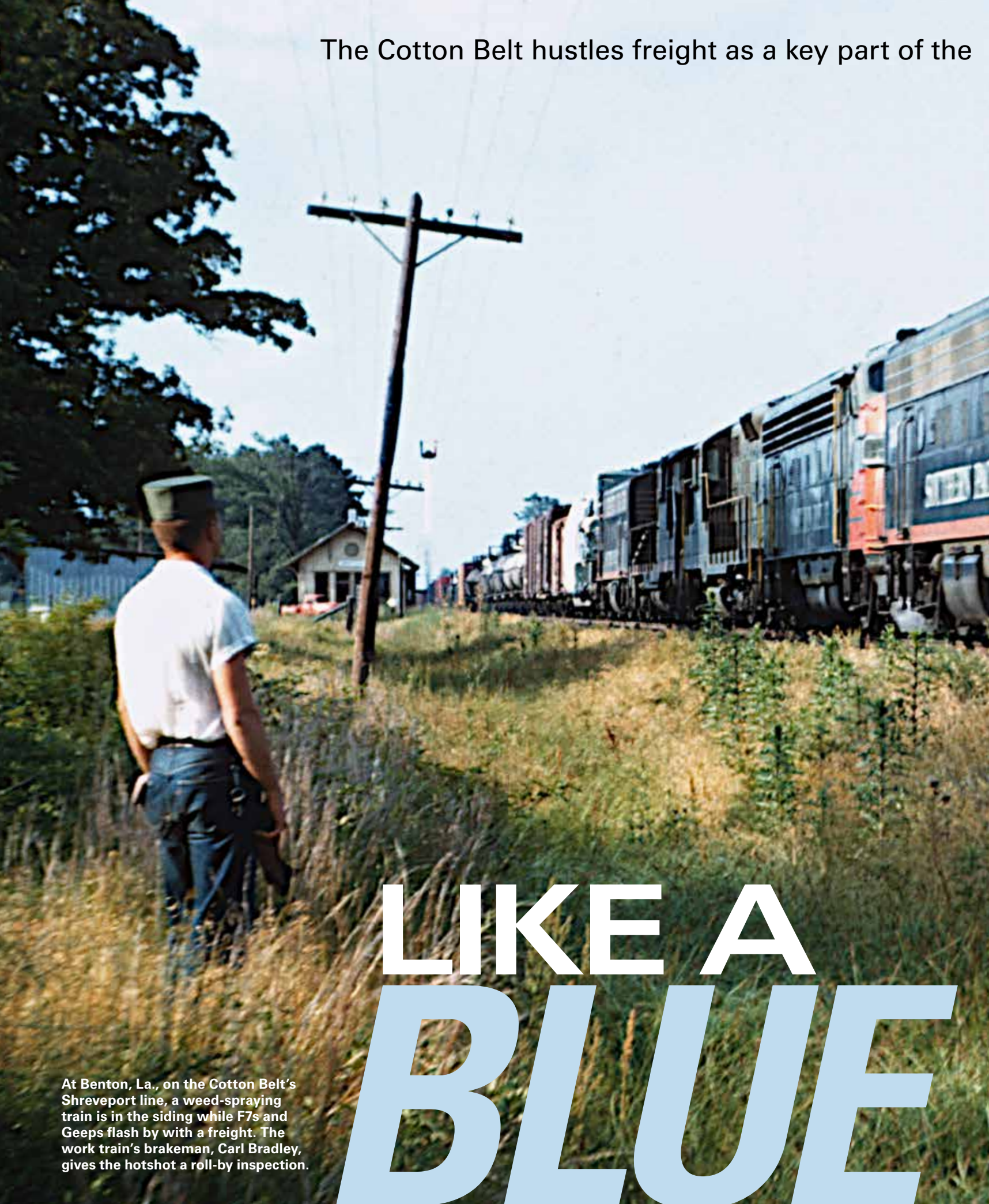
The Cotton Belt hustles freight as a key part of the

