

GRAND PRAIRIE RODE RAILS TO PROSPERITY

By James N. Bennett

The railroads serving Stuttgart have played a vital and enduring role in the development and economy of the town, ever since its founding in the 1880s to the present day. Locating Stuttgart on the railroad was by no means accidental, but rather of great necessity. Commerce was wholly dependent upon railroad transportation. People moved primarily by rail—certainly a trip of any consequence was unthinkable, and in most instances, impossible except by train. The pioneering families who settled at Stuttgart and on the Grand Prairie came by rail. Their household goods, livestock, and what few farm implements they brought all came by boxcar, to be unloaded from rail sidings on foot or to various horse- or ox-drawn conveyances, for transfer to their new prairie homes. In many instances, men came right along in the boxcar with the animals and family belongings, with the women and children arriving aboard regular passenger trains.

Land agents working for both the railroads and real estate interests accompanied prospective home seekers, buyers, and developers to the Grand Prairie by the hundreds, to see and experience the wonders of the region and envision the vast opportunities that awaited the pioneers. Low cost round-trip railroad excursion fares appealed to and attracted these prospective settlers and home seekers at unbelievable bargains, actually less than today's cost of an average meal in a local restaurant. A great number of these eager and foresighted people who came were duly impressed and sold, and made the decision to return with their families and settle at Stuttgart and on the Grand Prairie. They all, of course, came by train—the ambitious homesteader, the fledgling young farmer, a few of their interested neighbors, some close kin, the enterprising merchant, the eager young schoolteacher, the doctor, the lawyer, and all the rest—they arrived at Stuttgart and on the Grand Prairie by rail.

Thus it was only natural that the town be founded alongside a young and progressive railroad, one that had its very beginnings based on agricultural needs in East Texas. The Tyler Tap Railroad was incorporated December 1, 1871 to run a distance of 40 miles from Tyler, to connect with “some other railroad” in order that the region might have a “belt” over which to ship out its main commodity—cotton. Thus, the Cotton Belt Route was born. The railroad which emerged from this meager beginning evolved over the years into the solvent and highly efficient St. Louis-Southwestern Railway Company, maintaining through several reorganizations its highly popular and widely recognized name—the Cotton Belt Route. The Tyler Tap, like so many early railroads, soon fell victim to the chronic ailment of financial difficulties. The promoters were determined that those who had invested their money in the project would not lose, for they felt particularly responsible for the many shareholders whose faith had made possible the completion of the Tyler Tap line.

The group journeyed to St. Louis to contact the St. Louis Cotton Company, whose owners had expressed an interest in finding a means of shipping Texas cotton to St. Louis. The prospect was pleasing to both the Texas group and the St. Louis businessmen, and on May 17, 1879 the Texas & St. Louis Railway Company was organized and Eastern capital was obtained to begin construction of the new railroad. The year 1883 saw the completion of the line through Arkansas, and a huge celebration was held to inaugurate the opening of the route from Bird's Point, Missouri to Gatesville, Texas. The rail weighed 35 pounds per yard, and was imported from Wales at a cost of \$75.00 per ton, delivered. White oak ties,

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obtained in abundance from forests adjacent to the right-of-way, were used. Because of the narrow gauge of its tracks (3 ft., 0 in. between rails), passenger and freight cars interchanged to the Cotton Belt had to be hoisted aloft at Bird's Point. The standard gauge (4 ft., 8½ in.) wheel sets were removed, and narrow gauge sets placed under the car for the continuation of its journey over the Cotton Belt Route. Pioneer families bound for Stuttgart recalled with interest, over the years, this somewhat unusual occurrence during their trip to the Grand Prairie of Arkansas.



Stuttgart's link with the rest of the world, and for many years a focal point in the lives of many of its citizens, was the Cotton Belt depot, occupying the entire south property along the railroad's main line between College Street and Grand Avenue. Built in 1911 entirely of brick with a tile roof, it served as the trainmaster's office and housed the Cotton Belt agent and local personnel. The modern depot boasted tile floors and stained-glass windows in its waiting rooms, spacious comfort facilities, large offices and other features. It saw as many as six main line passenger trains a day, in addition to the branch line trains to Gillett, England, and Hazen. Passengers riding the highway motor buses of the railroad-owned Southwestern Transportation Company in the early 1930s used the depot's facilities as well. The ticket office was open 24 hours a day. Western Union telegraphic messages were sent and received by the railroad operator on duty. Ticket sales were impressive. For years, Stuttgart was a major shipping point for White River catfish. In summer months, express wagons loaded with boxes of iced-down fish stood dripping beside the track awaiting the northbound evening passenger train. The depot was nominated for the National Register of Historic Places in the 1970s, however, the handsome Mission Revival building was torn down in 1987.

