

July 4, 2004 was the 100th anniversary of the inauguration of rail service to the Rio Grande Valley

The following chronology of events has been prepared by Buddy R. Dossett of San Benito and a former member of the Cameron County Historical Commission. He is preparing an application for a Texas Historical Commission marker for the St. Louis, Brownsville & Mexico Railway.

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, mesquite, ebony, huisache, retama and wood brush covered much of the Rio Grande Valley. The principal industry was cattle raising. The agricultural potential of the Rio Grande Valley with irrigation had long been appreciated. In a letter to his cousin, dated August 27, 1829 discussing what is now known as the Valley, Stephen F. Austin wrote:

...The soil is rich and fertile, but the seasons are dry and so very irregular as to destroy everything like certainty in crops, unless where there are facilities for irrigation, and those can only be obtained by means of machinery for raising the water out of the river—an expedient which would be very expensive and I think inadequate—tho many have had it in contemplation, as I have been told, to use steam for this purpose...

Since the early 1850s, the construction of large irrigation works had been periodically promoted. In 1892, Lieutenant W. H. Chatfield, a civil engineer assigned to Fort Brown, urged construction of an irrigation system which would irrigate over one million acres in Cameron and Hidalgo Counties. There being no local market for the crops that the proposed large scale irrigation works would produce, critics argued it was not feasible to construct such a system until there was a railroad to transport the crops to market. To this, Chatfield responded:

No railroad will enter this country or get farther than twenty miles from this county seat until the people wake up to the fact that capitalists expect a fair return for the good money they invest in any enterprise. If the people of this section want railroads, as well as every other luxury which wealth will bring, let them rub their eyes and arouse themselves to the standing offer which I have made to irrigate their lands. After their lands are provided with irrigation, let them parcel them out to the thousands of buyers who will eagerly purchase them at a fair price.

Chatfield prophetically penned:

The construction of a complete system of irrigation for this section would be a grand enterprise. Where there is now only one acre in a hundred under cultivation, every square foot of this vast area of arable land would teem with luxuriant vegetation and the value of land would be increased in nearly the same proportion. Instead of four inhabitants to each square mile there would soon be a hundred; farm houses would spring up everywhere, and Ceres would reign benignantly over her prosperous and happy subjects.

Chatfield chartered the Chatfield Irrigation Company to construct the system, but most investors rejected his "If you build it, the railroad will come" argument.

Prior to 1881, the bulk of the goods imported to and exported from northern Mexico passed through Brownsville and Matamoros. Goods were transported to and from the interior of Mexico by mule and ox drawn wagon carts. Due to topography, most of the trade passed through the harbor at Brazos Santiago (near present day Port Isabel). Steamboats offered an alternative to transporting the goods overland between Matamoros-Brownsville and the coast, however, the steamboat company owned by Mifflin Kenedy and Richard King held a monopoly on this form of transportation. To reduce the cost of transporting goods between Brownsville and the coast, Brownsville businessmen, over the opposition of Kenedy and King, chartered the Rio Grande Railway Company to construct a railroad between Brownsville and Brazos Santiago. Completed in 1871, this railroad significantly reduced the cost of transporting goods between Brownsville and the coast.

To break the Brownsville-Matamoros monopoly, Corpus Christi wool merchant Uriah Lott incorporated the Corpus Christi, San Diego, and Rio Grande-Narrow Gauge Railroad in 1875 to construct a railroad from Corpus Christi to Laredo. Grading of the road bed began in 1875, and track laying began in November 1876. As Lott's railroad slowly inched toward Laredo, the Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico, more commonly known as the Mexican National, announced plans to construct a railroad from Nuevo Laredo to Monterrey, and Jay Gould's International & Great Northern Railroad began laying tracks toward Laredo via San Antonio. In the summer of 1881, as Lott's line neared Laredo, the syndicate financing the

Mexican National purchased Lott's railroad and changed the name to the Texas –Mexico Railroad. The Tex-Mex, as it was commonly known, reached Laredo in November 1881. The tracks of the I. & G. N. reached Laredo in December 1881, connecting Laredo to the U.S. national rail system. Immediately, the Mexican trade shifted to Laredo-Corpus Christi-San Antonio, leaving Brownsville-Matamoros with only local trade. The Mexican National completed its line in 1883.