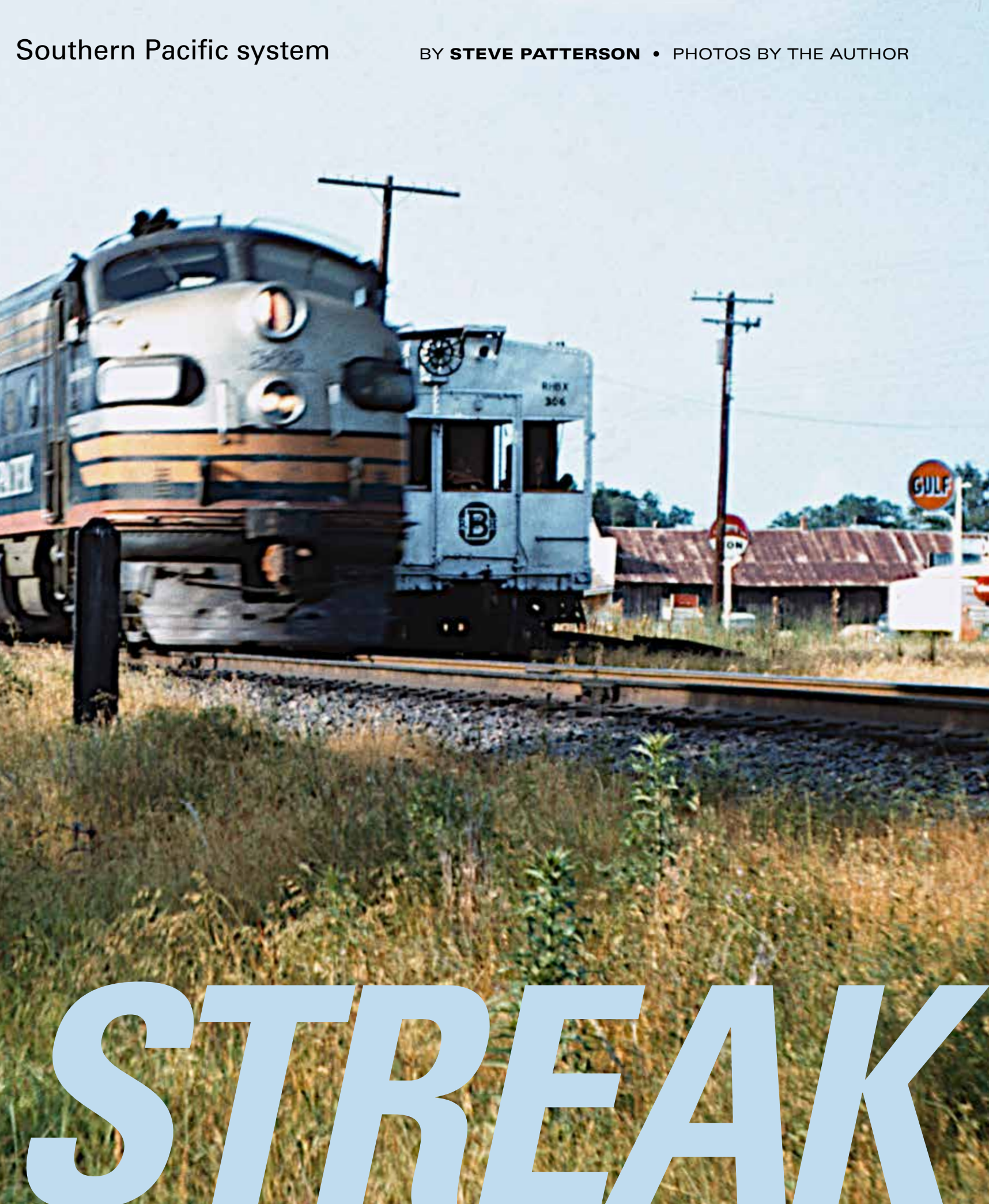
LIKE A BLUE



At Benton, La., on the Cotton Belt's Shreveport line, a weed-spraying train is in the siding while F7s and Geeps flash by with a freight. The work train's brakeman, Carl Bradley, gives the hotshot a roll-by inspection.

Southern Pacific system

BY **STEVE PATTERSON** • PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR



STREAK

"Hot rail!" someone shouts, and the crew of a work extra in a siding divides to take up inspecting positions on each side of the high iron as a Cotton Belt freight streaks by.

One way to be a money-making railroad today is to be a bridge line, and in the Southwest the 1,554-mile St. Louis Southwestern (a.k.a. "Cotton Belt") — from East St. Louis to Fort Worth, Dallas, and other Texas interchange points — is just such a road. Bridge lines are fortunate in not having to maintain large yards to break up and classify all trains; they can just haul them straight through as-is. They aren't plagued with the costs and delays of terminal switching. Bridge lines mean speed and tonnage; together the two mean efficiency. Both require good track, and good bridge lines usually have it.

Of the 105 Class I U.S. railroads in 1960, the energetic Cotton Belt ranked 17th in percentage of train-hours spent for switching, 16th in gross tons handled per freight train-hour, 13th in train-miles accumulated per day per mile of road, 7th in train-miles covered per train-hour, 6th in rate of return earned on average net investment, 6th in freight revenue received per ton carried (indicating the high-paying commodities hauled), and 3rd in car-miles amassed per day from serviceable cars on line.

The five railroads ahead of Cotton Belt in revenue per ton (Union Pacific, Santa Fe, Western Pacific, Southern Pacific, and Northern Pacific) are also the only ones with longer average hauls than SSW's 391 miles.

The two roads deriving more mileage from cars on line were little Kansas, Oklahoma & Gulf and Lehigh & Hudson River. KO&G rivals Missouri-Kansas-Texas and Frisco for traffic between Kansas City and Dallas-Fort Worth, and had an average car mileage of 210 for only a 327-mile railroad. The L&HR, only a 96-mile line, had per day average car mileage of 114.7 by utilizing trackage rights over Jersey Central from Allentown, Pa., to Phillipsburg, N.J., and over the Pennsylvania from Phillipsburg to reach its own track at Belvidere, N.J. At the other end — Maybrook, N.Y. — it interchanges to the New York Central and New Haven.

The Clinchfield, a principal link between the southeast Atlantic seaboard and the Great Lakes area and renowned for its superb track, was just a few steps ahead of Cotton Belt in gross tons handled per freight train-hour and return on investment.

In 1961 Cotton Belt stood 32nd in total operating revenues and 14th in the lowest operating ratios (SSW had a pleasant 62.7, well below the nation's average of 79.2).

