

The Delta Route: Decline, death, and rebirth By Louis R. Saillard

How Columbus & Greenville went from bankrupt orphan to a profitable Class 1 to oblivion . . . and then came back

A VISITOR to Columbus, in eastern Mississippi, in the late 1970's would find in the Columbus & Greenville Railway a line that resembled more of a time capsule or museum than a modern working railroad. Its Class 1 heritage was obvious, and much of its business was conducted with Class 1 style. But C&G was, at heart, a homespun short line. Its shop crews labored in a 10-stall brick roundhouse and machine shop built in 1908. The dispatcher's office, in a building just west of the roundhouse, was the gathering place for hostlers and yard crews. Corporate offices, a few blocks away in a former joint C&G-Southern Railway passenger station built in 1886, were still crowded with employees shuffling papers. Just south of the roundhouse, the old car shop stood silent, its glass clerestory roof allowing light down onto two or three partially rebuilt wooden cabooses. One visitor would recall later, "It looked like the people had just forgotten to come to work one day."

The Columbus yard tracks were full of leftovers from busier times. A trailer from a 1920's Brill gas-electric, later used in maintenance service, was on hand. Old passenger cars, later used on work trains, rested on yard tracks and in a roundhouse stall. A steam pile driver, long unused, which shop employees thought had come from the Southern, stood by the turntable. C&G had purchased 300 wooden boxcars from American Car & Foundry in 1929, and in 1970 still had 56 of them on the roster, stored on sidings all along the line.

By 1975, though, this Columbus & Greenville Railway was the second carrier of that name, operating the same property as the first one, a 168-mile line across Mississippi from the Alabama state line "Thru The Heart of Dixie" (as stated on C&G's 40-foot green boxcars) to the Mississippi River at Greenville.

The oldest part of what would become the C&G was originally the 3-foot-gauge Greenville, Columbus & Birmingham, which drove its first spike near the Mississippi River on January 5, 1878. Built to provide an outlet for the agri-



DAVID M. JOHNSTON

cultural products of the rich Delta soil, GC&B in 1878 had the highest profit-to-earnings ratio of the Magnolia State's 16 railroads.

After just three years of operation, GC&B's directors voted to consolidate their little company into what would become the Georgia Pacific Railway, a grand scheme to build a southern transcontinental from Atlanta to Texarkana, Texas, and on to the West Coast. From its earliest days the GP was owned by the Richmond & Danville Railroad.

The transcontinental plans were never fulfilled. Track from Atlanta to the Mississippi River was completed June 18, 1889, but because of the R&D's precarious finances, that date was four years after the promised completion all the way to Texarkana. Two years later, Richmond & Danville's owners admitted they were unable to service the company's large floating debt. Reorganized by Drexel, Morgan & Co., the great Southern Railway System was born from the R&D in 1894.

Mississippi's Constitution of 1890 required that railroads be incorporated in that state, so the new entity for the cross-state route became the Southern Railway Co. in Mississippi. Lacking on-line industry and a western connection across the river, the SRinM wobbled through World War I and into the general economic decline which followed.

On November 6, 1920, the company

C&G's Greenwood-Columbus local, behind Baldwins 605 in original green and orange and 601 in a newer blue and white, sets out boxcars at North Carrollton, Miss., on May 1, 1981.

published a circular announcing it was changing its name to Columbus & Greenville Railroad, with the same officers. This puzzled some, but few realized at the time this was an attempt by Southern to separate its name from what was to follow. Eight months after the name change, C&G was bankrupt.

Local interests purchased it in 1923 for \$35,000 cash and changed the name to Columbus & Greenville Railway. Adam T. Stovall, the local attorney for the Mobile & Ohio Rail Road, was elected president. His son and grandson would follow him in that office.

At the time, C&G owned virtually no equipment, having for years leased it all from Southern and M&O. Stovall acquired secondhand locomotives from several sources. As the road's fortunes improved in the prosperous 1920's, it acquired an almost-new Brill Model 55 railcar (a former demonstrator, bought at a 5 percent discount). Later, new and larger Brill gas-electrics and trailers came to supplement the daily steam passenger train, the *Deltan*. President Stovall was a great believer in local passenger service (a policy he later admitted was a mistake), and through the '20's C&G continued to add secondhand cars (bought for cash) to its passenger fleet. The *Deltan* was air-conditioned in 1938.



Encouraged by its success with gas railcars, C&G as early as 1938 considered buying diesel engines. Used steam locomotives filled immediate requirements, then World War II put further purchases out of the question. In 1945, at the recommendation of C&G master mechanic W. A. Trayler Jr., the line ordered five 1500 h.p. road-switchers, Nos. 601-605, from Baldwin. These were not only the first new locomotives ever owned by the company, but 601 was the first 1500 h.p. road-switcher in America.

After some break-in problems, the Baldwins would prove to be C&G's most memorable physical asset, pulling its freight and passenger trains for 38 years. Today the 601 is displayed at

Columbus, named *W. A. Trayler Jr.*, and the 606 (bought in 1951) is at the Illinois Railway Museum in Union, Ill.

C&G passenger service ended in 1948. No. 178, an ex-Mobile & Ohio 4-6-0 that was the road's last active steam locomotive, was retired in 1951 and today is displayed at Propst Park in Columbus with three passenger cars.

