

BAWLING CATTLE AND BARKING BRAKEMEN: AN OKLAHOMA RAILROAD MEMORY

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A story which is well known is that of the early cattle business in the American West—its cowboys, longhorn steers and trail drives to the railhead. Although in later days it may have been overly romanticized by Hollywood writers and others, it is, nevertheless, an interesting and even important story. Now however, both "legitimate" cowboys and longhorns are rare breeds, and railroad transport of livestock in any form has almost entirely disappeared from the American scene. Indeed, several important railroads have completely abolished their livestock tariffs in recent years. Nevertheless, the potential for generating and retaining a lucrative livestock traffic was a crucial incentive in the strategy of many early western railroads. This was particularly evident in the development, expansion and operation of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway, also known as the MK&T, the M-K-T after 1923 or Katy, in Oklahoma.

In 1871, MK&T stockholders were told by the railroad's management that "it would be difficult to assign limits to the probable extent of the through business which this company will derive from the cattle trade." The Katy's corporate goals at that time were to "afford the best and shortest route for freight and cattle from Texas and Indian Country to Chicago, St. Louis, New York, and all points East—300 miles less drive than by Abilene, and 100 miles less than by Neosho." Heretofore, an MK&T official continued, "in driving cattle in great herds through the country, much time has been consumed, and many head of cattle have been lost, by the ordinary vicissitudes of travel."¹

While the completion of the MK&T route to Denison, Texas did not forestall the long drives to Abilene, Newton and Dodge City, Kansas, it did, nevertheless, draw a significant livestock traffic to its rails. A company spokesman boasted that by the end of June, 1871 the Katy had hauled twice as much stock into Sedalia, Missouri as the Kansas Pacific had hauled into

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¹ A passage from the *Annual Report of the Board of Directors, Missouri, Kansas & Texas Railway Company, 1871*, as quoted in *The M-K-T Employer Magazine* (May, 1943), p. 6.

BAWLING CATTLE AND BARKING BRAKEMEN

Kansas City, Missouri. Indeed, cattle traffic represented the railroad's number one commodity in terms of tonnage during the mid-1870s.²

This pattern persisted for two decades. In 1894, livestock traffic amounted to 338,025 tons, 13.85 percent of Katy's total for the year and drew income amounting to \$1,295,761.33—highest among all revenue categories. A change began to develop in the next season, however. In 1895 revenues from the haulage of livestock were up slightly, but the percentage of livestock traffic, in tons, was down slightly. Two years later livestock represented 13.11 percent of the road's tonnage, but by then it was in third place behind coal and grain. It should be noted, however, that in 1897 the Katy hauled 424,167 tons of livestock, 86,142 more than in 1894; and during 1910 it handled 446,309 tons of livestock. Yet, this represented only 5.96 percent of all tonnage and only 5.79 percent of gross revenues from freight.³

The earlier lofty position of livestock in Katy's traffic mix continued to deteriorate. In 1916 it handled 357,423 tons—2.59 percent of the total. A major reason for this decline was the development of the refrigerator car; a corollary was the institution of major regional packing centers in Katy's trade area. Moreover, the MK&T's traffic mix was considerably more varied than it had been earlier. By now the region it served yielded heavy traffic in coal, grain, manufactured items and petroleum. To be sure, no less than 20.95 percent of Katy's traffic in 1922 was in oil or petroleum derivatives. Clearly oil was king; livestock tonnage had, at the same time, slipped to tenth place among commodities handled by the company.⁴

An attending corollary involved the physical expansion of the MK&T system. In 1910 it acquired the Texas Central Railroad. More important for Oklahoma, in 1911 it leased the Wichita Falls and Northwestern Railway, also known as the WF&NW, absorbing it fully in 1923; and during 1931, it would purchase the Beaver, Meade and Englewood Railroad, or the BM&E in the Panhandle of Oklahoma. By so doing, the parent road spread its tentacles throughout western Oklahoma and gathered to itself a growing volume of traffic in petroleum, grain and livestock—the commodities characteristic of the region.⁵

The WF&NW had been fostered by J. A. Kemp and Frank Kell, enterprising businessmen of Wichita Falls, Texas. Their road crossed the Red

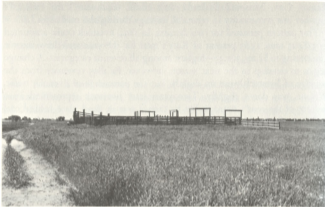
² V. V. Masterson, *The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), pp. 119, 204.

³ Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, *Annual Report, 1894*, Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad Offices, Dallas, Texas, pp. 11, 26; Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, *Annual Report, 1895*, *ibid.*, pp. 9, 19; Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, *Annual Report, 1897*, *ibid.*, p. 23; Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, *Annual Report, 1910*, *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1916, p. 29; *ibid.*, 1922, p. 23.

⁵ Masterson, *The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier*, pp. 278, 279, 285.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



One of the forty-one stock pens along the Northwestern District of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad

River between Burkburnett, Texas and Devol, Oklahoma, turned northward to Altus, Oklahoma, then northward to Elk City and Woodward, Oklahoma and northwestward again to reach its terminal at Forgan, in Beaver County. Its main line was supplemented by an important fifty-seven mile branch—boldly labeled the Panhandle Division—from Altus to Wellington, in Collingsworth County, Texas. After the WF&NW passed to the MK&T in 1911 it was appropriately known as Katy's Northwestern District.⁶

The trade area served by the Northwestern District, particularly the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, was "cow country." In 1903 the region's cattle industry had been revolutionized by the introduction of cottonseed cake, or "oil cake." As a result, ranchers used the railroad to ship in their supplies of this and other feed, but, more important, the rails were employed to move the cattle themselves. Consequently, stock pens were required at forty-one locations along the Northwestern District; virtually every station had such facilities, and a few even were constructed at country loading points. Almost

⁶ Preston George and Sylvan R. Wood, "The Railroads of Oklahoma," *Bulletin No. 60* (Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, 1943), pp. 52-53.

BAWLING CATTLE AND BARKING BRAKEMEN

all of them were built prior to 1918, although pens were installed at Dunlap, Oklahoma in 1926 and for the Cole Ranch, near Altus, in 1932. The sizes varied according to the volume passing through them. Stations in Oklahoma such as Moorewood, Trail, Rosston and Knowles had only two pens, but Elk City had five. The dimensions of these facilities ranged from 32 by 48 feet at Hollister to 39 by 204 feet at May, 70 by 174 feet at Supply and 100 by 150 feet at Elk City. Water, of course, was a necessity at all stock-loading locations. It usually was procured from city supplies or by way of Katy's own pumps. At tiny Knowles, Oklahoma, however, the railroad was compelled to install a wind mill with a twelve foot wheel mounted on a thirty foot wooden tower.⁷

Numerous stations acquired reputations as heavy cattle loading points, but more cattle were reportedly shipped from tiny Mocane, just east of Forgan, than from any other station on the Northwestern District. Certainly some of the largest ranches of the Panhandle were nearby. One of these was the well-known Barby Ranch. Otto N. Barby, its founder, was born at St. Louis in 1865 but moved to the Panhandle thirty-one years later. There, near Beaver, he acquired 160 acres, the humble beginnings of an empire that was later expanded to more than 50,000 acres. Barby and his sons annually grazed 3,000 head of cattle and employed 15 cowboys. Barby shipped in heifer calves from Texas and Colorado, but most of his shipping was outbound. In October, stock cattle which had been sold to farmers in Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania were driven overland to the pens at Mocane or Knowles for loading. Frequently the volume was great enough to warrant a special train. Slaughter cattle ordinarily were consigned to the Kansas City Union Stockyards; such shipments were made at the end of a week on a carlot basis. In all cases, the Barby cattle moved eastward via Woodward and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad.⁸

There likewise were numerous smaller cattle shippers along the route. At Supply, for instance, numerous ranchers received shipments of Mexican steers each spring. In the following fall, many of these same animals were reloaded and shipped east.

