

The Muskogee Roads: a four-state empire

This obscure Oklahoma-based conglomerate lived and died by what it extracted from the ground

If you were asked to name two Class 1 railroads established after 1900 to serve coal interests, could you do it? Easy, right? Not so fast—they served Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas, a region famous for producing black gold but not for the mining of black diamonds.

Katy (MKT) isn't one—it was well-established by the time these two came on the scene. The correct responses are Midland Valley Railroad and Kansas, Oklahoma & Gulf Railway, which are almost as obscure as the third pike that formed the Muskogee Company, the Oklahoma City-Ada-Atoka Railway.

Of all the U.S. carriers that would attain Class 1 status, Midland Valley was one of the last to be built, incorporated in Arkansas in summer 1903. MV's mission was to tap the bituminous coal fields of the western part of the state and eastern Indian Territory (Oklahoma would become the 46th state in 1907). Construction started at Greenwood, Ark., and reached Muskogee, I.T., by 1904. The town, later made (in)famous in song by Merle Haggard, became the railroad's headquarters and shop site.

After gaining trackage rights over the St. Louis-San Francisco (Frisco) on the east end from Rock Island, I.T., north to Fort Smith, Ark., construction proceeded northwest from Muskogee to Tulsa.

Everyone wanted to get in on the oil action around "Tulsey Town." The Frisco had held sway at the Arkansas River settlement since it built to Tulsa in 1882. The Katy arrived in 1903 and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe in 1905—21 years after one of its chief engineers had dismissed the location as "not suitable for a large town."

The Midland Valley would benefit in freight and passenger revenue during the black gold rush, which had swollen Tulsa's population to 15,000. The railroad expanded into Kansas in 1905-06, adopting as its slogan "Arkansas River Route," which it followed to Silverdale, Kans. Trackage rights over Missouri Pacific extended the MV into Arkansas City ("Ar-KAN-zuss," unlike Fort Smith's state). With the promise of fresh-meat traffic from the stockyards and packing plants in Wichita, MV built to there in 1911. Plans to extend farther north never materialized, nor did the Wichita meat



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Engineer Richard Skinner rides Midland Valley GP9M 153 (top) on August 28, 1962, as the local from Fort Smith crosses the KCS at Panama, Okla. After MoPac took over, Muskogee Group units were renumbered; note the painted-on emblem on F7A 847 in the undated photo above.

traffic. Instead, the oil business MV had built into almost by chance would be its primary revenue source.

Wildcatters hit crude southwest of Tulsa in 1902, and the city became the oil capital of the U.S. in 1905 with the tapping of the Glenn Pool. When Oklahoma gained statehood, its production was 100,000 barrels a day, and by 1908, almost 20.5 million barrels had been extracted. With the oil came wealth and growth—Tulsa's population ballooned to 115,000 by the mid-'20's.

Early on, MV profited from the lack of pipelines to move oil. While crude did

not immediately supplant coal as MV's top revenue source, it did help the railroad attain a healthy bottom line. Oil traffic eroded as infrastructure was built, but MV would benefit during World War I. The 1920 oil strike in the Burbank Field was close to its line, so in 1922, MV built the 18-mile Osage Railway west from Foraker.

Meantime, the 308-mile Missouri, Oklahoma & Gulf, which crossed MV at Muskogee, found itself in bankruptcy in 1918. Started in 1910 as Missouri, Oklahoma & Gulf Railway, it ran from a connection with the Kansas City Southern



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Possibly the last 2-8-2's built by Baldwin for U.S. service were KO&G 601 and 602, which came in 1944 and were the system's last new steam. No. 602 is at Wagoner, Okla., February 8, 1951.

at Baxter Springs, Kans., to a Texas & Pacific connection at Denison, Texas. In 1919, it was re-incorporated as the Kansas, Oklahoma & Gulf.

