

## II Frisco: a survivor and innovator

**H**AD THE FRISCO SURVIVED the merger fever of the 1980's, it would be celebrating its 125th birthday this year. It was a survivor, having gone through some very rough times, including at least five bankruptcies. It was an innovator. It started running unit coal trains from Fort Smith, Ark., the city across the Arkansas River from my hometown of Van Buren, in the 1930's, before my time. It helped move Texas and Oklahoma oil east during World War II. It was among the first big railroads to dieselize, in 1952. It was one of the first to be in a coast-to-coast run-through freight-train operation, with Santa Fe and Seaboard Coast Line. It ordered some of the first pioneering U25B diesels from General Electric. It developed the tri-level auto-rack, which, along with bi-levels on Eastern roads, helped recapture some of the nation's automobile traffic from the truckers. It was the first large road to consolidate its train dispatching into a central office, in Springfield, Mo.

The Frisco was a great system, and I am a Frisco fanatic and proud of it. Until I completed graduate school, I lived no farther than five or six blocks from Frisco tracks. My only memories of Class 1 steam are visions of Frisco engines on the front of passenger trains seen from a coach window as we rounded curves. During my freshman year at the University of Arkansas in Fayette-

The *Will Rogers'* handsome 4-8-2 1518 slows to 40 mph to grab mail at Spencer, Okla., in 1948.

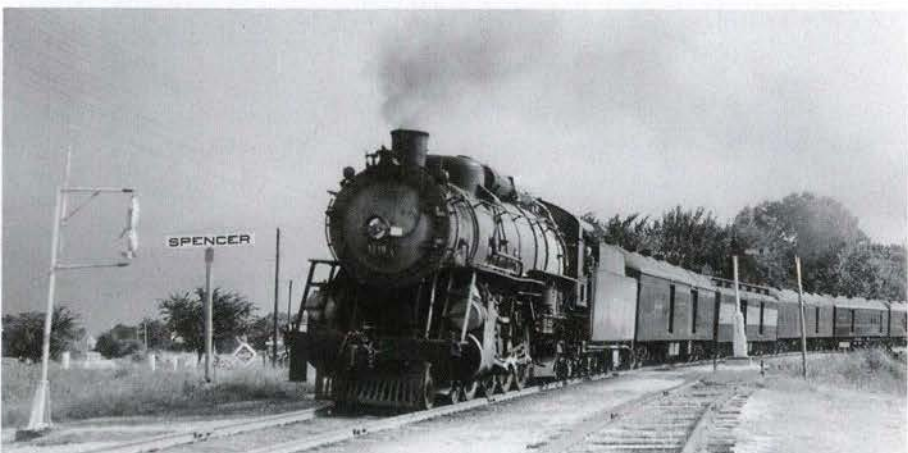
ville, I met the passenger train—the *Me-teor's* Fort Smith section—every night. As soon as the train stopped, I was on the engine talking to the crew. Those friendships lasted many years; they led to exciting times riding the cabs of passenger, freight, or lowly switch engines.

Frisco traces its ancestry to other routes which would become keystones of two much bigger lines: Santa Fe and Missouri Pacific. Frisco's humble beginning was as the Southwest Branch of the Pacific Railroad, leaving the main line at Franklin, Mo. (now Pacific), west of St. Louis. Through the Civil War, Rolla, Mo., served as a supply depot and base for Union troops. Wartime damage led to the first bankruptcy, and sale by the state of Missouri of both the Pacific Railroad (later Missouri

Pacific) and its Southwest Branch. Under ownership of John C. Fremont, the latter became the Southwest Pacific Railroad. Tracks were extended through Springfield 48 miles to Pierce City, Mo. Bankrupt again, both the Pacific Railroad and the Southwest Pacific Railroad (by then the South Pacific) were sold to the Atlantic & Pacific Railway.

When the A&P went bankrupt, the Missouri Pacific Railroad and the Saint Louis & San Francisco Railway were formed. The latter would use "SLSF" as its initials and reporting marks until the end, but everyone quickly called it by the nickname of the big California city. SLSF used Missouri Pacific tracks into St. Louis until completing its own.

