

# GM&O: Two roads in one, and always the innovator

From its 1940 creation through its 1947 northern expansion to its 1972 demise, GM&O personified the “merger movement”

**T**HE “modern merger movement” is often said to have begun in 1957 when Louisville & Nashville absorbed the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis, in which the L&N had a three-quarters ownership. Some would argue that three similar 1947 mergers—Denver & Salt Lake into Denver & Rio Grande Western; Alton Railroad into Gulf, Mobile & Ohio; and Pere Marquette into Chesapeake & Ohio—should mark the movement’s beginning. In all four cases, though, the surviving carrier already had a stake in, or a degree of control over, the “fallen flag.”

Omitting the interruption of World War II, a significant merger occurred just before the first three above, in fall 1940—the creation of the GM&O itself. Some would argue that GM&O’s creation—a classic “parallel merger”—set the tone for rail mergers in the second half of the 20th century.

GM&O was formed from two Deep South carriers: 827-mile Gulf, Mobile & Northern and 1180-mile Mobile & Ohio. GM&N reached from the ports of Mobile, Ala., and New Orleans, La., north, joining at Union, Miss. (between Jackson and Meridian), en route to the west Tennessee city of Jackson, while M&O, which paralleled GM&N 25 to 30 miles to the east, went from Mobile through Meridian, Miss., and Jackson, Tenn., to metropolitan St. Louis.

Both partners had colorful histories dating to the mid-1800’s. As was true for

**M&O Consolidation 547 and GM&N Decapod 255 leave Jackson, Miss., northbound in May 1941.**



C. W. WITBECK



GM&O: B. M. SHERIDAN

**GM&O kept the silver-and-crimson colors of predecessor Gulf, Mobile & Northern’s 1935 streamliner Rebel (leaving Southern’s Terminal Station in New Orleans, above, at age 10), and applied them to its early diesels, such as 1940 S1 664.**

many railroads, each itself arose from mergers of smaller lines, including logging and narrow-gauge pikes. GM&N’s slim-gauge predecessor, the Ripley Railroad in northern Mississippi, pre-dated the better-known Colorado narrow-gauges, and the same was true for the M&O’s 3-foot-gauge predecessor in southern Illinois, the St. Louis & Cairo.

M&O’s tracks north of Corinth, Miss., had been the objective of the opposing armies in the Battle of Shiloh during the Civil War, and M&O suffered severe damage in fighting around Meridian. GM&N was the evolution of several end-to-end mergers and reorganizations of small roads that tapped the hilly, heavily forested areas of southern and central Mississippi. Forest and re-



GM&O PHOTO, J. DAVID INGLES COLLECTION

lated paper products would be a system traffic staple for over a century.

The man behind the GM&O was Isaac Burton “Ike” Tigrett (TY-gret), a banker from Jackson, Tenn. He’d been appointed receiver for the GM&N when it emerged from government control after World War I, and his business philosophy was “growth by merger and take care of the stockholders first.” Tigrett surrounded himself with executives who would think unconventionally, rare in the staid railroad industry.

Mobile & Ohio had been in bankruptcy during the Depression and was controlled by the Southern Railway. When Southern offered the M&O for sale in the mid-1930’s, Tigrett saw an opportunity to protect and strengthen GM&N’s territory and extend its reach to the St. Louis gateway.

Toward this end, he incorporated the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio in November 1938, and directed purchase of the M&O, completed on September 13, 1940. His timing was fortunate, for the traffic surge brought on by World War II allowed the new company to prosper beyond anyone’s expectations.

Tigrett was an innovator, with both

the GM&N and the GM&O. The merged carrier was the first large Class 1 road to dieselize, and it made extensive use of gas-electric (later, diesel) motor cars for local and branchline passenger service. Before the merger, Tigrett's GM&N joined the streamlining trend when it introduced in July 1935 the lightweight, diesel-powered *Rebel* linking Jackson, Tenn., and New Orleans. Just weeks after the merger, GM&O upgraded its passenger service with full-sized cars on the St. Louis-Mobile *Gulf Coast Rebel*, pulled by new Alco DL109 diesels. (As a result, the three pioneer *Rebel* trains came to be called "the Little Rebels.")