Over the next 10 years, a small but profitable railroad family came together. In February 1923, the Muskogee Company—the majority owner of MV stock—was incorporated by C. Jared and John Ingersoll. The firm acquired KO&G in 1926 and finally, in 1929, Oklahoma City-Ada-Atoka, which crossed the KO&G at Tupelo. OCAA had been a Katy branch, spun off during a reorganization in 1923. From the Katy main at Atoka, it rambled northwest to the state capital, crossing the Frisco at Ada and the Santa Fe at Shawnee.

At first, Midland Valley relied mostly on Baldwin 2-8-0's, including one Camelback whose larger firebox allowed it to burn coal from on-line mines. MV also owned 4-6-0's, 0-6-0's for switching, and four 69-inch-drivered 4-4-0's for passenger trains. With growth came the need for more power. Light Mikados became the Muskogee Roads' locomotive type of choice, with MV buying seven, Nos. 70-76, during 1917-22. Five USRA light 2-8-2's, 90-94, followed through 1925. The last steam engine bought by MV was a 2-10-0 that year for the Osage Railway. Its bulk was too much for Osage's 60-lb. rail, though, so ownership was shifted to MV, but it spent much of its life on the KO&G, mostly in helper duty

at Denison. MV's 90-class 2-8-2's spent a lot of time on KO&G too, augmenting KO&G's 20 2-8-0's, all bearing odd numbers in series 201-239. Weight restrictions kept the 90-series from going west of "Ark City" or east of Panama.

Given the traffic, Midland Valley's trim roster was more than adequate. Since MV originated most of its tonnage, a daily train each way except Sunday was the norm, plus a local on each of the road's three dis-



Fallen Flags Remembered

tricts: Wichita-Pawhuska (west of Barnsdall), Pawhuska-Muskogee, and Muskogee-Fort Smith. Extras handled seasonal farm products, cattle off the Osage grasslands to Ark City, and petroleum to and from the Barnsdall refinery.

Although the MV was a Class 1 by standards of the day (yearly revenue of at least \$1 million), traffic declined during the Depression, and World War II gave it only a slight uptick. MV did get a shot in the arm in the early '50's with a daily 25-car coal move to MP at Wichita for the steel mill at Pueblo, Colo.

Midland Valley passenger trains offered Pullman parlor and even sleeper service, but given the length of the line, most folks weren't going far. The railroad turned to gas-electric motor cars exclusively after 1927, and by 1934 all MV passenger service was gone.

KO&G's primary source of revenue was MoPac bridge traffic between Okay and MP's Texas & Pacific at Denison, as the KO&G cut MP's own Kansas City-Fort Worth haul by one-third (592 miles vs. 918 via Little Rock). KO&G itself ran daily-except-Sunday trains between Baxter Springs and Denison, and locals ran each way from Muskogee. KO&G's commodities included wheat, soft coal, gasoline and other petroleum products, plus autos, and the overhead traffic helped it overtake MV in annual revenue in the '30's. KO&G passenger service linked Denison and Muskogee until 1954.

With its heavier rail and traffic, plus the grades and curves south of Muskogee, KO&G had larger steam engines than MV. KO&G 601-602, outshopped in 1944, might have been the last 2-8-2's Baldwin built; it also had five 2-10-2's.

OCAA, with traffic meager in comparison, never owned any locomotives, using power from the other two roads. Luck again put a Muskogee pike in the right place at the right time, though, with the World War II opening of Midwest Air Depot east of Oklahoma City. The maintenance and supply site (today Tinker Air Force Base) repaired and prepared bombers for combat into the Korean War. OCAA dropped its motor-car passenger service in 1940.

Muskogee's three roads owned few cars beyond small fleets of gondolas and hoppers for coal service. One exception: five silver, 50-foot XML-type insulated



Louis A. Marre collection, courtesy Hal Miller

Research and guesswork suggest this photo from 1940 is on KO&G at Henryetta, GE motor car M21 being train 9, out of Muskogee at 10:10 a.m. for Denison and due Henryetta at 11:45.

boxcars, KO&G 30009-30013, built in 1957. They wore large initials and KO&G's sunburst emblem with the slogan "Sooner Through the Southwest."