The prosperous 1950's were good for C&G, and it earned a yearly profit of \$300,000 through the decade. The road was among several that lost their Class 1 status on August 30, 1955, though, when the Interstate Commerce Commission increased the required gross annual revenue level from \$1 million to \$3 million. C&G had failed to earn \$1 million for a few years during the Depression but had quickly rebounded. Now, ironically, with a consistent \$2 million in annual gross earnings, it fell to Class 2 status.

Into the 1960's C&G remained a traditional railroad. It had begun laying heavier 80-lb. rail in 1937, but much of the main line was still 60-lb. rail rolled in the 1880's (the reason why the Baldwins had A1A trucks). Then there were the cabooses. One observer in the '60's

said C&G's wooden cabooses were "better than any museum cabooses I've seen." They were mostly ex-Southern (two were from M&O), bought by the SRinM in December 1915. The oldest reportedly dated from 1894.

The classic wooden cabooses were replaced with ex-Illinois Central steel cars in 1970, and there were obvious advantages. A passenger on wooden caboose 503 in 1969 had reported the old cars "were fairly open inside, and you could sit at one end and watch the other end twist as you went down the track." Two years after the steel cars arrived, a rail broke under a freight near West Point, rolling the caboose onto its side and seriously injuring conductor Bob Gray. Had the wooden cars still been in use, Gray believes the weight of the trucks would have crushed the carbody and he wouldn't have survived.

In 1965, C&G bought two new 1800 h.p. SD28 road-switchers from EMD (which built only four others, for Minnesota's Reserve Mining) to provide higher horsepower for through freights 51 and 52 and to compensate for the loss of Baldwin 602, which had derailed

C&G through the years (clockwise from below): The 216, a former Mobile & Ohio 1899 Rogers 4-6-0, rides the Columbus turntable on March 12, 1944, two years before being scrapped. C&G's 50 50-ton-capacity 1957 Pullman-Standard boxcars were painted green. Caboose 506, earlier Southern X-1323, began service out of Columbus in 1915, is pictured in 1966, and was not retired until 1970. The 702, one of two green-and-white SD28's, was 3 months old in December 1965.



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into a creek near Maben and was retired in 1961. C&G's newest items, SD's 701 and 702 possessed one heartwarming attribute: tiny 1000-gallon fuel tanks to reduce their weight. The rest of the space below the frame, usually occupied by a larger tank, was fitted with a metal basket, in which C&G stored wooden blocking, tools, and re-railing frogs to clean up derailments, speaking to C&G's true homespun status.

On May 16, 1968, Mississippi's two largest railroads—Illinois Central and Gulf, Mobile & Ohio—announced plans to merge into the new Illinois Central Gulf. C&G interchanged with IC and GM&O at nine points, and its predicted loss in revenue from the merger was \$232,000 a year, or 14 percent of its income. Two other Mississippi short lines, the Fernwood, Columbia & Gulf and the Bonhomie & Hattiesburg Southern, predicted a loss of 59 percent.

C&G agreed in 1969 to not oppose ICG if the new firm would buy C&G for a mutually agreeable price. But the merger was actively opposed by several roads. Negotiations dragged on longer than expected, and while C&G's fate hung in limbo, tragedy struck it twice. President R. C. Stovall (son of founding

president A.T.) was killed in an auto accident in 1970, and in December 1971 the SD28's hit a gravel truck at Kilmichael and were seriously damaged (IC would repair them at Paducah, Ky.).

It was obvious to most everyone that Columbus & Greenville was too fragile to last. ICG became a reality on August 10, 1972, and in accordance with its agreement, bought the C&G on September 29. The new road's priorities lay elsewhere, though. The old C&G rapidly declined, and customer service plummeted. Spring floods in 1973 closed the line in several places, and ICG made no repairs. When on-line customers filed complaints with the Mississippi Public Service Commission, ICG suggested perhaps they would be better served by an independent short line.

Thus was the Columbus & Greenville Railway re-chartered and re-purchased, by local interests, on October 29, 1975, 37 months after C&G's initial demise. ICG kept the SD28's, so the new C&G had to rely on the Baldwins, four of which would last until 1983. Further C&G diesel purchases would be from the secondhand market.

Today the "new" Columbus & Greenville still serves Mississippi. Certainly the property is a short line, having long dispensed with Class 1 methods of doing business. A visitor in, say, 1970, would have looked over C&G's Baldwins, frail track, and many bridges and proclaimed the road's chances of survival in "ICG's state" as zero. Happily, he would have been wrong. ■

C&G fact file

(comparative figures are for 1930 and 1972)

Route-miles: 168; 168

Locomotives: 30; 14

Passenger cars: 25 (includes 3 motor cars, 3 trailers); 0

Freight cars: 380; 193

Headquarters city: Columbus, Miss.

Recommended reading: *Delta Route, A History of the Columbus & Greenville Railway*, Louis R. Saillard (C&G, 1981); "The Railroad That Keeps Ringing Doorbells," Dibrell Duval (September 1958 *TRAINS*); "Resurrection on the Delta," Jim Boyd (Winter 1974 *Railfan*).

Source: Author's records