NARROW-GAUGE ROOTS

The Cotton Belt had its beginning in 1871 when the citizens of Tyler, Texas, wanted a railroad to ship out their cotton and to tap the outside world of commerce. Thus was born the Tyler Tap Railroad. Meager capital limited the gauge to 3 feet. By 1877, trains were operating between Tyler and a Texas & Pa-

The first run of the Cotton Belt's famous *Blue Streak Merchandise* poses for a photo west of Mt. Pleasant, Texas, on October 1, 1931.
Harold K. Vollrath collection

Cotton Belt 819, destined to become the only survivor of the road's 20 4-8-4s, brings the first section of fast freight 119 through Texarkana in 1951.
R. S. Plummer

cific connection at Big Sandy. Later the company was reorganized into the Texas & St. Louis Railway. President J. P. Douglas went to St. Louis in an attempt to interest financiers in his railroad; the businessmen were indeed interested in getting Texas cotton to St. Louis.

They planned to have the T&StL connect at Texarkana with the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern (a Missouri Pacific predecessor) and to extend lines southwest to Waco.

In 1881 Jay Gould purchased the Iron Mountain and canceled the proposed agreement to handle T&StL cotton to St. Louis. This was an effort to get the narrow-gaugers to sell him their Texas properties. Not only did the T&StL refuse his proposal to sell out or to wither on the vine, but it launched plans to build its own tracks toward St. Louis.

On August 12, 1883, President J. W. Paramore drove a silver spike on a bridge over the Arkansas River near the small town of Rob Roy, Ark. This officially opened the T&StL's narrow-gauge line from Birds Point, Mo., on the Mississippi River to Gatesville, Texas.

One of the features of the Cotton Belt through Arkansas was the number and length of bridges required. The area between the White and Arkansas rivers was very swampy and sometimes trestles were built 40 feet above the water. In some sections pilings had to be sunk 70 feet below water level to reach a good foundation. More than 2,000 feet of spans and some 6.5 miles of trestle approaches were built to cross five rivers.

The T&StL built as far from the Iron Mountain as possible so as to develop a new trade territory. Advertisements boasted that the "Cotton Belt Route" had no branches, thus preventing cars from "getting astray." Connection with other railroads were facilitated by changing the cars from narrow-gauge trucks to standard-gauge ones. For 17 years T&StL traffic was ferried across the Mississippi and interchanged with the Illinois Central, Big Four, and Mobile & Ohio. But flooding or low water made the owners start looking for a better place to cross.

Not quite five months after the driving of the silver spike, lack of adequate equipment to handle increasing traffic and the damage resulting from floods forced the Texas & St. Louis into receivership. In 1886 the properties were sold and reorganized as the St. Louis, Arkansas & Texas.

Samuel Fordyce, now StLA&T president, decided the road should be converted to standard gauge and that feeder branches be built. On October 18, 1886, all traffic was stopped and the line from Birds Point to Texarkana — 419 miles — was converted from narrow to standard gauge in 24 hours.

Soon afterwards a program of laying 56-pound rail was started. More than $3 million worth was purchased and soon Fordyce realized that earnings would not pay for the debt. He was forced to sell treasury stock and income bonds, and Gould soon held controlling interest in his competitor. But the new capital failed to avert a second receivership.

Fordyce again became receiver, although by this time he wanted to return to private business. But new owner Gould asked Fordyce to stay on, and he did. In 1891, the properties were reorganized into the St. Louis Southwestern Railway.

Local railroaders and crewmen from a weed-spraying train salute a westbound freight at Grapevine, 10 miles west of Carrollton, Texas. The first two units are FTs, soon to be retired.

Three new Alco RSD15s and an F7B glide down the ladder track at North Tyler Yard with a 75-car *Motor Special* in June 1962.

With the new prosperity a line was built from Delta, Mo., to Grays Point on the Mississippi. Ferry service started there in 1900 to connect with IC and Chicago & Eastern Illinois. Soon Chicago-to-Texas passenger trains were using this route and the Birds Point operations ceased in 1908.

Since 1892 Cotton Belt freight and passenger cars had been hauled by Missouri Pacific into Memphis from Fair Oaks, Ark. In 1921, an agreement was reached with the Rock Island whereby Cotton Belt could operate its own trains with its own crews from Brinkley to one of the world's largest cotton markets — Memphis — over RI's tracks.

In 1898 Edwin Gould (second son of Jay) succeeded Fordyce as president. A few years later MP began handling SSW trains from Delta through Bismarck to St. Louis, and MP started using Cotton Belt's tracks from Dexter, Mo., to Grays Point and ferry facilities to reach its Illinois Division at Thebes. Six years later Cotton Belt was granted trackage rights on MP's line to East St. Louis and the movements through Bismarck were discontinued. On April 18, 1905, a new double-track bridge across the Mississippi was opened at Thebes. Considered an engineering marvel, the massive cantilever span is operated by the Southern Illinois & Missouri Bridge Co., owned 60 percent by MP and 40 percent by SSW.

Also during Gould's 14-year presidency, the Cotton Belt's gross earnings more than doubled, mainline grades were reduced, and 75-pound rails were laid from Grays Point to Fort Worth. In 1925 Edwin Gould sold his control of the Cotton Belt to the Rock Island, ending 68 years of Gould-family control of at least one railroad. Later in the same year Kansas City Southern acquired the SSW control held by Rock Island, then sold it to New York investors just before the onset of the Great Depression.

Train 243, the East St. Louis–Houston *Shreveport Streak,* is about to crest the hill at McNeil, Ark., in June 1961. The consist includes 19 loads of '62 Chevys.