Like their steam, Muskogee Roads' diesels were no-frills. KO&G in 1949 got two EMD A-B-A F7 sets (cabs 751-754, boosters 755B-756B), painted in MP's blue and cream, for the through freights, plus NW2 1001, in a smart black with a red band, for the Muskogee yard. KO&G added eight GP7's (801-808) in 1952, in the same livery (shared by cabooses), and a ninth (809) in 1953 when MV got four GP7's (151-154) to vanquish system steam; all the Geeps had dual controls. EMD rebuilt 152 and 153 as 1500 h.p. GP9M's after a 1958 head-on collision.

The roads' "collective" emblem [page 17] was the essence of simplicity. A metal one with enameled paint adorned all

steam tenders, and the practice continued with diesels. On tenders, Midland Valley was listed up top, with KO&G in the middle and OCAA below. When diesels came, the emblems had KO&G (as the sole remaining Class 1) on top, except for the NW2, which while bought by KO&G on paper, listed Midland Valley on top! Another exception: owing to the door, the nose emblem on the F7A's was painted directly onto the carbody. KO&G 2-8-0 235, the main engine on the Osage, had a similar emblem. The Osage may have never seen a diesel, being torn up in 1953 after pipelines and trucks had taken over the oil.

By the early '60's, the Muskogee Co. was running on fumes. Midland Valley, once the leader, was losing money as its profitable coal had shifted to an all-MP routing. No new on-line traffic had de-



Louis A. Marre collection, courtesy Hal Miller

Rare but splashy were five 50-foot insulated boxcars; 30013 was at Fort Smith in 1962.



William J. Husa Jr.

OSAGE RAILWAY Co. is all that appears on the emblem on 2-8-0 235's tender in October '53.

veloped since the '30's. MP was still keeping KO&G afloat with three freights a day, but no traffic between Okay and Baxter Springs spelled abandonment in 1963. MP, which had seen KO&G's virtue since the late 1920's, moved to bring the Muskogee lines into the fold, and Texas & Pacific bought them in September 1964, then sold OCAA to the Santa Fe in '65. The Midland Valley name continued until absorbed by T&P in April 1967; KO&G followed in 1970.

MP took the diesels, and most wound up in the "Jenks" solid blue. Two rare EMD GP28's KO&G had ordered came in blue in late 1964, as 700-701 but with Little Rock-applied "buzzsaw" emblems; they became 570-571 to fit into MP's number system. GP7's 97-109 fit between C&EI's and T&P's. The NW2 became 1027, while the F's became 844-847 (cabs) and 846B-847B (F7B's).

The Muskogee Roads were a well-run outfit that was neither heroic nor awful. In many ways, it was a system in the right place at the right time, doing what it was supposed to do with a minimum of fuss and without any grand aspirations. With all the Union Pacific acquisitions in the region, little remains of the Muskogee roads' 750-odd miles other than spurs in Wichita and Oklahoma City, and a stretch through Tulsa. One proud vestige that still stands, though, is the passenger station in Muskogee, which houses the Three Rivers Museum. ■

MUSKOGEE'S FACT FILE

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1963)

Route-miles: MV 363/333; KO&G 327/221; OCAA 129/101

Engines: MV 26/4; KO&G 28/16; OCAA 0/0

Cars: Passenger, MV 19/0; KO&G 3/0; OCAA 7/0; **Freight,** MV 295/13; KO&G 255/65; OCAA 0/0

Headquarters City: Muskogee, Okla.

Special Interest Group: Missouri Pacific Historical Society, c/o Secretary, 2226 W. Walnut, Springfield, MO 65806-1518; www.mopac.org. See also www.cbu.edu/~mcondren/FSVB/Midland-Valley.htm

Recommended Reading: *Midland Valley: Rails for Coal, Cattle, and Crude*, by Lloyd E. Stagner (South Platte Press, 1996)

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