In the 1870's and 1880's, Frisco be-



PRESTON GEORGE

By Mike Condren



STAN MCCARTHY; D. INGLES COLLECTION

Although its "coonskin" emblem is bedraggled, E7 2003, complete with E8 grilles and a horse name (*Steel Dust*), shows off Frisco's red-and-gold image.

gan to increase its mileage dramatically. It built tracks south from Monett, Mo., through Fort Smith to Paris, Texas; west from Pierce City to Tulsa, Okla., and also to Wichita and Ellsworth, Kans. It extended southwest from Tulsa to Oklahoma City, Okla., and on to Quanah, Texas. A line from Sapulpa, Okla., went south to Dallas and Fort Worth. For several years, beginning in 1879, Frisco was under control of the Santa Fe, which during this time completed its line to California using land grants that had been issued to Atlantic & Pacific for the Frisco's line to San Francisco.

Under the leadership of General B. F. Yoakum as general manager, president, and chairman of the board, Frisco became a system serving the Southeast as well as the near Southwest. It reached to Kansas City, Memphis, and Birmingham, Ala., through the lease of the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis, whose tracks the Frisco crossed in Springfield, Mo. Frisco built a line from Amory, Miss., south to Pensacola, Fla., on the Gulf of Mexico, and later acquired the Alabama, Tennessee & Northern, giving it access to Mobile.

The Frisco was a family type operation whose employees took great pride in their railroad. They put its famous "coonskin" logo on structures as well as rolling stock. Legend has it that the emblem originated from an official discovering a raccoon hide drying on the side of the station at Neosho, Mo. Employee pride was also evident in the care given



MIKE CONDREN

A classic mix of Frisco cabs, led by re-engined Alco FA 5202 with F3's, an F9B, and an F7A trailing, cruise into Dixon, Mo., on January 1, 1967.

to locomotives, diesel as well as steam.

The Frisco, in my opinion, had some of the most handsome steam locomotives ever built, sporting clean lines and visored headlights hung from smokebox fronts. Many passenger engines, ranging from modern 4-4-0's to upgraded heavy 4-8-2's, had gold lettering and gold striping. Freight 4-8-4's were delivered with "fireball"-style "Frisco Faster Freight" lettering on their tenders.

Management was conservative, not wasting money on fancy appliances for its locomotives. Near the end of the Depression, Frisco began experimenting with rebuilding old locomotives into more modern machines. Seven 2-8-2's were rebuilt from 2-8-0's, 10 4-6-4's from 4-6-2's, and 34 fast 4-8-2's from 2-10-2's, arguably the most dramatic transformations. The 4-8-2's received new cast steel beds and cylinders, keeping their huge boilers, and the first 22 received Scullin disc drivers from on-line Scullin Steel in St. Louis. Frisco's last steam, in the 1940's, was 25 4-8-4's from Baldwin.

Frisco also did some serious experimenting with streamlining, on Pacifics, Hudsons, and Mountains. The most radical was on three 4-6-2's for the *Firefly*, a Kansas City-Oklahoma City train. Heavyweight cars got some streamlining to match the locomotives.

To me, the most beautiful Frisco engines were the 1500-class 4-8-2's delivered in the 1920's, several of which are preserved. One, of course, St. Louis-based 1522, graces us today as the only operational 4-8-2 in the U.S.

Frisco ran passenger trains to the Southeast such as the *Kansas City-Florida Special* and the *Sunnyland*, and others with great regional names including the *Black Gold*, *Oklahoman*, and *Will Rogers*. But its top name trains were the St. Louis-Oklahoma City *Meteor* and the *Texas Special*, run jointly with Katy from St. Louis to San Antonio via Vinita, Okla. The 1942 *Meteor* was assigned three 4-8-4's lettered for the train and painted blue-and-white like the cars.

