

'Standard Railroad of the South'

Atlantic Coast Line in many ways was a big "Family" patriarch

The Atlantic Coast Line Railroad was true to its name: it linked an important string of coastal cities between Richmond, Va., and Florida, paralleling the Atlantic Ocean along the way. Its major traffic flows were north-south along the seaboard, and its New York-Florida passenger trains—handled by the Pennsylvania to Washington and the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac to Richmond—were widely known and heavily patronized for nine decades. But ACL was also a major railroad holding company, and its "family" of lines stretched to Cincinnati, St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans.

This large, powerful system was one of several in the Southeast formed in the late 1800's. Like its rivals Southern Railway and Seaboard Air Line, ACL was a creation of northern financiers who first wove together formerly separate companies through financial control, then merged them into one entity. Although ACL's earliest predecessors dated to 1830 in Virginia (Petersburg Railroad) and 1834 in North Carolina (Wilmington & Weldon), not until after the Civil War did real interest surface in forming a single north-south system. Baltimore bankers Benjamin F. Newcomer and William T. Walters began buying railroads that formed a route from Richmond to Charleston, S.C., with branches to the Atlantic on the east and Augusta, Ga., on the west. They sought better transportation for manufactured goods to the South and for raw materials and agricultural products moving north. As early as 1871, advertisements



David W. Salter

There is no mistaking ACL boss Champ Davis' favorite color—Royal Purple—as E6 518 nears Cascade Road leaving greater Atlanta for Waycross, Ga., with local train 101 in October 1958.

began to appear labeling the combined route "the Atlantic Coast Line."

After three decades of common ownership and coordinated operations, most of the predecessors were brought together under one entity, Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Co., on April 23, 1900. (The 343-mile Charleston & Western Carolina, controlled after 1897, wasn't merged into ACL until 1959, along with 75-mile neighbor Columbia, Newberry & Laurens.) The new ACL was financially robust from the beginning, and soon had taken control (through majority stock ownership) of the Louisville & Nashville, which stretched from the

Ohio River and St. Louis to Atlanta and New Orleans. L&N, in turn, controlled the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis, which ran from Atlanta to Memphis via Nashville. Linking L&N at Atlanta and ACL at Augusta was another acquisition, the Georgia Railroad. ACL and L&N jointly leased the "Georgia Road" and its affiliated companies, Atlanta & West Point and Western Railway of Alabama. ACL essentially finished its route map with its 1902 purchase of the Plant System, reaching from Charleston, S.C., south to Jacksonville and Tampa, Fla., and west to Montgomery, Ala.

The Plant System provided the Coast Line with a well-located main line from Richmond to Florida. Merchandise, forest products, and Florida produce flowed rapidly along, augmented by sand and—from west-central Florida's "Bone Valley"—a growing volume of phosphate. For Northeast-Florida passengers, ACL, being fastest, was the route of choice. As early as 1888, ACL gained notice with its seasonal *Florida Special*, advertised as the first New York-Miami all-Pullman flyer. Although ACL never reached Miami, it established an early relationship with the Florida East Coast to forward its trains south from Jacksonville.

While the *Florida Special*, *Havana Special*, *Miamian*, *Everglades*, *Palmetto*, and other flyers were always the back-



William J. Husa photo; Louis A. Marre collection

Dual-service Pacifics were routine for Coast Line, evidenced by 1554, a 1920 product of Alco's Richmond Works, hauling loads of cypress stumps at Lake City, Fla., on December 2, 1950.

bone of ACL's service, the road was also the premier forwarder of the Midwest-Florida fleet. Most were the "Dixie Route" trains from the L&N/NC&StL that ran over Central of Georgia from Atlanta to the ACL at Albany, Ga., but some came to ACL off other routes: Illinois Central's *City of Miami* and *Seminole* via Birmingham and CofG to Albany, and Pennsy/L&N's *South Wind* via Birmingham to ACL at Montgomery.

