, Louisiana via El Dorado, had been dieselized using the 505-512 series F Unit originally built in 1944-45. It was then decided that, even though carrying a rating of E-45, these units could operate on the Norman Subdivision from PK Junction to Norman in single unit only and provided an empty "idler" car was carried next to the engine. The plan then and the practice at the time I went to Gurdon was for the units inbound on Train 274 to be serviced and go out on Train 880. At PK Junction the B unit would be set out and the local would make the trip to Norman and back with the A unit. The ruling grade on the Norman Subdivision was between PK Junction and Gurdon. A 2300 class steam engine could handle only 1000 tons on the 2% grades of Okolona and Maple Hills. The 1350 HP diesels could handle 1700 tons with one unit and 3400 with two. At this time there was a large rock quarry in operation some five miles north of PK Junction where a contractor was shipping rock to the U. S. Engineers at Maud, Texas to be used in rebuilding the Cotton Belt Railroad around the impoundment on the Sulphur River. The normal tonnage off the Norman Sub would scarcely tax the 2300's but the 15 to 20 cars of rip-rap being loaded every day was just too much. It was necessary to run from three to five extras or "gigs" out of Gurdon each week with a 1200 class Mike to bring in the tonnage left at PK Junction.

The thought behind this diesel operation was sound and if oper-

ated daily would enable the local to bring all the tonnage off the Norman line each trip. Actually, however, it was rare that the diesels were used over three or four days a week. With all the switching to be done on the Norman-Delight subs it was impossible for the local to make the round trip in less than about 14 hours. This threw No. 275 late out of Gurdon and along about Wednesday or Thursday you just couldn't afford to wait for No. 274 and the diesels. Consequently you ran the little 2300's. After two days operation with a 2300 it was then necessary to run a "gig" to PK Junction with a 1200 Mike to bring in the tonnage left behind.

Early in 1955 we received on the Arkansas Division the much maligned EMD BL-2's. Built in 1948 they had been in use on the Western District. Numbered 4104 to 4111 they were classed as E-45's but it was decided that they too could operate singly from PK Junction to Norman with an idler car next to the unit. I see from my diary that I rode Engine 4108 on Trains 880-881 on Tuesday, February 15, 1955. To the best of my knowledge there were no steam engines operated on the Norman-Delight Subdivisions subsequent to this date. The BL-2's were used, also, on the locals between Gurdon and Little Rock and on the Malvern yard engine. When available, we used them in Gurdon yard and on the Nashville local. At this time the Little Rock Air Force Base was being constructed and it was necessary to work two traveling switch engines at Malvern to handle sand and gravel and the Nashville local drew three units nearly every day to bring in cement off the GN&A. We still used an occasional steam engine at Gurdon and in Hope yard until finally on March 17, 1955, as outlined, the 9301 was sent in from Hope and

that wound up steam on the Arkansas Division.

At the end of steam operation there was a total of 21 steam engines at Gurdon. They ranged from a pair of booster equipped 1400 class 2-8-2's on down to the 2300's, the 2348, 2349 and 2389. We had these engines spotted in all the tracks around Gurdon not actually needed to operate on. After stumbling around them for a week or so I called out an extra yard engine and gathered them all up and drug them out to what was known as the "southward siding". I had them lined up for movement to North Little Rock with the big 1400's on the north end and the little 2300's bringing up the rear. This siding started about one-fourth mile north of the depot at Gurdon and was located between the main tracks and extended some two miles to Smithton. Several months later the powers that be ordered these engines into North Little Rock to be scrapped. We then sent sundry and diverse mechanics out to inspect and put them in running or rather pulling order and found to our consternation that all the brass had been stolen! This included not only driver and rod brass but injectors, check valves, whistles and just about all brass except the bells. Apparently the bells were just too heavy to handle.

To make a long story short, we made bearings - I hesitate to say "brass" out of OAK and ran these locomotives behind a three-unit 200 class Baldwin diesel from Gurdon to North Little Rock with absolutely no trouble. We had several mechanical representatives riding them and frequent inspection stops were made. The speed was kept below 15 mph. The biggest job was getting them started and moved out of the siding which had an ascending grade northward through the turnouts.