After World War II, Frisco ordered 38 streamlined cars from Pullman-Standard to re-equip the *Texas Special* and *Meteor*. The only lightweights in the road's history, they had stainless-steel fluting, bright red roofs and window areas, and maroon skirts. Each carrier supplied one complete train for the overnight *Texas Special*, and Frisco owned two trainsets for the *Meteor*; extra cars were used on the *KC-Florida Special*. Both the *Texas Special* and *Meteor* for a time had through sleepers to cities beyond St. Louis, and *Meteor* cars served Fort Smith; Lawton, Okla.; and Joplin,

SD45 911, one of just four modern Frisco units (three other '45's and a GP38) with a "coonskin" on the nose, bisects Rolla, Mo., in May 1970.



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Mo. The *Meteor* and all but two other runs came off September 17, 1965, and discontinuance of the K.C.-Birmingham *Southland* in December 1967 made the 4565-mile Frisco the largest freight-only U.S. railroad at the time.

Frisco took great pride in its diesels. In my youth, our local roundhouse at Fort Smith was home base for 40 or so GP7's, a half dozen Baldwin VO switchers, and the 8 44-tonners, and they were kept as the shiniest black diesels you'd ever see. Early switchers, like those three 4-8-4's, were dark blue with a white stripe, but when road diesels came, the switcher fleet went all-black.



J. DAVID INGLES COLLECTION

Immaculate GP7 542 was one of the dozens kept spiffy by the roundhouse forces at Fort Smith, Ark.

Frisco and Katy each bought two E7's for the *Texas Special*, and Frisco bought four more for the *Meteor*, then added 17 E8's to replace steam. In the beginning, the E7's had stainless-steel fluting to match the cars. Later, all 23 Frisco E units were named after famous horses and painted red and gold. The names began to disappear in the early '60's as a simplified red-and-yellow was applied, and in the last days of passenger service, three E8's were repainted into the bright Mandarin orange and white introduced on freight units in 1965 for better visibility.

The road freight diesel fleet included EMD F's and Alco FA's (about half later re-engined with EMD 567's) wearing an attractive black and yellow. Frisco ads in the *Official Guide* for freight featured artwork of four F3-powered trains lined up. Road-switchers, mainly 128 GP7's, were solid black with yellow end stripes. There were also 11 RS1's, owned by AT&N, plus 5 RS2's, which were re-engined with derated 567C's.

The first order of GP35's and the first two orders of U25B's (one with high short hoods, one with low) were black,

but the next orders came in orange and white. Frisco took 33 GP35's and 32 U25B's, then went for 49 SD45's before returning to four-motor GE's, amassing 71 in three models, including the first and last production U25B's plus four demonstrators, the last U30B, and the first B30-7. Its GP7's were replaced by 146 GP38's and GP38-2's; meantime, 46 SW1500's and 5 MP15's replaced the yard-goat fleet of Alcos, Baldwins, and Fairbanks-Morse H10-44's.

Among the last groups of Frisco road diesels were 25 GP15-1's in 1977, 8 SD40-2's the next year, and 25 GP40-2's (plus 4 hump-yard SD38-2's) in 1979. Frisco contributed 430 diesels to Burlington Northern in the November 21, 1980, acquisition. As a nod to the past, BN allowed the first of 10 GP50's Frisco had ordered just before the merger to be delivered in full Frisco colors, but with the BN number 3100.

Although gone for two decades, Frisco remains alive in the hearts of its admirers through the Frisco Museum in Springfield, Mo.; three operating steam engines; dedicated e-mail list-servers; and miniature railroads in our homes. Yes, the Frisco was a great railroad. ■

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## Frisco fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1979)

**Route-miles:** 5735; 4653

**Locomotives:** 880; 431

**Passenger cars:** 669; 0

**Freight cars:** 34,009; 17,392

**Headquarters city:** St. Louis, Mo.

**Special interest group:** Frisco Modelers Information Group, c/o Charles Dischinger, 2541 W. Allen Dr., Springfield, MO 65807; Frisco Railroad Museum, 543 E. Commercial St., Springfield, MO 65803; Frisco information website: [www.Frisco.org](http://www.Frisco.org)

**Notable postwar passenger trains:** *Kansas City-Florida Special; Meteor; Texas Special*

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