The Official Railway Guides of the period already listed Stuttgart as a regular stop, and continued to clearly identify the Texas & St. Louis Railway as the Cotton Belt Route. An 1885 schedule showed the daily "Mail and Express" arriving Stuttgart at 11:10 a.m., having come the 233 rail miles from Bird's Point in twelve hours. Through passengers had made an across-the-Mississippi River ferry transfer to Bird's Point, having left St. Louis the day before. Northbound, the "Mail and Express" departed Stuttgart at 8:32 p.m., with passengers arriving at St. Louis via the combination rail-and-ferry route the next evening. In 1886, the railroad was reorganized for the second time in its brief but rapidly developing and interesting existence, and became known as the St. Louis, Arkansas and Texas Railway Company. The officers of the railroad by this time had realized that it was necessary to standard-gauge the road, as well as build branch lines into the rapidly expanding territory. Plans were made, and on October 18, 1886 at a pre-arranged hour, traffic was suspended, and reinforced section gangs completed the change from

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narrow gauge to standard gauge in just 24 hours. Schedules were vastly improved, and Stuttgart and St. Louis were now only sixteen hours apart.

A new and expedited rail-ferry transfer across the Mississippi River (now between Thebes, Illinois and Gray's Point, Missouri) speeded up both passenger and freight operations considerably. In 1905, the Thebes Bridge was completed and opened to traffic, thus ending for all time the costly and time consuming rail-ferry transfer. At long last, an all-rail route was a reality from St. Louis to Arkansas and Texas, via the storied Cotton Belt Route. In 1891, the property again was reorganized, for the third and final time, to become the St. Louis-Southwestern Railway. The Southern Pacific Railroad gained control of the St. Louis-Southwestern in 1933, and in 1992 the Cotton Belt Route was fully integrated into the 14,000-mile Southern Pacific Transportation Company.

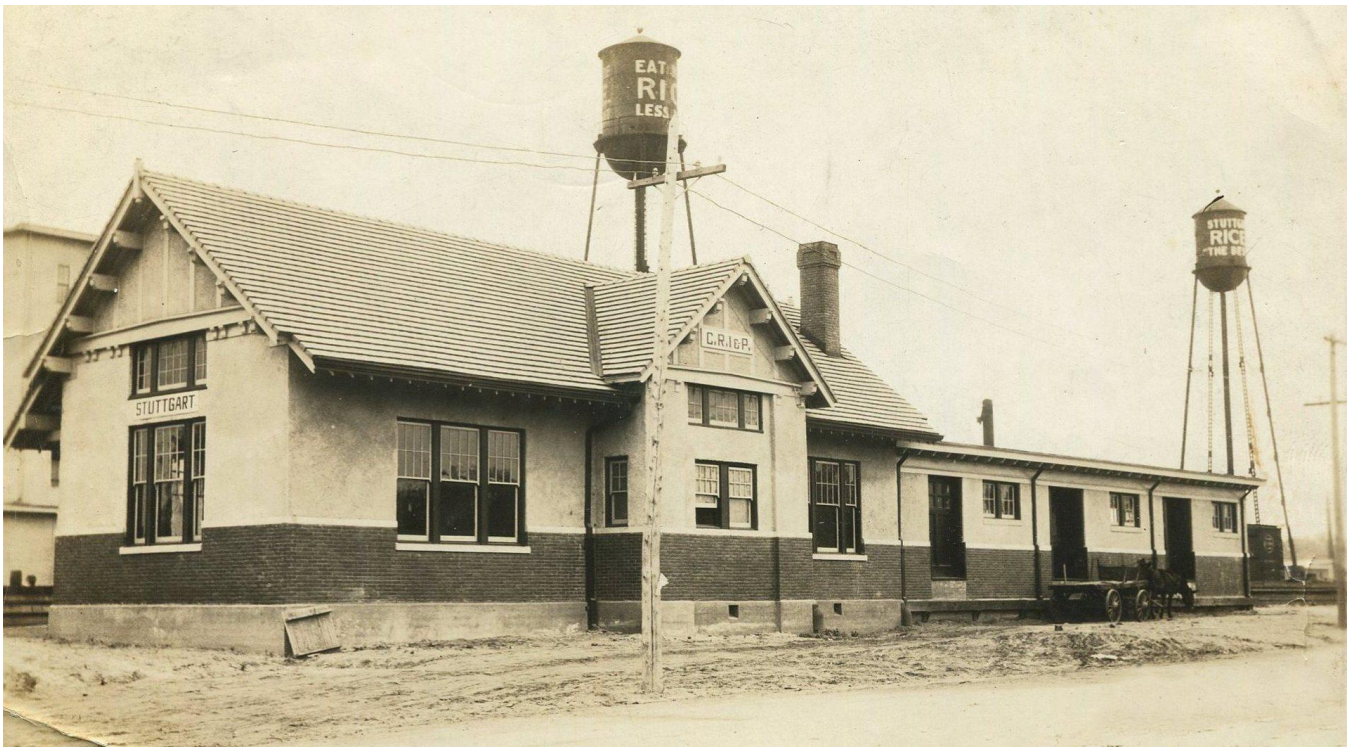
The Cotton Belt branch line extending from Stuttgart southeast to Yoder, Almyra, DeWitt, and Gillett was incorporated November 21, 1901. The two Cotton Belt branch lines which extended north from Stuttgart to Slovak and Hazen, and west to Brummitt, Humnoke, Coy, and England were incorporated May 18, 1901 as the Central Arkansas and Eastern Railroad Company. Actual construction, however, was by the St. Louis-Southwestern, with the two branch lines becoming part of the Cotton Belt Route October 22, 1911. The Gillett, Hazen, and England branch lines all saw regular passenger, freight, and mixed-train service. A daily through passenger train was operated from Gillett to Stuttgart to England and on to Argenta (North Little Rock), making connections across the Arkansas River with trains at Little Rock. Another passenger run operated from Stuttgart to Hazen, where connections to trains of the "Great Rock Island Route" were made. Service over the branch lines to England and Hazen was discontinued in the early 1930s, with the two lines being abandoned in 1937.