In freight service, GM&O was a unit-train pioneer. In the late 1940's, it ran solid consists of refrigerator cars of bananas from the Mobile port to northern markets, and in the early 1960's it was among the early operators of unit coal trains. This concept was not new, but GM&O's unit trains were the first to haul coal in customer-owned cars on a

fixed-price contract, directly from mine to utility. The customer was Chicago's Commonwealth Edison; its rotary-dump gondolas shuttled between southern Illinois mines and power plants near Joliet, Ill., and Hammond, Ind.

The new GM&O went to work in 1940 with a fleet of small, aging steam locomotives, dominated by 87 2-8-2's, 61 4-6-0's, 26 4-6-2's, and 26 2-10-0's, none built after 1928. Spurred by a cost-benefit analysis conducted by then General Manager Glen P. Brock, GM&O aimed at an ambitious goal of completely dieselizing by 1950. GM&O beat that by a year, when Mikado 404 tied up on an October 1949 day at Columbus, Miss.

GM&O's diesel fleet was almost all Alco. A 6-cylinder 539 engine powered each of the three ACF-built *Rebels*, and their silver-and-crimson colors were applied to GM&O's first diesels: the 3 DLs; 4 S1's of 1940; and 12 S2's of '41-46. The breakthrough for dieselization, in '46, was Alco's first fleet of 1500 h.p. freighters (55 cabs and 31 boosters) that came to be known as "FA's" and "FB's."

Tigrett didn't stop at St. Louis. He had his eye on Chicago, and a golden opportunity for further expansion came in 1943 when the bankrupt Alton Railroad was offered for sale by owner Baltimore & Ohio. The Alton, which B&O had renamed from "Chicago & Alton" in 1931, two years after it purchased the road, had two routes out of St. Louis. The main line, which dated from the 1847 Alton & Sangamon, went to Chicago; the other went to Kansas City.

By buying the Alton, Tigrett's goal of creating a Gulf-to-Great Lakes railroad would be realized; Kansas City was almost an afterthought. B&O's goal with the Alton had been to break the invisible east-west Mississippi River wall as only the Wabash otherwise did, but this was ultimately thwarted by other big Eastern roads, so with little freight traffic on the Alton, B&O sold it. GM&O's directors agreed with Tigrett's plan in early 1945. After some delay by the Interstate Commerce Commission, GM&O and Alton were united on May 31, 1947.

The merged carrier kept the name Gulf, Mobile & Ohio, but Tigrett was savvy enough to submerge "The Rebel Route" slogan and adopt "The Alton



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This map from GM&O's August 13, 1945, timetable has been colorized to differentiate the lines of M&O (black), GM&N (blue), and Alton (red).



J. PARKER LAMB

**Stalwarts of GM&O's "south end," an FA1-FB1 duo departs Meridian, Miss., in August 1950. Note the rain runoff trough above the cab steps and the lowered headlight, found on early FA's.**

Route," since the Alton was the premier passenger carrier on the fast, competitive Chicago-St. Louis corridor. GM&O also deferred to the Alton's colors, giving up the silver-and-crimson for Alton's red and maroon with gold trim, in which even the pre-merger FA's were delivered.

The amalgamation transformed a profitable little Class 1 serving a Deep South region with an agriculture-based economy into a 2900-mile trunk line serving Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City. But in many ways GM&O continued to be "two railroads in one." The northern region and southern region (or "north end" and "south end") were different in character, as was their motive

**Representing "south end" steam: USRA 4-6-2 567, ex-M&O 268, at Trendley Avenue station, East St. Louis, Ill., and ex-GM&N 1926 Baldwin 2-10-0 262, at Jackson, Miss., in October 1944.**

power, well into the 1960's. In the South, Alcos reigned supreme, but in the North, there was a mix. While the Alton had acquired 10 S2's and 10 RS1's right after the war for yard jobs and locals, EMD's ruled the road. Alton had inherited two EMC passenger units from B&O, a box-cab and a streamlined EA, and also got seven of the earliest E7's. Orders for F3's (by the Alton, delivered as GM&O) and F7's followed. The fleet totaled 28 F3's and 14 F7's, with 12 F3's (9 cabs, 3 boosters) having steam boilers and being utilized in both passenger and freight duty.

With 34 RS1's, 14 RS2's, and 9 RS3's for local freights, GM&O never owned a Geep until the second generation. As the 1950's waned, broken crankshafts, especially on the FA's, kept workers busy at Iselin Shops in Jackson, Tenn., but officials received no such complaints about the F's from the former Alton shops at Bloomington, Ill. EMD was offering attractive trade-in terms on its new GP30, so GM&O struck a deal that would, during 1962-65, see all Alco road units (plus the lone Ingalls road-switcher and

GM&O's only Baldwins, a pair of passenger cabs) go in trade for 31 GP30's and 48 GP35's, which rode on the FA's trucks and kept their Westinghouse traction motors. EMD designed the Geeps' black-and-white livery, as well as the subsequent red-and-white schemes on follow-up SD40's and GP38's.