SOUTHERN PACIFIC GAINS CONTROL

Ever since 1919 Southern Pacific had realized the importance of its connection with SSW. During the Depression SP made application to acquire control of the Cotton Belt, and the Interstate Commerce Commission approved this in February 1932.

By 1935 the Depression was carving its ugly mark on many railroads, including the Cotton Belt. For 10 years SSW was in court hearings trying to present a plan of reorgani-

Two GP20s and an RSD15 head up a freight at Mt. Pleasant, Texas, a major junction.

zation. Then World War II increased profits so much that the company and its new owner decided to drop bankruptcy proceedings. The trusteeship was abolished in 1947.

SP couldn't have made a wiser move. It holds 95.7 percent of Cotton Belt's stock now, and in essence the SSW is the east end of the SP for transcontinental shipments through the St. Louis and Memphis gateways. Solid trains are exchanged with the proud parent at Corsicana. The *CBX* (*Colton Block Expedited*), the *Colton Block*, the *RGV* (*Rio Grande Valley*), the *SSE*, and the *Merchandise* are examples of the northward hotshots. Speeding south are the *BSM* (*Blue Streak Merchandise*), the *ABSM* (*Advance Blue Streak Merchandise*, formerly the *Advance Motor Special*), the *SSW*, and the *MS* (*Motor Special*). They whisk by 60-mph speed boards, frequently exceeding that.

Recently dispatchers began to suffix an *X* to the initials, which authorizes trains so designated to run at 70 mph where conditions allow between Illmo and Corsicana.

Cotton Belt inaugurated the *Blue Streak Merchandise* between St. Louis and Pine Bluff in 1931. Today the *BSM* (often tagged *BSMX*) covers the 763 miles from East St. Louis to Corsicana in 14½ hours. It's the fastest on the system. Thirty-six hours later SP will have it in Los Angeles. The *ABSM* and *CBX* make the run in 15½ hours, while reefer blocks from Colton, Calif., and the Imperial and Rio Grande valleys are given about 18 hours.

These racers are powered with EMD GP20s or a combination of them and six-motor Alco RSD15s. They replace sets of FTs, and work in multiple with SP RSD15s while racing over the relatively flat Southwest. Cotton Belt has just completed a program of trading in the old FTs for the new engines. SP low-nose road-switchers and 300- and 400-series cab units run through to East St. Louis if they aren't turned at Pine Bluff, and SSW's 800- and 900-series diesels are usually turned at either San Antonio or El Paso.

Protecting the rear of these hotshots are the best in conductor offices. Beginning in February 1959, Cotton Belt received the first batch of 25 new steel cabooses with extended-vision cupolas with window wipers, extended cushion underframe, electric lights powered by a belt-driven generator and supplemented with batteries, refrigerator, oil-fired stove, radio, roof-mounted electric marker lights, roomy lockers and washroom, and low-level slip-proof steps. All this glides on roller-bearing trucks.

Cotton Belt and Missouri Pacific still share many miles of trackage rights. After leaving Valley Junction (SSW) and Dupo (MP) near East St. Louis, trains of both companies use the same tracks to as far as Dexter Junction, Mo., 50 miles west of the Mississippi. The Thebes Bridge marks the division of track ownership; everything north of it is MP and everything south of Illmo is SSW. The 3.4 miles from the Illinois end of the bridge to Illmo belong to the SI&MB Co.

Also using the bridge are C&EI and Missouri-Illinois. C&EI's nightly local interchanges with MP at Thebes, then crosses the bridge to tap SSW at Illmo and the Frisco at nearby Chaffee, making about 10 miles of C&EI trackage rights. Since discontinuance of its ferry facilities at Ste. Genevieve, Missouri-Illinois operates its trains down parent MP to the bridge, then back up the Frisco on the west riverbank to rejoin its other half.

SSW VS. MP

As in Paramore and Fordyce's day, the Missouri Pacific is an established competitor. Southwestward from the St. Louis gateway Cotton Belt brings around 600 carloads per day and MoPac averages about 800 a day. In 1960, 28 percent of this MP traffic split from the SSW-MP thoroughfare at Dexter Junction to join at Poplar Bluff MP's main passenger line from St. Louis to Texas. The tracks meet again at Texarkana. The other 72 percent of MoPac traffic continued on SSW trackage to JN Junction, 16 miles south of Paragould, Ark. There it left the heavy-traffic line on MP's own tracks to Monroe and Alexandria, La., and Houston.

On March 20, 1961, MoPac opened its new electronic hump yard at North Little Rock. Then on May 4, 1962, the road ceased routing its freights beyond Dexter Junction and began directing all of them through Poplar Bluff and the new yard. Now only triweekly local service is maintained by MP through Paragould, a northeast Arkansas town named after two early Cotton Belt presidents.

MoPac operates four northbound and four southbound Red Ball freights daily between Dupo and Texas through Thebes, Dexter Junction, Poplar Bluff, Little Rock, and Texarkana. Southward are Nos. 61, 63, 65, and 67; northward are Nos. 60, 62, 64, and 66. MoPac has the shorter route between East St. Louis and Texarkana, and it gets No. 60 over the 532 miles in 15 hours. Cotton Belt's *CBX* (often combined with the *Merchandise* north of Pine Bluff) can make the 561-mile dash in about 13 hours. Southward, MP's Red Ball No. 67 makes it in 15¾ hours; SSW's *BSM* does it in 12.