In 1885, Uriah Lott was hired by investors to construct the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railroad-known as the SAP-between those two cities. Lott hired Benjamin Yoakum as his chief clerk. Lott completed the line in 1886, with a branch to Corpus Christi. In 1888, the SAP completed a branch to what is now Alice. Lott offered to extend the SAP to Brownsville if Brownsville satisfied certain financial demands. Brownsville could not, or did not, meet Lott's demands, and the line to Brownsville not constructed. Although the SAP talked about extending its line from Alice to Brownsville, it did nothing.

In 1889, the New York, Texas & Mexican Railway Company was chartered to construct a line from what is now Rosenberg, Texas to Brownsville via Victoria, Texas. This line reached Victoria before funding ran out.

In 1890, E. H. Ropes arrived in Corpus Christi and announced his plans to dredge a channel from Corpus Christi to the Gulf, and to construct a railroad from Corpus Christi to Panama via Brownsville. In June 1890, Ropes chartered the Corpus Christi & South American Railway Co. About 30 miles of road bed had been graded, and large amounts of material were on hand, when, in late 1891, the eastern bank financing the line failed. No other investor could be found, and the project was abandoned.

About this time, promoter, J. S. Anthony, chartered the Pan American Railway Co. to build a railroad from Victoria, Texas, to Rio de Janeiro via Brownsville. This project came to an end at the east bank of the Guadalupe River because the Company did not have the funds to construct the bridge across the Guadalupe.

In the early 1890s, Uriah Lott formed the San Antonio & Tampico Railroad Co. to construct a line from Alice to Tampico via Brownsville. Nothing was done other than some preliminary work.

In 1897, Uriah Lott incorporated the Guadalupe Valley Railroad to construct a rail line from Victoria, Texas, to a point where the boundary line between Hildago and Cameron Counties intersects the Rio Grande River. Lott abandoned this project soon after construction began due to lack of funds.

In 1899, Lott again began trying to attract investors for the construction of a railroad from Alice, Texas to Brownsville. Aware that elsewhere in the state by ranchers were selling grazing land along railroads to farmers at a tremendous profit, ranchers were willing to donate the right-of-way for the railroad—"the idea of farm colonization seemed like an answered prayer to the hard pressed rancher." Lott turned to his former clerk, Benjamin Yoakum, who the meantime had made good in the railroad business. By the turn of the century, through various syndicates, Yoakum controlled more miles of track than one else in the world. It turned out that Yoakum had begun investigating the feasibility of constructing a line from the Houston area to Mexico City via Brownsville.

On October 1, 1902, according to the *Houston Post*, Lott, while in Brownsville, announced that he represented a company interested in constructing a railroad from the Red River to Brownsville.

On January 2, 1902, the *Corpus Christi Caller* newspaper reported that Uriah Lott was in town talking generally about a railroad to Brownsville. A separate article reported that a surveying party had arrived in Corpus to survey a railroad line from Corpus Christi to Brownsville.

On January 6, 1903, Uriah Lott announced that the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway Company had been formed to construct a railroad to Brownsville.

On January 12, 1903, the Charter of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway was signed. The charter called for the construction of a railroad from Houston to the Rio Grande River at or near Brownsville and the construction of a branch to begin at a point on the main line situated not less than 24 and not more than 35 miles north of Brownsville that would run through Hidalgo County to the southeast corner of Starr County. Many of the investors were from the St. Louis area. One of the conditions of the investors was that Brownsville pay a \$40,000.00 bonus.

As finalized, plans called for work to commence at a point on the Tex-Mex about 16 miles west of Corpus Christi, this point being in Robert Driscoll's pasture, 141 miles north of Brownsville. This point became known as Robstown. Materials would be delivered by ship to Corpus Christi and transported by rail from Corpus over the Tex-Mex to the job site and shipped by rail via Laredo. Upon completion of the line to Brownsville, the construction of the line from Robstown to the Houston would commence. Upon completion of the line to Houston, a bridge would be constructed over the Rio Grande at Brownsville, and thereafter work would commence on extending the line to Mexico City and possibly beyond.

June 6, 1903: At a meeting of interested parties at Brownsville, this resolution, introduced by Lon C. Hill, is unanimously adopted:

Whereas, The building of the proposed St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railroad into the Rio Grande River Valley will greatly enhance the value of our property, and open up and develop our Country as one of the great garden, fruit and rice sections in the Southwest, and will insure speedy passenger and freight transportation; therefore, be it resolved that we, the citizens of Brownsville in meeting assembled, say that the bonus must, shall and will be raised for said road.