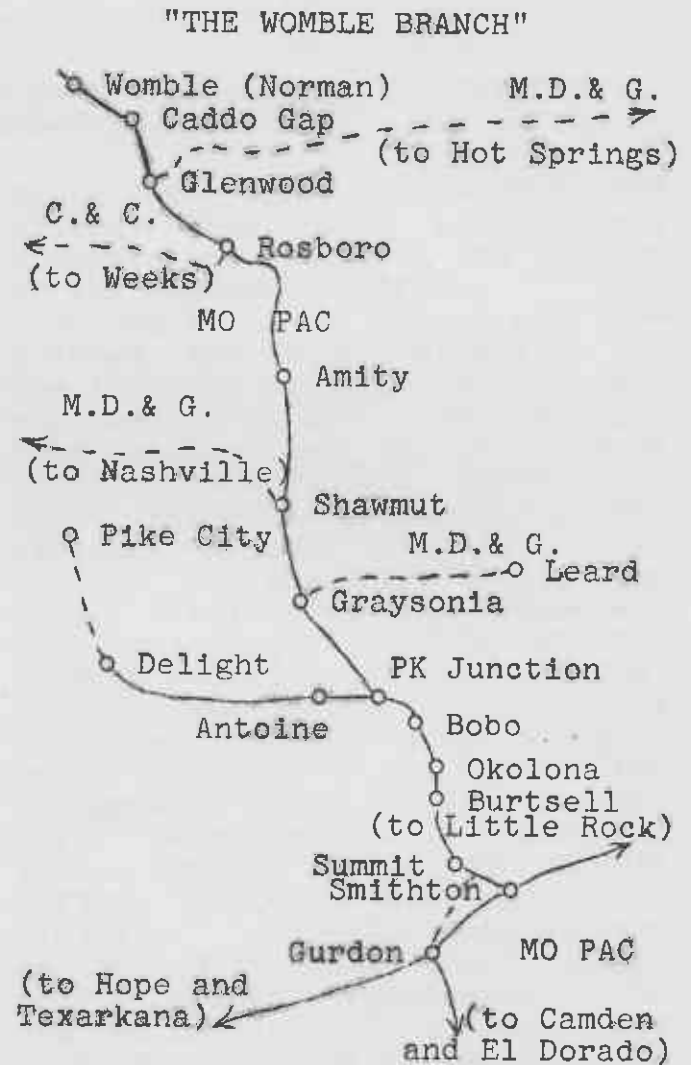
Gradually all traces of steam operation were removed from Gurdon. First the little four-stall wooden roundhouse was unceremoniously pushed and pulled down by bulldozers and burned. A large wooden water tank near the roundhouse was also, with much difficulty, burned. The steel water tank located across from the depot was sold to the City of New Boston, Texas and dismantled by them to be erected for their city water supply. I suppose it still serves our haughty Tejano neighbors faithfully. The water cranes were dismantled and shipped in for scrap and the turntable was lifted out and brought to North Little Rock to be rebuilt as a bridge. The large fuel oil storage tank on the west bank of Caney Creek was carefully dismantled, shipped to Newport and reassembled for storage of diesel fuel oil. Last to go was the massive coal chute spanning the main tracks. Upon my arrival at Gurdon the sanding facilities were the only parts of the chute being used and it was some time after the completion of new sanding facilities that work began in dismantling the chute. It took two bridge gangs from March 27, 1956 until April 20, 1956 to tear it down. Constructed in 1927 of steel reinforced concrete, it was erected for posterity but was reduced to rubble with a "headache" ball and cutting torch.

From the layman or outsider's standpoint I suppose the transition from steam to diesel looked simple and to be welcomed by the operating personnel. In actual practice it was a terrific headache. At no place, to the best of my knowledge, was there an even swap-out, unit for unit. Based on the hypothetical high availability of the diesel, you were lucky to receive four units for five steam engines. In the horsepower department you lost out even more.

Take the Gurdon to El Dorado local service. We were using booster equipped heavy 2-8-2's, the 1400 class. They had a tractive effort of over 70,000 lbs. and could handle all the pulpwood out of Gurdon you could tack on them. They gave you a 1350 HP diesel with a tractive effort somewhat less than half of the 1400 and then couldn't understand why you couldn't keep the yards fluid. Your enginemen knew how to run the diesels and that was just about all. When one of them stopped, they were just there. To me the most frustrating thing in railroad operations, at least at that time, was diesel failures. Believe me, you were helpless. The mechanical people were very little better. The old roundhouse foreman at Gurdon was strictly a haywire mechanic. He could keep the steam engines operating but diesels baffled him. He freely admitted this and just as soon as the 9301 was put in mothballs, took his pension. His replacement was an experienced diesel man and over the months gradually trained all the enginemen and mechanical personnel and eliminated many costly delays. With a steam engine, except for an outright boiler explosion or stripping the rods off, you could usually at least "limp into the clear" someplace. The railroad lost much of its glamour for me when the steamers were layed to rest.

OUR LAST MEETING featured a lively discussion of Railpax led by John Mills. It will be interesting to see how the nationalized passenger service does in light of some of the comments at that meeting.

OUR NEXT MEETING will feature some recent films of Illinois Central and Southern passenger trains shot by J. Harlen Wilson. The meeting will be Sunday, March 14, at 2p.m. Room 305, Mo Pac Union Station.



- MO PAC Missouri Pacific
- C. & C. Caddo & Choctaw (aban.)
- M.D. & G. Memphis, Dallas & Gulf (abandoned to Nashville, Nashville to Ashdown now operated by G.N. & A.)

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