Southbound, SSW No. 243, the *Shreveport Streak,* travels the 815-mile East St. Louis–Houston route through Shreveport via SSW and SP in 30 hours. Northbound 216 makes the distance in 33½ hours. Red Ball freights daily between Dupo and Houston via the 897-mile Dexter Junction–Little Rock–McGehee–Kinder route are No. 81 down and No. 80 returning. No. 81 makes the trip in 37 hours; No. 80 requires 37½.

On a sample day in early 1962 between 8 p.m. and 1:30 a.m., five MoPac freights passed through Illmo — two north and three south. Cotton Belt had three southbound. Averaged, MP trains had 42 loads and 40 empties each and Cotton Belt trains had 67 loads and 10 empties per train. Trains on SSW seldom exceed 90 cars.

Cotton Belt shares considerably in the movement of automobile parts for assembly plants in Texas and California. Most trains have flats carrying products of Detroit on three decks (particularly No. 243), plus auto carriers on piggyback flatcars. Fourteen loading-unloading ramps are located on-line and SSW especially participates in piggyback with subsidiary Southwestern Transportation Co., which provides free pickup and delivery service.

Most southwest coastbound traffic from the East through St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans arrives in California over the Southern Pacific. St. Louis gateway traffic may be delivered to SP at Shreveport or Corsicana by Cotton Belt, or at El Paso by the MP-T&P alliance. Memphis gateway traffic may also be picked up at those points, or at Tucumcari, N.Mex., from the Rock Island. And of course SP reaches New Orleans itself.

Leaving Chicago's Burr Oak Yard at 11 a.m. daily is Rock Island's *GSX* — the *Gold Streak Express*. It arrives Tucumcari at 2:45 p.m. the second day, and SP screeches it to a halt in Los Angeles at 6 p.m. the third day. Eastward is No. 92-98. SP wheels it out of L.A. at 10 o'clock nightly, and arrival is made in Chicago just after midnight the fourth night. In each direction setouts and pickups are made at Kansas City.

This leaves Santa Fe as SP's principal competitor since Santa Fe hauls its southwest tonnage into California itself and SP gets no cut as it does of everything else west of El Paso. The big headache for SP brass is LA-53, which Santa Fe releases out of Chicago at 10 each morning, one hour before the *GSX*. Sixty-one hours later LA-53 is in Los Angeles.

BRANCH LINES

As Samuel Fordyce wanted, Cotton Belt has a number of contributing branches. In 1960 they were most responsible for the 35.1 percent of total tons carried as originated on-line. This would seem to indicate that 64.9 percent of SSW's traffic is through tonnage, but the road declines to confirm that figure and quotes "50 percent" as being closer to the actual amount of bridge traffic. For the same year, freight revenue accounted for 98.7 percent of total income. Peak seasons of traffic are fall and early spring when more movements are made northbound than southbound.

F7 631, wearing an experimental orange-and-black SP livery, is at the head of a northbound freight getting ready to depart Camden, Ark., in June 1962. On the next track, one of SSW's new cabooses brings up the rear of the hot *Blue Streak Merchandise*.

Two branches extend from Malden to serve communities, granaries, and fertilizer plants of Missouri's Bootheel country. One is the old SSW main to Birds Point, built through swamps in 1878. The track now ends at Wyatt, 6 miles from the point. At Lilbourn a 5-mile line separates to serve New Madrid, also on the banks of the Mississippi. From Lilbourn to Wyatt is the longest straight stretch on the system, 30.6 miles.

The other branch from Malden drops down to Trumann, Ark., a point on the Frisco's main where U25Bs zip over the diamond. A segment from this branch reaches the Mississippi at Caruthersville, Mo., by wading through many geese-filled cotton fields. In Midwestern cotton fields geese are fenced in since it is said they keep the vegetation, except for the cotton, under control. Also on this segment can be found opposite-joint track like that used in Great Britain. This is to keep the local's cars from rocking vigorously on the little-traveled track.

At Paragould a branch joins the main from the fast-growing Air Force base town of Blytheville, and it bisects the Malden–Trumann line at Hornersville. Cotton Belt and Frisco tracks form a criss-crossing pattern in this productive Mississippi alluvial valley, crossing each other at a dozen different locations. The valley is so rich that the SSW leases land on its branch rights of way to farmers. Soybeans and other crops can be found growing within 3 or 4 feet of the tie ends.

The daily-except-Sunday locals on these branches are coaxed along by 1942-vintage 1,000 h.p. Baldwin switchers, the first diesels to appear on the Cotton Belt. Bringing up the rear are large side-door cabooses complete with spacious cupolas. They are left over from mixed-train service, which ended in 1958, and are used today for handling less-than-carload freight. They still have passenger seats in their forward compartments. Other secondary trains on the SSW system get old but very trim wooden hacks, many of which have been reconditioned in Chinese red and sport the new, bold Cotton Belt lettering, as well as new numbers, electric lights, and radio.

In Arkansas' Grand Prairie, a 34-mile branch turns eastward and follows rice field borders to Gillett to bring rice to the many Stuttgart elevators, "palace of the rice belt." The Little Rock line forms a wye and leaves the main at Altheimer to parallel more rice and cotton fields on both sides of England. The trackage ends at North Little Rock Yard except for industrial spurs.