June 6, 1903: The corporate charter of the St. Louis, Brownsville & Mexico Railway is filed with the Secretary of State.

June 18, 1903: The survey of the route to Brownsville is begun.

On July 2, 1903: The names of the stations are published. They are:

Robstown: the crossing on the Texas-Mexican railroad on Robert Driscoll's land;

Coldris: on Petronilla-Robert Driscoll's residence;

Third Station: not named;

Kingsville: three miles east of Mrs. King's residence at Santa Gertrudis Ranch, named for Capt. R. King;

Spohn: On Mrs. King's land, six miles below Kingsville; named for Dr. Arthur E. Spohn, chief surgeon of the road;

Sarita: on Kenedy Pasture Company's land; named in honor of Mrs. Sarita Spohn and Mr. John G. Kenedy's only daughter (Sarita Kenedy);

Mifflin: on Kenedy land; named in honor of Capt. Mifflin Kenedy;

Turcolle: on Kenedy land; named in honor of Mrs. John G. Kenedy, being her maiden name;

Katherine: on Major Armstrong's land named for his daughter, Miss Julia Katherine;

Norias: on Mrs. King's land; named for Hon. James B. Wells (norias being Spanish for wells);

Yturria: on F. Yturria's land and named in his honor;

Raymondville: on Mrs. King's land; named in honor of E. B. Raymond;

Lyford: on Mrs. King's land; named in honor of the general attorney for the Chicago and Eastern Illinois railroad;

Stillman: on Mrs. King's land; named in honor of Charles Stillman, one of the founders of Brownsville;

Sixteenth station: not named;

Harlingen: on Lon C. Hill's land; this is the junction of the Hidalgo branch and named for Col. Lott's grandmother, whose name was Van Harlingen and American home was Harlingen, New Jersey;

Powers: on land of Combe, Hicks and Landrum; named in honor of Hon. Stephen Powers;

Nineteenth: is on the Browne land and is to be named by Mrs. San Roman;

Ratcliffe: just beyond Olmito, on land of C. Lindsey and the Brownsville Land and Irrigation Co.;

Twenty-one: not named; on land of Col. H.M. Fields on the north bank of La Resaca de Guena;

Brownsville: one hundred forty-one and one-fourth miles from the crossing of the Texas Mexican Railroad.

July 8, 1903: The \$40,000 bonus to be paid by Brownsville almost all raised. The grading outfit shipped from Mississippi but held up due high water in the Mississippi River. The survey crew laying out the route has completed 60 miles.

July 22, 1903: Lott announces that line will continue east from Sinton to the Houston area; the contract for the construction of the line will come later. Brownsville sets a July 1, 1904 completion date.

July 30, 1903: Grading crews and equipment have begun arriving in Corpus Christi. Today, Passengers and trainmen on the Tex-Mex reported that grading of the line has begun.

July 30, 1903: Uriah Lott confirms that grading has begun and that the railroad plans to complete 40 miles of grading per month; at that rate, grading crews will reach Brownsville in November.

August 4, 1903: Scrapers and tools left from Corpus Christi for Robstown.

August 10, 1903: Survey of route to Brownsville completed.

August 12, 1903: Survey of branch to Hidalgo County begun.

October 2, 1903: Due to a cash flow problem at first, and also because clearing the brush was harder than anticipated, as of October 2, only 10 miles of grading had been completed and were ready for rails. It is anticipated that 10 more miles would be completed by mid October. As of October 2, 20,000 ties have been delivered by ship to Corpus Christi and delivery of rails scheduled for late October.

October 11, 1903: First shipment of rails arrives at Galveston; will be shipped by rail to Robstown.

November 30, 1903: The contractor originally hired to lay the rails and build the trestles had quit the job. A new contract is let to the Southern Contracting Co., of which Sam Robertson was one of the partners. The contract calls for 30 miles of track to be laid per month.

December 1903: Rail laying begins in early this month.

December 21, 1903: 11 miles of track have been laid.

December 25, 1903: Rails reach Driscoll.

January 15, 1904: Rails have reached Julia (Julia Driscoll), now known as Bishop.

January 29, 1904: 100 miles of grading completed making the tentative arrival in Brownsville, April 1. 35 miles of track have been laid.