Rising fortunes in the Roaring '20's

ACL's fortunes continued to rise through the 1920's, and it was soon double-tracking its Richmond-Savannah main stem and improving other routes. The "family" continued to grow, with a joint lease (with L&N) in 1925 of the Clinchfield (Spartanburg, S.C.-Elkhorn City, Ky.) and purchase in 1926 of the bankrupt Atlanta, Birmingham & Atlantic. ACL renamed the AB&A as Atlanta, Birmingham & Coast, and kept it as a separately run property. The Y-shaped AB&C provided an important missing link between ACL's south Georgia shop town and hub of Waycross with L&N at Birmingham and Atlanta. ACL's "family lines"—a term first used in the 1920's and formally applied to the group in the 1970's—totaled over 12,000 miles at peak, of which ACL owned about 5,500. ACL's stature prompted its advertising department to proclaim it "The Standard Railroad of the South," with no record of apologies to PRR.

ACL's relatively flat profile let it make good use of a large fleet (235) of dual-service Pacifics, equally at home on fast passenger trains, long strings of refrigerator cars, or merchandise freights. ACL's early steam roster also had many Ten-Wheelers (called "Copperheads" after their copper-rimmed stacks), which ACL used in both passenger and light freight service, and Mikados for drag freights. Its heaviest freight engines were 20 2-10-2's bought in 1926 for the up-and-down "Bow Line" from Waycross to Montgomery.

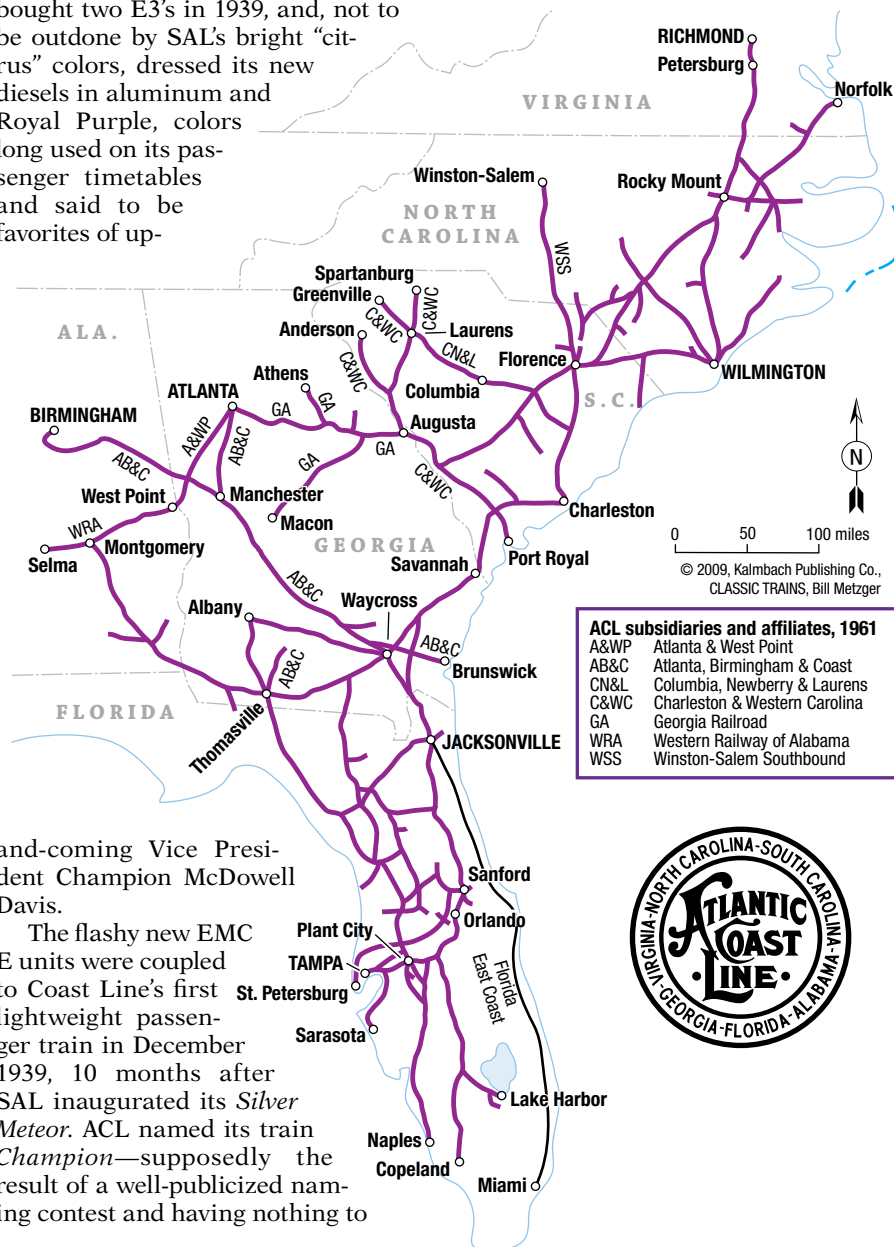
Coast Line's deep pockets—helped always by a steady stream of dividends from coal-rich L&N—let the company weather the Depression without lapsing into receivership, a fate that thinly financed neighbor SAL could not escape. But as tourist travel picked up in the