My first memories of the GM&O are from this period, when family trips from Memphis to visit relatives in Mississippi put me "on-line." To a young fan, GM&O seemed a lot like a family business. The friendly station agent in Walnut Grove, Miss., was always willing to share information about the next train, and if one was due, we'd go out to the Highway 35 grade crossing near my uncle's farm and wait. I can still see those FA's roaring past!

In summer 1964, when I was 12, I flew over to Starkville, Miss., on a Southern Airlines DC3 to visit some cousins. One day as my aunt drove us around town, we spotted the Starkville branch job switching. It was an Alco, probably an RS1, freshly painted bright red. When the crew saw several excited kids standing there watching them work, they invited me and two of my cousins up into the cab. The Starkville branch was abandoned a year or two later.

Other trips took us to reunions at a lake resort near Louisville (say it Lewisville) in the late 1960's. By 1968 I was old enough to drive, so when things got dull I'd borrow car keys and drive to the GM&O yard in town to watch trains. I'd always find an Alco working the yard's south end, and when the crew would spot this 16-year-old shooting pictures with an Instamatic, they'd invite me into the cab of their S2 or RS1.

In the South, the GM&O main lines navigated a hilly profile and were unsig-



R. J. FOSTER



STEVEN P. DAVIDSON



R. J. FOSTER

To familiarize Midwesterners with its name, GM&O kept Alton's colors and "the Alton Route" slogan, seen on freshly repainted Alton 4-6-2 5296 in October 1948, and on year-old F3 885A leaving Chicago the previous July with the *Ann Rutledge*.

naled. Although well-maintained, the track didn't really appear to be that of a Class 1. The rail was not heavy, and the roadbed wasn't immaculately groomed or heavily ballasted. Conversely, the former Alton Chicago-St. Louis main, being a high-speed passenger railroad, had block signals—distinctive B&O-style color position lights, only now finally being replaced. Quietly progressive, GM&O in the '60's installed CTC signaling on the Alton and single-tracked it.

I once heard the GM&O favorably described as a "3000-mile short line," which the Southern Region surely



ROBERT H. MILNER

seemed to be. Despite appearances to the contrary, GM&O was a profitable company, thanks to conservative management and strict attention to customer service.

Even as GM&O modernized, Brock, elevated to president in May 1957, eventually saw in its bigger, parallel competitor Illinois Central the familiar parallel-merger "writing on the wall." So, in the mid-'60's, Brock began the discussion process that would, two and a half decades after the Alton acquisition, result in the next merger, IC taking over GM&O. This occurred in August 1972, with IC adding Gulf to its name.

Much of the original GM&O is gone, though not the Alton. Short lines and Kansas City Southern operate some segments in the South, and KCS also has the St. Louis-K.C. line. Most of Chicago-St. Louis belongs to Union Pacific and is being upgraded into a higher-speed passenger route for improved Amtrak service (Chicago-Joliet stayed with IC, now Canadian National). Difficult as it may be to comprehend, GM&O now has been extinct just about the same length of time that it existed and carved a lasting niche in our memory. ■

## GM&O fact file

(comparative figures are for 1940 and 1971)

**Route-miles:** 2007; 2734

**Locomotives:** 174; 258

**Passenger cars:** 62; 92

**Freight cars:** 4945; 12,699

**Headquarters city:** Mobile, Ala.

**Notable postwar passenger trains:** *Abraham Lincoln*, *Alton Limited*, *Ann Rutledge*, *Gulf Coast Rebel*, *Midnight Special*

**Special interest group:** Gulf, Mobile & Ohio Historical Society, P.O. Box 1085, Clinton, MS 39060; [www.gmohs.org](http://www.gmohs.org)

**Recommended reading:** *Gulf, Mobile & Ohio*, by James H. Lemly (Richard D. Irwin, 1953); *Gulf, Mobile & Ohio Color Pictorial*, by R.R. Wallin (Four Ways West, 1996); *Chicago & Alton Railroad*, by Gene V. Glendinning (Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 2002)

**Source:** *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999).