Only a few miles from Altheimer the main crosses a swing bridge over the Arkansas River. The river begins in Colorado near Denver & Rio Grande Western's Tennessee Pass and provides the road with the spectacular Royal Gorge.

Having crossed the river, all trains immediately enter Cotton Belt's pride and joy — Pine Bluff Gravity Yard. The $5.5-million yard, begun in 1957, was put into operation December 18, 1958. It has 28 classification tracks with a 1,300-car capacity and was designed so that 12 more tracks can be built if needed. Rip track facilities can accommodate 70 cars at a time, cleaning tracks can hold 56 cars, and local and storage yards can handle

Boldy marked boxcars took SSW's Blue Streak legend throughout North America.
John S. Ingles

Racecourse for fast freights
St. Louis Southwestern circa 1961

EAST ST. LOUIS
Dupo
VALLEY JUNCTION YARD
ILLINOIS
MP (SSW)
Chester
Gorham
MISSOURI
Illmo
Delta
Thebes
Birds Point
Wyatt
Dexter
Parma
Lilbourn
KY.
Malden
New Madrid
Campbell
Gideon
Piggott
Deering
Caruthersville
Paragould
Hornersville
Blytheville
Jonesboro
Trumann
TENN.
Fair Oaks
RI (SSW)
MEMPHIS
ARKANSAS
Fargo
Brinkley
Forrest City
North Little Rock
England
Clarendon
Stuttgart
MISSISSIPPI
Altheimer
PINE BLUFF
DeWitt
Gillett
PINE BLUFF YARD
OKLAHOMA
Fordyce
Camden
Stephens
McNeil
TEXARKANA YARD
TEXAS
Sherman
Sulphur Springs
Mt. Pleasant
Texarkana
Lewisville
Commerce
SP (SSW)
Addison
Carrollton
Greenville
Pittsburg
Plano
FORT WORTH
DALLAS
Gilmer
Big Sandy
TYLER YARD
Benton
Shreveport
SHREVEPORT YARD
Athens
Tyler
Bullard
Corsicana
Jacksonville
Hubbard
Rusk
SP
Gatesville
Waco
McGregor
To Sunset Route
Lufkin
LOUISIANA
SSW Cotton Belt
MP Missouri Pacific
RI Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific
SP Southern Pacific
0 50 100 miles
N

Modern headquarters for a modern railroad: Cotton Belt's general office building at Tyler, Texas, opened in March 1955.
Classic Trains collection

357. Electric signs at each end of the yard light up the track number into which each arriving train will pull. Nine receiving and departing tracks, each with a 140-car capacity, have remote-control switches to enable trains to enter or depart without stopping.

The prize facility also boasts an electronic push-button hump, radios, intercom squawk boxes, a pneumatic tube system among towers and other buildings, and floodlighting for around-the-clock operation. Nearby is a roomy diesel shed with associated servicing units, including an electronically controlled locomotive wash rack capable of washing four units at a time at a rate of 6 minutes each. Also nearby is one of two refrigerator-car icing stages on the Cotton Belt (the other is at Valley Junction).

Other yards at East St. Louis, Texarkana, Shreveport, and Tyler each have a modern yardmaster's tower like the ones at Pine Bluff. The 50-foot towers are complete with air conditioning, paneled walls, tile floor, drinking fountain, rest room, tinted glass windows with Venetian blinds, fluorescent lighting, two-man electric elevator, and roofed observation porch.

At the southwest end of Gravity Yard are the Pine Bluff Shops where major rolling stock repairs are performed, and where big 4-8-4s were once built. Baldwin supplied 10 in 1930 and Pine Bluff followed with 5 more of its own in 1937 and another 5 in '42. Today only one is left, No. 819, and it stands in Pine Bluff's Oakland Park, a gift of the railroad. Cotton Belters who pool and donate their time are building an appropriate display track and shed to enshrine the majestic high-wheeler that faithfully upheld the "Blue Streak Fast Freight" motto.

Cotton Belt dieselized relatively early. Engine 502, a Consolidation built in 1906,

A local freight, powered by RS3 No. 309, is under the high Texas sun at Commerce.

The station at Gatesville, Texas, most soundly constructed and beautiful on the system, marks the west end of the Cotton Belt.

Laborers top off the bunkers of refrigerator cars at the Pine Bluff icing platform, one of two on the Cotton Belt system.

made the last smoke over the road when it shuttled a work train on October 28, 1953.