Among the largest steam locomotives ever built were the Cotton Belt's ten famous homemade and handsome "800-series" engines. Weighing 737,500 pounds in working order and exerting 61,564 pounds of tractive effort, numbers 810–819 were built beginning in 1937 by Cotton Belt machinists at the railroad's Pine Bluff shops. On October 21, 1937, #810 rolled out of Pine Bluff on its first run, hauling a special trainload of railroad officials, business, and civic leaders to Stuttgart to attend the Rice Carnival. The locomotives operated into the 1950s, finally being replaced by diesels. The sole survivor, #819, shown in restored condition at Little Rock (above) on excursion duty in the 1990s, is on display at the Arkansas Railroad Museum in Pine Bluff, coincidentally in the same building in which it was constructed in 1943. *Barry Robinson photo; editor's collection.*

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Highway 165 between Stuttgart and England is built on the old Cotton Belt right-of-way for the greater part of the distance between the two towns. Traces of the old right-of-way to Hazen still can be found in Prairie County. The Gillett branch, always a top money-maker for the Cotton Belt, continued in operation with the track and roadbed maintained in first-class condition until abandonment in the 1990s. The main line of the Cotton Belt (today the Union Pacific) passing through Stuttgart is of heavy, continuous welded rail, the roadbed rock-ballasted, and engineered and designed for safe, smooth, and high-speed operation. An impressive number of fast freight trains, including “run-through” trains from distant Eastern and Southeastern points destined for the Southwest and west coast terminals, transporting high-priority freight, move through Stuttgart regularly. These trains are handled and expedited to their destinations by highly-trained and skilled employees with aid of the latest electronic and computerized equipment. A large switching and car holding and storage yard is located at the northeastern edge of the city, and industrial trackage serves Stuttgart’s rice milling, grain processing and storage facilities, as well as other varied local businesses and industries.



The Rock Island depot at Stuttgart was an attractive buff-and-dark red tiled-roof structure, standing on the north side of East First Street between College and Grand. The impressive building was gone by the mid-1940s, making way for the first of the massive concrete grain storage facilities that today make up the city’s familiar “skyline.” Rock Island operated for a number of years from a smaller frame structure one block east, then finally moved its depot site to a location on North Anna Street.

The Rock Island Also Served City

The other railroad that served Stuttgart for many years was the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific, organized in Illinois in 1847 as the Rock Island and LaSalle Railroad Company. Stuttgart is located at the end of a 21-mile branch line from Mesa in Prairie County, where connection was made with the railroad’s Memphis–Little Rock main line. This branch was chartered March 22, 1910 as the Stuttgart and Rice Belt Railroad Company. On August 12, 1911, another charter was issued in the name of the Stuttgart and Southern Railroad, and again in 1913 a third charter was granted to the Rock Island, Stuttgart and

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Southern Railway Company. All of these lines became property of the Rock Island about 1913, and the branch was operated continuously until March 22, 1980, when the entire Rock Island system across fourteen states ceased operation. Afterwards, the Cotton Belt operated the ex-Rock Island industrial and switching trackage at Stuttgart under court-approved authority.

Over the years, the Rock Island contributed significantly to the growth and economy of Stuttgart and the Grand Prairie, and during its many years of dependable service moved a voluminous amount of grain and other commodities. Competitive rates and service resulting from two rail lines were of great economic benefit to Stuttgart's agricultural and industrial climate in general. The Stuttgart branch was always of great importance to the Rock Island. Their management looked with considerable pride on their road's record of service to the city. Rock Island passenger service, gone by 1930, was provided by a combination passenger-baggage gas-electric motorcar running between Stuttgart and Mesa, making connections there with main line Rock Island trains to and from Memphis and Little Rock to Oklahoma and points west and southwest.