Most of the slaughter cattle billed from there and from other stations on the Northwestern District went to market in carload lots. During the early years, an extra train was called to Woodward late in the week to drop stock

⁷ Beaver County Historical Society, *A History of Beaver County* (2 vols., Beaver: Beaver County Historical Society, 1970), Vol. I, p. 346; Collective data from files held by the Valuation Engineer, Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, Denison, Texas.

⁸ Beaver County Historical Society, *A History of Beaver County*, Vol. I, pp. 30-32, 346; *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 237; Interview, Ralph Barby, Knowles, Oklahoma, November 3, 1972.



The cowboys who accompanied the cattle to market had to ride in bouncing cabooses such as this

cars at every station between Woodward and Forgan. The next day these cars, now loaded, were picked up by the same crew and handled to Woodward where most were given to the Santa Fe. On the same day, a local train began picking up stock at each station above Elk City. Upon its arrival at Woodward, interchange cars were given to the Santa Fe, and the remaining loaded stock cars were combined with whatever southbound cattle remained from the recently arrived train from Forgan. Another extra train then wheeled these cars, mostly consigned to Fort Worth, Texas packers, southward. Back in the bouncing caboose, the usually fearless cowboys who accompanied the cattle to market braced themselves, cursed the engine driver who was rapidly propelling them toward what appeared to be an uncertain destiny and yearned for the sanity of the open ranges now far behind. After they had delivered the cattle, and after "shootin' 'em up" in the big city for a few days, these same cattlemen boarded the cars of the Katy's passenger trains for a more civilized if less colorful return voyage.⁹

⁹ Interview, W. P. Altland, Woodward, Oklahoma, November 14, 1971; Interview, C. W. Dowdy, Mangum, Oklahoma, November 15, 1972; Interview, P. O. Parks, Woodward, Oklahoma, November 4, 1972.

BAWLING CATTLE AND BARKING BRAKEMEN

Cotton, wheat and livestock were the three commodities which traditionally moved to and from stations on the Wellington Branch. Extra train 914 on August 18, 1917 represented a normally heavy Saturday livestock run on the Panhandle Division in those days. Its manifest read:

- 5—Cars of cattle, Wellington to Wichita, Kansas
- 2—Cars of cattle, Dodsonville to Kansas City
- 1—Car of cattle, Dodsonville to Oklahoma City
- 1—Car of hogs, Hollis to Fort Worth
- 3—Cars of cattle, Hollis to Kansas City
- 1—Car of cattle, Duke to Oklahoma City

However, none of the livestock handled by Extra 914 was destined for stations on the Northwestern District. Cattle bound for Oklahoma City were taken to Elk City where they were transferred to the Rock Island. Cattle sold to packing houses in Wichita and Kansas City were delivered to the Santa Fe at Woodward while the hogs for Fort Worth were handled all the way by the MK&T. Throughout the 1920s the regular eastbound freight trains collected from twenty to fifty cars of stock each Tuesday and Saturday at the various stations between Wellington and Altus. Many of these cars contained hogs billed to Oklahoma City packers and were moved via Altus and the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway. Slaughter cattle consigned by shippers on the Wellington Branch usually were destined for plants or yards in Oklahoma City, Fort Worth or Kansas City. As with most commodities, livestock shipments declined on the Wellington Branch during the depression. Such loadings reached an all time low in 1939 and then increased.¹⁰

The pattern was similar on the main line of the Northwestern District. At Leedey, for instance, rancher T. H. Farris loaded his cattle on the home road and sent them to Oklahoma City slaughterhouses via Elk City and the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad. Saturday was an especially "big day" at Hammon, Oklahoma as it was at most other stations, for on that day ranchers and farmers traditionally sent their livestock to market. Entire trainloads of stock were shipped from some stations by on-line ranchers, but single-car billings by individual farmers was more typical at most. By way

¹⁰ Wichita Falls and Northwestern Railroad, "Dispatcher's Sheet," August 18, 1917, Missouri Kansas and Texas Railroad Offices; Interview, C. P. Parks, Altus, Oklahoma, November 17, 1972; Interview, V. L. Alsup, Duke, Oklahoma, November 16, 1972; E. B. Parks, Mangum, Oklahoma, November 15, 1972; M-K-T, "Carload Business Received and Forwarded to Stations on the Wellington Branch File," Missouri, Kansas and Texas Offices.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

of example, total billings at Camargo, Oklahoma for October, 1914 included three carloads of cattle and seven carloads of hogs.¹¹