RACING TO TEXAS

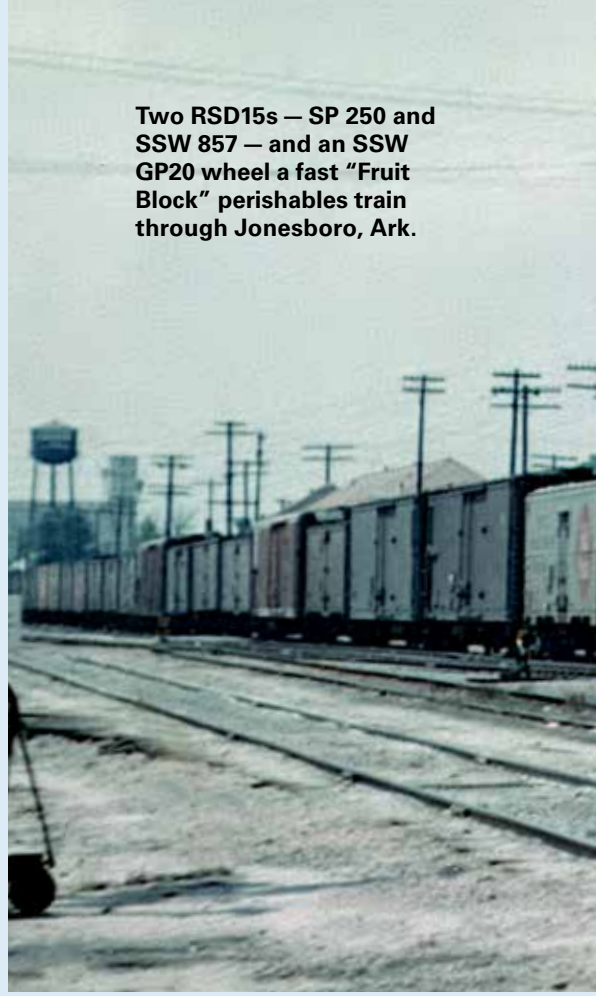
After the merchandisers cross almost the center of downtown Pine Bluff, the low-nose hood units unleash their power for the 151-mile race to the Texas state line. Thirty miles before Texarkana Yard is Lewisville, an important fork in the road. There the 62-mile main line to Shreveport originates for the second most important delivery point to the SP. On this line is Cotton Belt's longest mainline stretch of tangent track: 25 miles.

Even with Dallas and Fort Worth setouts and pickups, Cotton Belt freights usually spend less time in Texarkana than MP, T&P, and KCS passenger trains do at the nearby Union Station. The hotshots pause only a matter of seconds and frequently the new Tyler Subdivision fireman makes his inspection under the hoods as the train eases out of the yard and across the state line.

Next junction is Mt. Pleasant, 60 miles and an hour from Texarkana. The centralized traffic control-equipped main swings south at this junction while 112-pound rails with a 49-mph speed authorization heads westward into the Texas setting sun. Milepost 546 stakes the end of the Tyler Subdivision and home of the Cotton Belt. Tyler's $1.5-million general office building was dedicated in March 1955. The air-conditioned structure boasts three acres of floor space and a 500-seat auditorium.

Still another branch leaves the main line, this one beginning near the general office and stretching 88 miles over hilly, sometimes curvy, and scenic country to the Texas timber region around Lufkin. Wood and wood products are the chief export of Angelina County and the lifeblood of connecting short

Baldwin switcher 1013 wades through soybeans with local train 389 at Blytheville, Ark. The big caboose, left over from mixed train service, still contains passenger seats.



Two RSD15s — SP 250 and SSW 857 — and an SSW GP20 wheel a fast "Fruit Block" perishables train through Jonesboro, Ark.

lines Angelina & Neches River and Texas South-Eastern. The branch has a jovial, rough-riding characteristic. The agency at Bullard has long been closed, but not wishing to see the quaint old station demolished, a nearby cattleman bought it and had it moved to his ranch.

Only local service is provided beyond Waco once the train has threaded its way through downtown Waco streets. The local usually turns back at the Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe connection at McGregor unless there is business to be done at the Army base at North Fort Hood or at Gatesville.

The final miles into Gatesville, referred to by some crewmen as "Rattlesnake Country," mark the terminus of the appropriately named St. Louis Southwestern. There one can sense railroading of decades past, yet the area is so little traveled now that eventual abandonment looms around the rusting, nonballasted track. Ironically, by far the most soundly constructed and beautiful station on the entire system is at Gatesville. The landmark is used only by the operator whenever the local is in town. Some Cotton Belters think an SSW general superintendent, K. M. Post, from Gatesville was responsible for the station's being built to adorn his hometown.

The rapidly expanding areas of Dallas and Fort Worth contribute a good many carloadings, which are handled in through trains to Texarkana. The 1903-built line into Dallas abuts the backyards of many attractive homes, and while the head end watches an overdose of grade crossings, the rear crew has a top-side view of sunbathers around private swimming pools. The trains pass Dallas Union Terminal to get to SSW's yard. Fort Worth's Hodge Yard ends another segment of SSW track, except for downtown leads.

ROOM FOR INDUSTRY

Serving as vast a territory as it does, Cotton Belt has no problem finding acreage for prospective industries. The most booming center is the Dallas-North industrial area. Between them, SP and Cotton Belt own more than 675 acres there for industrial use. Besides the scattered railroad-owned lands, some 70,000 acres are available for industrial purposes along the Cotton Belt. Most of this land was ordnance depots and bases built by the Government in World War II, with the largest near Camden, Ark. Thus most of the land is already graded and populated with a few buildings. In terms of natural resources, the territory has an abundance of limestone, glass sand, and natural gas.

Cotton Belt fortunately passes through states with fairly low tax rates (*i.e.*, Arkansas with 20 percent taxation on assessed value and Texas with 25 percent) in comparison with some others, but nevertheless the taxes are discriminatory. Cotton Belt consequently doesn't have the financial ailings of, say, Tennessee Central and Jersey Central, owing in large part to their states' 100 percent taxation on assessed value. Yet in comparison with the 1-mile-shorter Boston & Maine, Cotton Belt paid almost 2½ times as much in 1961 taxes as did B&M.