Rock Island passenger service to Stuttgart was provided by combination motorcars similar to the one pictured above at Little Rock, until about 1930. Afterwards the occasional patrons were accommodated in the train's caboose. *Kalmbach Publishing*.

The Cotton Belt Continued to Serve Stuttgart

The Cotton Belt, at the height of its passenger train operations, ran as many as six passenger trains daily through Stuttgart, in addition to the branch line runs to and from Gillett and England and the local run to Hazen. Countless sacks of mail and huge amounts of express were handled daily at Stuttgart, and crowds of people always gathered at the depot at "train time." Cotton Belt's passenger trains were famous for their dependability, comfort, "homey" atmosphere, excellent dining car service, and the courteous and friendly train crews and depot employees. Due largely to this type of service and atmosphere on Cotton Belt trains, the railroad earned an enviable and highly regarded reputation from shippers and passengers alike. Beginning in the 1950s, Cotton Belt passenger services began to suffer. First, the dining cars were

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eliminated. Next, sleeping car services were reduced. Finally, all that remained was coach service, with that being between East St. Louis and Pine Bluff only.



Ten ultra-modern lightweight air-conditioned chair cars were purchased by the Cotton Belt in 1937 for service between St. Louis, Memphis, and Dallas on its *Morning Star* and *Lone Star* passenger trains. Individual, rubber-cushioned reclining seats accommodated 76 passengers aboard the semi-streamlined, roller bearing-equipped cars. Sound deadening materials, modern lavatory facilities, big picture windows, restful interiors, pillows, lights dimmed at night, and porter service were some of the features of the new cars. The Cotton Belt speeded up its schedules, and promoted Dallas–Memphis–Washington service via “The People’s Train to the People’s Capital,” by offering a convenient across-the-platform connection at Memphis to the Southern Railway’s new streamlined *Tennessean*. A trip aboard the attractive and easy-riding Cotton Belt chair cars were a pleasure indeed. Always maintained in top condition, they ran in Cotton Belt service for many years, then went west to parent Southern Pacific, where they served out their days in San Francisco commuter service. *Pullman-Standard Car Company*.



“Travel and Sleep in Safety and Comfort” was the well-known slogan of the Pullman Company, which operated such heavy-weight sleeping cars as the *Lake Sunapee*, a car which was assigned to Cotton Belt passenger service in the 1930s. First-class passengers boarding Pullman sleepers at Stuttgart could occupy upper or lower berths, or more expensive private accommodations such as drawing rooms or compartments. Cotton Belt provided Pullman service to St. Louis, Memphis, Shreveport, and Dallas, with passengers making direct connections at these cities for all points in the nation. *Courtesy of Bill Pollard*.

On November 30, 1959, the last Cotton Belt passenger train was discontinued, leaving Stuttgart as a freight-only listing in the railway guides. The railroad was then able to concentrate all of its energies,

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resources and manpower to the expedited and damage-free movement freight, and its dependable and on-time arrival. The Southern Pacific (including the Cotton Belt) merged into the Union Pacific Railroad in 1996. Today, the modern and highly developed industrial and agricultural complex that is Stuttgart can proudly extend recognition to the railroads which, from the days of the city's founding, have served it so well. The continued growth and economy of the city and surrounding area depends upon the railroad today, just as it did in the early years, as an efficient and dependable means of transportation for incoming goods and materials. Of equal or greater importance is the dependence of Stuttgart upon the railroad as a means to ship its products to the world.

Ed. note—Mr. Bennett wrote this article for the May 1980 *Stuttgart Daily Leader Centennial Edition*. In order to frame it in modern context, the editor added updated information on later changes to the Cotton Belt's corporate and physical structure.



Diesels replaced steam on the branch line to Gillett in 1945. Brand-new No. 1009, fresh from Baldwin Locomotive Works and rated at 1000 horsepower, was attractive in its gray and yellow paint with red trim. Handling short, branch line freights and serving as yard switchers demonstrated the versatility of these units. *Baldwin Locomotive Works*.

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The Cotton Belt's original *Blue Streak* rolls west of Mount Pleasant, Texas, on October 1, 1931. The train is led by 4-6-0 No. 659, built by Baldwin in 1913. Formally known as the St. Louis-Southwestern, the railroad began as the three-foot-gauge Tyler Tap Railroad between Tyler and Big Sandy, Texas, in the 1870s. *Harold K. Vollrath photo.*



A set of diesel engines built by General Motors' Electro-Motive Division leads Cotton Belt's fast *Blue Streak Merchandise* freight train through Texarkana, Texas in 1949. Grand Prairie businesses benefitted greatly from this expedited service over many decades. *Roger S. Plummer photo.*