On the northern end of the Northwestern District, livestock men were particularly pleased with the special Fort Worth-bound hog trains which were operated periodically by the railroad. Even after this service was terminated, about 1925, area hog shippers continued to rely on the railroad for their transportation needs. One of these men was Jacob C. Holmes, proprietor of the Holmes Livestock Company at Laverne, Oklahoma. He was an independent hog buyer and shipper who purchased animals at various stations along the Katy and BM&E, especially at Beaver, Laverne and Vici. Most of the hogs shipped by Holmes were taken by the M-K-T to Woodward from whence they were billed to Los Angeles, California slaughterhouses. Holmes also frequently consigned carloads of swine to Fort Worth, a lengthy and remunerative line-haul for the Katy. Prior to the depression nearly every farmer in the area had a few hogs, and Holmes was never at a loss to fill out his weekly carloadings.¹²

Other animals and even poultry similarly went to market over the rails of the Northwestern District. At Vici the sales barn shipped large numbers of horses and mules during the 1930s. This reflected more the financial disaster which had befallen local farmers than it did a switch to mechanized farming. Also at Vici, and at Forgan too, poultry cars were loaded several times each year until the late 1930s when this traffic disappeared for all time.¹³

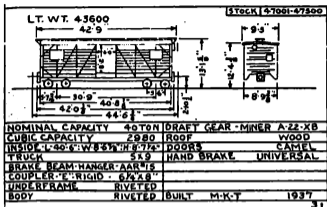
In 1935, the M-K-T system handled 142,492 tons of cattle; this represented 1.92 percent of Katy's gross tonnage for that year. Five seasons later it handled only 98,376 tons, representing a mere 1.21 percent of the road's gross tonnage. Nevertheless, the movement of livestock, particularly feeder and slaughter cattle, remained important to the financial health of both the railroad and its shippers. In 1943, the M-K-T expected to participate in the movement of at least 9,000 carloads of Texas range cattle to various northern feeders. Such animals ordinarily weighed about 700 pounds and were valued at from \$85 to \$100 per head; the railroad loaded 28 in each car. Federal law required that the animals be rested for at least five hours after each twenty-eight hours enroute. Thus, on the Katy, the cattle were un-

¹¹ Interview, M. H. Farris, Elk City, Oklahoma, November 17, 1972; Interview, Mrs. E. B. Savage, Hammon, Oklahoma, November 15, 1972; *Camargo Corner* (Camargo), November 20, 1914.

¹² Interview, Walter R. Smith, Laverne, Oklahoma, November 9, 1972; Interview, Jacob C. Holmes, Laverne, Oklahoma, August 24, 1972.

¹³ Interview, Cliff Kay, Ponca City, Oklahoma, June 20, 1972; Beaver County Historical Society, *A History of Beaver County*, Vol. II, pp. 132, 135.

BAWLING CATTLE AND BARKING BRAKEMEN



Specifications by the Mechanical Department of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad for the stock cars rebuilt at Denison, Texas in 1937

loaded for feed, water and rest at stock pens constructed for those purposes at Hodge, Texas, on the outskirts of Fort Worth; at Denison, Texas; Muskogee, Oklahoma; and at Parsons, Kansas. The railroad provided 200 pounds of hay for each carload of cattle when the animals were detained; it charged shippers a combined unloading and hay fee of \$2.55 per car for those services. Naturally, expeditious handling was important to all parties. Therefore shipments of twenty-five or more cars were handled by special trains; during the early 1940s, however, Katy was pleased to note that its stock trains averaged forty cars.¹⁴

Although livestock traffic held up rather well throughout the war years, it declined precipitously thereafter. The percentage of gross tonnage represented by cattle on the Katy for 1945, 1950 and 1955 was—respectively—.79 percent, .65 percent and .53 percent. In the latter year, it should be noted, only 63,165 tons of cattle were moved by the road. Traffic in hogs and other live animals had, by this time, virtually disappeared.¹⁵

¹⁴ Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, *Annual Report, 1935*, Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad Offices, p. 21; Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, *Annual Report, 1940*, *ibid.*, p. 21; *M-K-T Employee's Magazine*, (May, 1943), p. 6.