Cotton Belt is modern in areas other than motive power, cabooses, and Gravity Yard. Installation of CTC was begun in 1941 in the bottlenecks between Illmo and Dexter and between Pine Bluff and Texarkana. By 1956, CTC was complete from East St. Louis to Corsicana. The 121 miles between Valley Junction and Thebes, through MoPac 60- and 50-mph speed limit zones, are dispatcher-controlled by that road. Until 1959 the CTC between Texarkana and Corsicana was controlled from Tyler, but today dispatchers at Pine Bluff regulate the traffic flow on the whole 628-mile main west of the Mississippi. The SSW is an example of how CTC and dieselization can cut running time in half; in 1947 as much as 30 hours was needed for the 4-8-4s to get over the road.

In 1948, 115-pound rail was being laid, and today the 112- and 115-pound main line has a few spots of 119- and 136-pound steel. The only welded rail in service is 5.5 miles of 78-foot sections. The last time Cotton Belt was in a major program of rail laying, equipment for transporting ribbon rail had not been developed. The next rail to go down will be the typical 1,440-foot lengths. By 1957 rock ballast had been tamped into place from end to end. Many trestles have been replaced with fills.

Radios are used systemwide — engine to caboose, train to wayside, and on maintenance-of-way equipment. IBM-processed payroll checks, reflectoscope inspection of steel in bridges, and direct long-distance telephone dialing (linked with SP's — the nation's largest private telephone network) are other examples of SSW's use of the latest technology.

Although the road has no hotbox detectors, it has plenty of spotters. Employees patriotically exercise Rule 110 of the Uniform Code of Operating Rules, whose seven paragraphs make it mandatory that all employees, as far as practicable, observe passing trains for defects. They're proficient at signaling their findings to the caboose crew.

Cotton Belt claims several important "firsts" in the rail industry:

- First in the Southwest to use oil as a locomotive fuel.
- First to organize an engineering department specifically for improving health conditions. (SSW initiated a malaria-control program in 1917 for employees and farmers. Many community sanitary departments had their start from the educational help of the railroad.)

• First to feature coordinated truck-train service.

• First to give shippers freight schedules on par with those of passenger trains.

• First to offer consignees progress reports of freight en route.

Some of Cotton Belt's vigor can be traced to its relatively young workforce. When H. J. McKenzie assumed the road's top office in 1951, he, at 46, was one of the nation's youngest railroad presidents. Clifford Stewart, a recent Oklahoma State graduate, is now an assistant roadmaster at Tyler and on his way up. And take the Davidson brothers: Ralph began railroading recently as soon as Cotton Belt would let him at age 21 and is a full-fledged brakeman. His older brother Jim is also on the Illmo board, as a fireman. Their father is a conductor on the hotshots.

Even though the road still operates first-class trains, Cotton Belt is like the money-making Clinchfield — it carries no passengers. Trains 7 and 8 stopped plying the 402 miles between St. Louis and Pine Bluff on November 29, 1959, to make the SSW the largest freight-only railroad in America. In 1955 Nos. 7 and 8 operated daily beyond Pine Bluff to Texarkana, and together with the mixeds on the Waco–Gatesville and the Missouri and Arkansas branches, they lost $1.2 million that year.

Technically, passenger trains still grace SSW rails daily, but only for 2 miles. All of KCS's passenger trains (except Nos. 15 and 16 to and from Port Arthur) cross the Red River at Shreveport on Cotton Belt's bridge. These are the only signal-protected miles on the Shreveport Subdivision.

"MODERN AND EFFICIENT," SAYS SP

What does Southern Pacific think of its gem? SP Vice-President B. F. Biaggini puts it this way: "We are . . . very proud to have the Cotton Belt as a member of the Southern Pacific family. Since 1932, when Southern Pacific purchased a controlling interest in the Cotton Belt, this railroad has made continued and rapid progress, until today it has come to be one of the most modern and efficiently run railroads in the country. Close cooperation between Southern Pacific and the Cotton Belt has made it possible to offer shippers outstanding service between Eastern and Midwestern points and the Pacific Coast."

Freight handling has long been a natural for Cotton Belt. The road thinks no more of shipping carloads of foot-powered paddle fun boats (built at on-line Malakoff, Texas) than it does totem poles bound from Sausalito, Calif., through St. Louis (talk about a job for the rate clerks!).

South of Paragould, SSW is paralleled on both sides by MoPac, so it has to elbow for business. Having traffic men stationed at such far-flung places as Boston, North Carolina, and Oregon shows SP that Cotton Belt doesn't aim to sit on its laurels and depend on its connections for business, but rather get out in the field and help create it.

Being a vital link in such prominent transcontinental shipping lanes is a virtue in itself. And with such rapid transportation, the advantages of adjoining industrial sites are greatly enhanced, for industries could complete the process of production faster by getting the goods into consumer hands faster. Too, where land and labor are in such supply, companies can build even though they are farther from the markets; Cotton Belt's freight schedules make up the difference. The road will continue to share handsomely in perishable traffic simply because it maintains perishable schedules demanded by such commodities.

A company that had a tough time trying to keep its head above water in the beginning is proving the adage "a bad beginning makes for a good ending." The word "ending" is used loosely here, but speculation is that someday the SSW will follow the Texas & New Orleans and lose its identity into the SP system. It is a dynamic railroad running its freights at or superior to many passenger train speeds. Woe to anything in their way.

STEVE PATTERSON began contributing to Trains magazine in 1960. He is retired from a 42-year career, mostly in engine service, with Santa Fe and BNSF.