late 1930's, Seaboard—eager to attract any business it could—beat ACL to the punch with both diesels and streamliners. SAL put colorful Electro-Motive Corp. E4's on its *Orange Blossom Special* in 1938, but the ever-conservative Coast Line went back that year to its favorite supplier, Baldwin, for 12 huge 4-8-4 passenger engines. They were fast and powerful, but had counterbalancing problems and could not match the efficiency and servicing advantages of diesels.

The Coast Line changed course and bought two E3's in 1939, and, not to be outdone by SAL's bright "citrus" colors, dressed its new diesels in aluminum and Royal Purple, colors long used on its passenger timetables and said to be favorites of up-

do with Davis, although historians have raised an eyebrow over the claim. Regardless, Champ Davis, who became ACL president in 1942, remained a dedicated fan of the purple, and by the mid-1950's the color adorned everything from passenger cars to maintenance-of-way cranes to depot trim.

Although ACL was able to acquire only a few dozen diesels, mostly EMD E's and FT's, before 1945, it rapidly ramped up when wartime restrictions were lifted. Steadily larger numbers arrived through the late '40's, all EMD's



and-coming Vice President Champion McDowell Davis.

The flashy new EMC E units were coupled to Coast Line's first lightweight passenger train in December 1939, 10 months after SAL inaugurated its *Silver Meteor*. ACL named its train *Champion*—supposedly the result of a well-publicized naming contest and having nothing to



David W. Salter



Charles K. "Ken" Marsh Jr.

A mix of F's, a GP7, and FT's in both purple and black, led by FP7 886, rolls a southbound freight near Cordele, Ga. (top), in 1959. At Waycross on March 28, 1964 (above), two Alco C628's and a GE U25C, bound for hilly Alabama, herald ACL's pioneering choice of six-motor diesels.

except for a few switchers from Baldwin and Alco. In 1950–51 alone, EMD delivered some 350 units. A few more came in 1952, and ACL's roster of 564 diesels was complete; 154 were GP7's—ACL had no need for GP9's. Steam was almost gone by 1952, but a few Pacifics and Ten-Wheelers ran on two former AB&C branches in Georgia until 1955.

ACL updated its passenger trains in the late '40's. Like many other roads, it received a large lightweight car fleet in the postwar years, allowing the flagship *Champions* and *Florida Special* to be fully re-equipped for the 1949–50 winter season. ACL also completely rebuilt its heavyweight coaches to lightweight standards, and often used them on its premier runs. Besides the Florida headliners, ACL also ran a strong network of secondary passenger runs, including through Pullmans to such destinations as Wilmington, N.C., and Naples, Fla.