¹⁵ Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, *Annual Report, 1945*, p. 42, Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad Offices; Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, *Annual Report, 1950*, *ibid.*, p. 32; Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, *Annual Report, 1955*, *ibid.*, p. 24.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

The decline was patently evident on the Northwestern District. As late as the fall of 1947 the Barby Ranch near Knowles had shipped an entire trainload of cattle over the Northwestern District. Nevertheless, the construction of hardtop roads and the development of over-the-road trucking meant the end of the era when cattle were driven overland to the railroad's pens for loading. Barby and another rancher, T. A. Judy of near Forgan, continued to ship a few cars from Knowles and Mocane until the mid-1950s, but the end of all livestock shipping on the Northwestern District was clearly at hand. Even the Holmes Livestock Company of Laverne, which had shipped hogs to market on the Katy since 1925, quit using the railroad for its transportation needs about 1960. According to Jacob C. Holmes, the proprietor, there were several reasons for the switch. These included the development of sale barns, changing patterns of agriculture, good roads and large trucks.¹⁶

The demise of livestock traffic on the M-K-T system was soon reflected by the retirement of its stock handling facilities and equipment. On the Northwestern District, pens were dismantled during the 1940s at only two tiny stations; between 1950 and 1955, pens were retired at only two more small stations. Yet, between 1955 and 1960 pens at no fewer than twenty-one locations were retired; all remaining stock facilities on the Northwestern District were similarly disposed of in the 1960s. The same situation was mirrored in Katy's dwindling stock car fleet. In 1937, the railroad's shops at Denison, Texas had rebuilt 500 of its stock cars, turning them into virtually new equipment. By 1958, however, only 410 of these remained on the company's roster; the number dropped to 363 in 1959. As the M-K-T itself fell on hard times, and as the traffic in livestock ebbed away during the early 1960s, the company sold its last 300 cars to a rebuilder at scrap prices. After being upgraded, the cars were leased back to the Katy and were used to haul what little stock traffic that remained. Later in the decade they were temporarily converted to wheat cars after plywood had been nailed to the inside of the slats and paper grain doors had been applied. Finally, when the lease ran out, about 1970, the cars disappeared from Katy's property.¹⁷

¹⁶ Interview, T. A. Judy, Mocane, Oklahoma, November 12, 1972; Interview, Jacob E. Holmes.

¹⁷ Collective data from files held by the Valuation Engineer, Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad; In 1958 the Wellington Branch was abandoned and that portion of it extending from Hollis, Oklahoma to Wellington, Texas was dismantled. The remainder, from Altus to Hollis then was purchased for operation by the newly formed Hollis and Eastern Railroad, or the H&E. When the H&E assumed ownership stock pens still were in use at Duke, Gould and Hollis. A decade-and-a-half later, the entire BM&E along with part of the Northwestern District—from Altus to Forgan—was abandoned in 1973; *The Official Railway Equipment*

BAWLING CATTLE AND BARKING BRAKEMEN

In 1894, livestock had been the Missouri, Kansas and Texas' most important tonnage and revenue-generating commodity. Changing conditions within the packing industry, altered feeding and marketing patterns, hard-top roads and over-the-road trucking changed that. Gradually the traditional livestock traffic was drained away from the railroads; what happened on the Katy was typical. The ultimate result was predictable. After being in the business of transporting live animals for more than a century, the M-K-T cancelled all of its livestock tariffs effective June 7, 1972. Now the sounds of barking brakemen—urging bawling cattle aboard wooden Katy stock cars—is nothing more than an Oklahoma railroad memory.¹⁸

Register, Vol. LXXIV (October, 1958), pp. 510-513; *ibid.* Vol. LXXV (April, 1959), p. 510; Freight Equipment Folio Number 41, Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad Mechanical Department, Parsons, Kansas.

¹⁸ D. A. Fuhrig to all M-K-T agents, May 10, 1972, Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad Office.