February 1, 1904: Rails reach Kingsville.

February 6, 1904: Rails reach Ricardo (mile post 29), which is named after Richard King.

February 14, 1904: Rails reach Spohn (mile posts 37); this location is now known as Riviera.

February 17, 1904: The bridge over Santa Gertrudis Creek, south of Kingsville, collapses after the locomotive and several cars had passed over the bridge. This causes nine cars loaded with rails and ties to fall into the creek. A train speeding to the place of the collapsed bridge derailed when it runs into a cocked switch. The only person hurt was Sam Robertson, whose right leg was broken.

February 20, 1904: Rails reach Sarita.

Late February, 1904: Rails reach Mifflin.

March 4, 1904: Rails reach Katherine, now known as Armstrong.

March 5, 1904: 60 miles of track completed. While the slow arrival of ties has retarded the work, ties are arriving more regularly now.

March 5, 1904: Chief Engineer begins surveying of line from Robstown to Sinton.

March 8, 1904: 71 miles of track laid.

March 11, 1904: Rails reach Norias.

March 18, 1904: 82 miles of track laid bringing the line within 59 miles of Brownsville.

March 21, 1904: 86 ½ miles completed.

March 30, 1904: Grading crew 5 ½ miles from Brownsville. 96 miles of track laid bringing line to 15 from Harlingen. It is estimated that will require 10 days to construct the low wooden bridge over the Arroyo Colorado.

April 2, 1904: Rails reach mile Raymondville.

April 9, 1904: Rails reach Lyford.

April 11, 1904: Bridge timbers and ties have been delivered to Arroyo Colorado for construction of bridge. Except for one mile at Olmito, grading to Brownsville is complete.

April 18, 1904: Track laying crew has now passed Combes near mile post 111. The bridge building material is all in readiness for the construction of the bridge across the Arroyo, having been hauled by wagon. The derrick is up and already at work, and the foundation of the big piers on either side is already in and settling.

April 20, 1904: Rails reach Harlingen. The *Brownsville Herald* of April 21 proclaims: "Harlingen, Texas. On yesterday, April 20, Harlingen-on-the-Arroyo, the Dutch City that is to be, was connected with the outside world by rail, the track of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico railroad reaching here yesterday morning at 10 o'clock. The track gang did not stop to celebrate their arrival here, as Harlingen is a dry town—at present, at least, there being no express office here as yet—but pushed straight on through. The track is now completed to the Arroyo Colorado, where work will be somewhat slower until the bridge is completed. .."

May 2, 1904: Bridge over Arroyo Colorado completed.

May 6, 1904: Rails have reached Bessie, named in honor of Benjamin Yoakum's daughter, Bessie. The town is renamed San Benito in 1907, when the application for a post office name is rejected because there is a Bessie in Grimes County

May 10 1904: Rails have reached Fordyce—renamed Barreda, and now known as Russelltown.

May 13, 1904: Rails are 13 miles from Brownsville.

May 16, 1904: Work has been held up since May 13 due to lack of materials, however, may only be 9 miles from Brownsville instead of 13.

May 18, 1904: Rails reach Olmito.

June 7, 1904: Rails reach Brownsville.

July 4, 1904: Rail service officially inaugurated.

April 19, 1908: Passenger service between Houston and Brownsville begins.

1910: What is now known as the B&M Bridge completed. Revolution in Mexico starts soon afterward, killing the plan to extend the line to Mexico City.

N. Rozeff adds this additional information:

The first train out of the Valley left Brownsville July 4, 1904. Its crewmen were Ed Burke, engineer, George W. Thomas, conductor, and Arthur W. Moore, fireman. It left Brownsville at 6:30 a.m. arriving in Corpus Christi at 5:45 p.m.

Coming from Corpus Christi the same day was a train departing 7:40 a.m. Its crew consisted of H.H. Kendall, engineer, George Heustes conductor, and Billie Jordan, fireman.

That day numerous people lined the tracks to catch their first glimpse of scheduled train service. There was yet to be any telegraph connection between the various stations along the line.

When the service to Houston was established on 4/19/08 the passenger cars were old ones and their ride was uncomfortable. It wasn't until January 31, 1909 that the first Pullman passenger cars were put into service. The consist at that time was comprised of the locomotive, tender, a baggage-combination car, and two passenger cars.