These improvements were just part of a huge modernization program the

Coast Line undertook after World War II. ACL installed thousands of new freight cars, many with roller bearings years before they became standard; CTC signaling; train radio; and many other physical plant improvements. Many of the changes were first applied to the old AB&C, which ACL merged as its Western Division on January 1, 1946. The complete overhaul of this once run-down property turned it into a major Midwest-Florida artery, and freight volume surged. ACL also rerouted the *Dixie Flyer*, which had always taken the CofG to reach ACL rails, over its newly rebuilt Atlanta-Waycross route.

Like much of the industry, ACL endured some slim years in the late 1950's. It ceased dozens of local passenger runs, pulled up branch lines, and bought no locomotives and little rolling stock. In 1957, Champ Davis retired at age 78 and was replaced by W. Thomas Rice, the young president of the RF&P. Rice promptly ended the maintenance-

intensive purple paint scheme and replaced it with basic black, albeit with aluminum lettering and yellow striping. At the end of the decade, he oversaw the relocation of ACL's long-time Wilmington headquarters to a new general office building in Jacksonville.

Merger talks with rival Seaboard

Perhaps Rice's greatest departure from ACL orthodoxy was his immediate merger overture to arch-rival Seaboard. ACL had tried unsuccessfully for years to acquire FEC, a logical but elusive quest that Rice dropped. Instead, he sought a "parallel" union. The proposal reflected growing recognition that the railroads' most serious competitors were outside the industry.

As the merger process wound its way through regulatory and legal hurdles, brisk freight business returned in the early 1960's as Sunbelt growth and industrialization accelerated. ACL bought its first second-generation diesels in 1963, nine EMD GP30's. These were followed shortly by new six-axle, high-horsepower models that EMD, GE, and Alco had just put in their catalogs—a marked departure from nearly two decades of EMD dominance. ACL liked the six-axle power, especially its ability to reduce the long strings of F's and Geeps required on lines like the Western Division, and eventually bought 64 of the units, versus only 34 second-generation B-B's.

Passenger traffic continued to be strong, although subject to the general industry-wide decline. Overall, ACL's strong Northeast-to-Florida market kept its passenger miles and income well above the norm. It fielded a refurbished *Florida Special* for the train's 75th anniversary in the 1962–63 season, and as late as 1964 was buying surplus

lightweight cars from other railroads (and also E8's from the Katy). Even though ACL lost its longtime Miami partner when a protracted strike took FEC out of the through passenger business in 1963, Coast Line quickly arranged to use a combined ACL-SAL alternative route through central Florida.

In spring 1967, the Supreme Court disposed of the last challenge to merger with the Seaboard, and on July 1, Seaboard Coast Line came into being. Some wags proclaimed that the initials really meant "still Coast Line," a reference to the dominance ACL exerted over the combined system in many ways, from equipment colors to consolidation of operations at Jacksonville to Tom Rice's continuation as president.

At first, little trackage was abandoned, but by the 1980's some former Seaboard main lines had been taken up or severed. SCL kept the best passenger trains of both predecessors, and by the time of Amtrak's 1971 inception, had become known as one of the few remaining pro-passenger carriers. Today, the New York-Florida market under Amtrak remains as its most heavily patronized long-distance route, and virtually all of it is conducted over original Coast Line rails—one of the railroad's many enduring legacies. ■

COAST LINE FACT FILE

(Comparative figures are for 1929 and 1966)

Route-miles: 5,155; 5,743

Locomotives: 1,007; 629

Passenger cars: 786; 361

Freight cars: 32,644; 31,284

Headquarters cities: Wilmington, N.C., until 1961, then Jacksonville, Fla.

Special interest group: Atlantic Coast Line & Seaboard Air Line Railroads Historical Society, P.O. Box 4141, Bay Pines, FL 33744; www.aclsal.org

Notable passenger trains: *Champion*, *Florida Special*, *Dixie Flagler*, *South Wind*

Recommended reading: *A History of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad*, by Glenn Hoffmann (CSX, 1998); *ACL Passenger Service: The Postwar Years*, by Larry Goolsby (TLC, 1999); *ACL, The Diesel Years*, by Warren Calloway (Withers Publishing, 1993)

Source: *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2000).